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edited by Algis Budrys

tomorrow

No. 12 SPECULATIVE FICTION \$4.00

ROBERT REED • ROB CHILSON • ELIOT FINTUSHEL • OTHERS



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SPECULATIVE FICTION

ISSN 1072-4990

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

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SPECULATIVE FICTION
Box 6038
Evanston, IL 60204

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

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Subscription Information:

6 issues...\$18.00, basic rate

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

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

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

All figures are in U.S. funds.

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

EDITORIAL



I don't dance. It's a species of shyness on my part. But I appreciate dance; I'm not a balletomane, exactly, but I like ballet a lot. Other forms of formal dance, too, from ballroom dancing exhibitions to figure skating, find me rapt, sometimes with tears in my eyes. Similarly with painting, sculpture and drawing, similarly with song.

The thing is, all these frequent human things to do are, in fact, useless.

The purpose of feet is to walk and run. It is not to do steps in a circle. The purpose of painting and drawing is to do signs: **NO SMOKING; WIPE YOUR FEET; POST NO BILLS.** The purpose of having a voice is to communicate hard data. Who was it who, first of all the human race, moved his feet to express a feeling? Who was it who, in beating a drum for the purpose of communicating a message, suddenly burst into rhythm? Who sang? And why.

I do not think there are very clear answers to these questions. I repeat that there is no apparent survival value in them. Not in any of what we call "the arts." That in fact you can draw a distinction about any human activity; if it is useless, then it is an art. If it has some representational value, then it is a skill, like baseball.

So the question comes down to what it is that makes every single human culture, without exception, and no matter how far back we go, give rise to the arts, and artists?

Without exception. And usually also not without contumely and attempts at suppression, often enough severe. Most artistic young people have to fight their parents, often viciously. Most cultures regulate the differences between permissible and impermissible art. But no culture survives if it tries to suppress all art; if it does, it is quickly overthrown.

Curious, don't you think? The stuff is useless, but if you don't have it, you die.

I have noticed that frequently enough, art is the only redeeming feature of some people, and some cultures. Except for their art, they are petty, grasping, sometimes homicidal. Which means that 90 percent of the time, those are their overriding traits. The art is the only thing that is in the least attractive about them.

Is that it? Did the feet of the first dancer track through the blood of the man he had killed? Was the first song a perversion of the cry of agony? Is it that God, in confronting the generally ill-natured thing He had made out of clay, said wearily: "Oh, all right, I'll give you Art."

Think about it. When we speak of the mighty cultures of the past, we illustrate the lecture with photographs and drawings of the art. Not the downtrodden peasant, not the raped female, not the greedy glitter in the secretive face of the miser; the art. And when we illustrate with the art, we somehow forget the repression, the blind, dogmatic ignorance, the appropriation of another party's territory and possessions. Yet which is more true, day to day?

We speak of the artless joy and love of children, and it is true. At about the time that we develop the instinct for art, we leave indiscriminate joy and love behind; we detect differences between our playmates and ourselves; we form cliques; often enough, we begin to persecute those who are somehow different from us. At about the time that the instinct for art kicks in. Isn't that strange?

Children frequently go through a period that resembles art; the child draws, or dances, or sings. But when puberty sets in, this false dawn frequently disappears; the childish soprano becomes a croak, the drawing somehow does not get better, the dancer gets fat. It's only starting at puberty that the genuine stuff truly appears, if it's going to. And of course it appears together with that other bad stuff.

Now, one thing I want to know is, are we all actually artists, but some of us manage to nurture the thing, often desperately, while most of us give up and live "normal" lives? Is art the perversion, or is "normality?" One clue: You've got to have at least one banker, one lawyer and one real-estate agent, or your artists' colony fails. So very likely, neither type is the final answer.

Very curious.

— Algis Budrys

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They had something to teach it*

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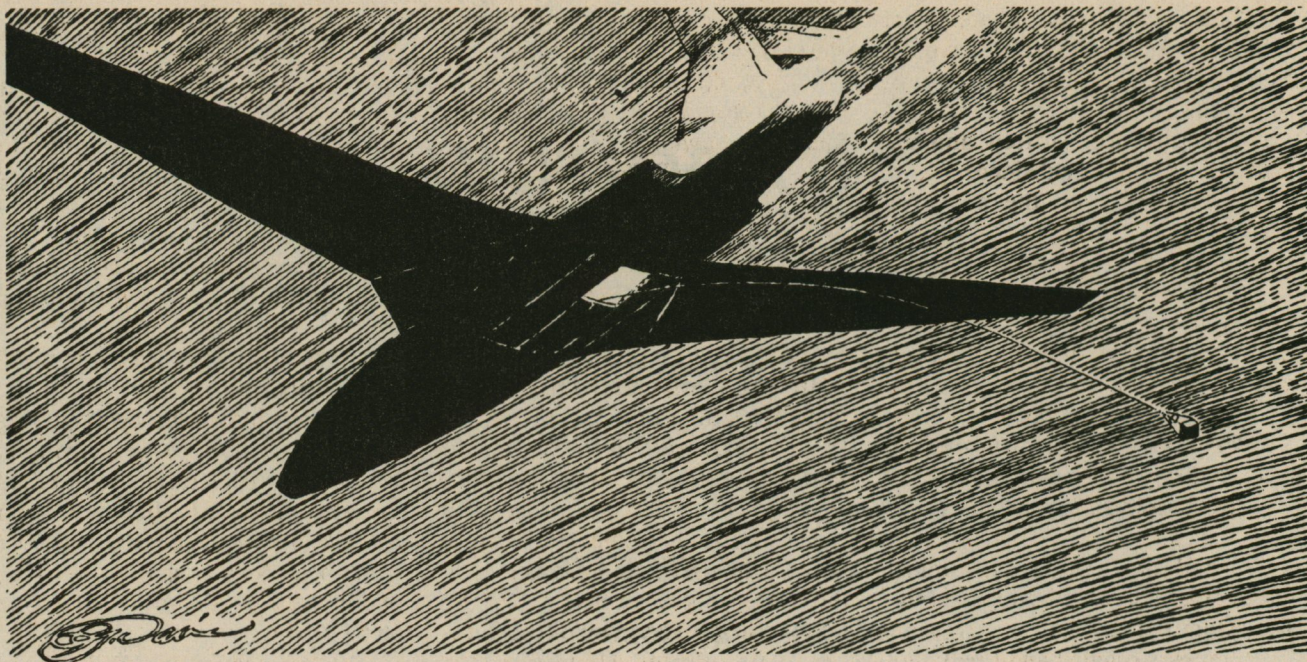
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tomorrow speculative fiction, published by The Unifont Company, Inc.
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GRANNY IN THE FLIGHT PATH

George S. Walker

Illustrated by Gary Davis

Granny wanted to steal the airplane, and go talk to her gods.

Granny shushed her, but there was no need. Little Siksrik heard the snowcat's engine slow to idle, heard the heavy metal door slam.

She and Granny were hidden in a big crate, the one that had been filled with little bottles, more than Siksrik could count. The bottles were all gone now. Granny and Siksrik—mostly Siksrik—had carried every one of them off and buried them in the hard snow where the soldiers wouldn't see. Siksrik had pulled one of them from its thick cardboard sleeve and studied the label: "Miller Beer." She knew what a miller was, because Miss LaBerge, the Canadian Outreach teacher, had read her fairy

tales. Millers were men who had sons or daughters who needed to get married. And a beer was an animal, a *nanuq*. The bottle seemed to be full of water, but it didn't freeze. Puzzling.

Boots crunched nearby, and rope rattled through eyebolts as a tarp was pulled away.

"Inventory, sir?" said a soldier's muffled voice in English.

"Screw that. If it was here four hours ago, it's still here. Puff the gas bag. I want to be long gone when the radiation wake passes."

Metal clanked outside. Granny's breathing wheezed in the crate, but the arctic wind outside was louder. Little Siksrik buried her head in her *anorak*, pretending she was a sled

dog with her tail covering her muzzle. Thumps. Ropes through eyebolts again. Then a shriek of wind that didn't stop.

"Free it up there. I don't want it to tear as it inflates."

"Yes, sir."

"That's good. Keep an eye on it."

The frame creaked. Siksrik thought both men were out of the cargo basket now.

"Heard any more news about the Luna probe, sir?"

"Nope. Think it's all faked, myself. The Russians can't get all the way to the Moon on chemical rockets."

"But if they do get there, won't they claim it?"

"Like what President Goldwater told Khrushchev: You can have the Moon. Just stay the hell out of Indochina."

The platform shifted and ice cracked. The shriek subsided.

"Okay. Fire up the auxiliary heaters."

"Yes, sir."

Someone pounded the frame; it must still be frozen in the snow, like the runners on a sled. She heard a roar: the heaters.

"Ah, that feels good."

The platform shifted and swayed beneath her.

"Release lines."

"Yes, sir."

The platform tilted, and Granny fell against her, smothering Siksrik. They were rising.

Granny struggled and finally got off her in the darkness.

"Now can we open it, Granny?"

Granny shushed her again. The village *angakok* wasn't really her grandmother, just her great-aunt, the only family Siksrik had left. And now Granny was dying, too, of what her people called lump disease. Miss LaBerge called it cancer. It must hurt a lot, because Granny was always complaining.

Siksrik had been staying with Granny when her father went out on his last hunt. He never came back. Some people in the village said it was Siksrik's fault, that she'd done something to offend the spirits of the *nanuqs*, and a living one had eaten her father. And Granny said as long as people talked like that, no one in the village would marry Siksrik. Granny claimed to be two hundred years old, the oldest and wisest person in the village. Siksrik was only eight.

"Now open it, little one," wheezed Granny.

Siksrik stood, pushing as hard as she could on the lid of the crate. Something held it shut. Granny couldn't stand, but she pushed, too, and the lid lifted enough that Siksrik could squeeze through. Still dark. She crawled on hands and knees. The tarp covered the cargo basket, pinning the lid of Granny's crate. Siksrik took out

the knife her father had given her on the night of her mother's death.

"Siksrik."

She stabbed a hole in the tarp and began sawing.

"Little one." The lid of the crate banged insistently.

"Wait, Granny." Cold fresh air blew through the cut, and she peeked through at the arctic twilight. The Moon was rising; there were few clouds. Tension on the tarp began pulling it apart, and Siksrik moved her knife along the rent. Freed, the two sides flapped like a snared sea bird.

The lid of the crate rose, and Granny pulled herself erect. Her face was a grimace of pain, staring up at the monstrous silver balloon towering overhead. The glow of the burners lit its interior. Underfoot, the cargo basket swayed in the wind. Siksrik went to the edge of the basket and looked down.

"Be careful!"

Siksrik saw the miniature snowcat creeping across the snowfield to the Soldier Place. A thin line snaked from beneath the basket to the ground, but the balloon still rose. It seemed she could see forever.

"Have you ever been this high, Granny?"

"When I go to speak with the Moon Man, much higher."

"Oh." She saw the Moon far away, but it seemed level with her.

"Come away from the edge, little one. You're not a bird."

"I'm high as a bird."

"Not as high as the Raven."

Suddenly she was afraid again. "I don't want to meet him, Granny."

"Your father didn't like to hunt the *nanuq*, but he did, Siksrik."

A gust of wind swung the basket, reminding her she was no longer in her village. Though the children taunted her, at least she knew them. The Raven was a stranger, more powerful than the spirits of men or animals. Granny had told her the story many times: At the dawn of time, when the ice first cracked to create the Raven, he in turn created the first men, the *Inuit*, from the ice of the great ocean.

But now, the ice cracked too often, frightened by the false suns that blossomed and withered to the north. Granny was going to speak to him about that, and the easiest way, she said, was to ride the soldiers' offering basket into the sky.

With a creak of taut line, the balloon stopped rising. The burners remained lit, breathing fire and life up into it.

"When will the Raven come?" asked Siksrik.

Granny closed her eyes, pursing her lips. Lines like ice breaks crinkled her face, and wind ruffled the fur edging her *anorak*. She listened not to Siksrik, but to some voice only she could hear. Siksrik shuffled her feet, pushing snow down through the metal grating.

"The Raven hasn't yet decided," said Granny. "Maybe soon, maybe late. He's thinking about the offering to see if it makes him hungry."

Granny had brought a little pouch filled with raw seal liver to add to the tribute offered by the soldiers. It should more than make up for the worthless bottles removed from the crate.

"Sit beside me, little one."

Siksrik plopped herself down next to the wheezing *angakok*. She kicked, banging her heels against the side of the wooden box they sat on. Granny shushed her, and she stopped.

"I talked to your papa last night," said Granny. "He stood right next to me, and even though my eyes were closed, I could see him. He said to me, 'Granny, just ask that little girl to do what's needed and she'll do it.'" She paused for breath, sucking it in great gulps. "And he said, 'When you talk to the Raven, you ask him to find somebody to take care of her, because, Granny, your time's almost up, just like my time was. I'll visit her when I can, but that's not enough.'"

"What about the *nanuq*?"

"He said to me, 'You tell Siksrik the *nanuq* wasn't mad at me; he just wanted company, so it's no little girl's fault.'"

Siksrik stared down at her feet, wiggling them but not kicking the crate. Granny had a coughing fit.

Siksrik heard another sound through the wind and the roar of the burners: a far-off rumble.

She poked Granny's *anorak*. "I hear something."

Granny tried to stifle her coughing but failed. Siksrik huddled against her, listening to the growing rumble. A star grew in the twilight sky. Siksrik stared, unable to turn away, and Granny lifted her head to look, too.

"The Raven?" Siksrik whispered, pressing against Granny.

"Inside!" croaked Granny.

Siksrik helped her clamber into the crate, then climbed down beside her. She shivered in the darkness, imagining the creature beating toward them on giant wings. She didn't ask Granny why they had to hide, because Granny was still coughing. The roar outside climbed to a shriek.

Abruptly the crate jerked upward, tilting sideways. Granny gasped as Siksrik fell against her soft belly. The Raven was shrieking in her ears, and Siksrik howled to drown it out. She fought her way off Granny to fall beside her. The crate lurched. Siksrik held her breath, but the crate stayed in the cargo basket. Everything in the basket was vibrating: cans, bottles, steel drums. Music for the Raven.

"Granny!"

The *angakok* was limp beside her.

The crate still tilted, but Siksrik managed to stand. When she lifted the lid, the wind tore it open to bang against the other side. The Raven was pulling the basket through the night like an empty sled drawn by crazed dogs. Siksrik looked up and gasped at the sight of the Raven. It was huge and black as soot, but fire glowed in its belly. Of the silver balloon there was no trace. The basket was being sucked up toward the fire.

"Granny! Granny!" Siksrik shook her, but Granny didn't respond.

The Raven held its wings stretched tautly. It had no feathers like a mortal bird. Where its beak should have been, two fat sticks protruded, and above them was a glow-

ing painting of a fierce bird holding strange eggs in its talons. There were words written there in the language of the Whites: *Atomic Eagle*.

Closer to the belly now, Siksrik saw two men inside dressed in tan soldier suits. They must live in it, she thought, like lice. They weren't on fire, but light shone all around them. Behind them towered a rack of giant silver eggs, like the ones in the picture of the bird. She wished she could ask Granny what it meant. She looked down, but the old woman's eyes were still closed.

Up into the belly of the bird went the basket, and the belly closed beneath it. The wind stopped, but the basket was still swaying from the lines that once held the balloon. All around her was metal, no bird entrails. Glass fires glared down at her. The shriek of the Raven was muffled.

"Hey, Bill, look in that crate!" A soldier pointed at her, and she shrank down beside Granny.

"Ring the captain! And get a Tommy gun!"

"Granny!" Holding back tears, Siksrik tugged Granny's arm. She could hear Granny's ragged breathing, see her tongue lying behind worn-down teeth.

Boots pounded on metal.

"I don't know how many, sir. The basket could be crawling with them." The soldiers talked too fast for her to understand everything in their language.

"All right!" shouted a deeper voice. "You all come out with your hands on your heads!"

Siksrik huddled closer to Granny.

"In that crate there, sir. That's where I saw one."

"In the beer crate! What the hell'd they do with our *beer*?"

"They're not coming out, sir."

"Sir, maybe we should just drop it. The Russkis must have the damn thing booby-trapped by now. And we've got supplies for a few more days in the air."

"Open the cargo bay doors!"

Metal clanked, and the shriek of the Raven pierced its belly. The air

grew cold again. Granny's eyes were still closed, so everything was up to Siksrik. She poked her head cautiously above the lip of the crate.

"There!"

"Don't shoot!" said a soldier.

"Jesus, it's just a kid."

"Come out of there. Now! Cover him, Coville."

Siksrik climbed out and stood beside the crate.

"Come to the edge of the basket. And put your hands in the air!"

Siksrik raised her mittens. There were seven soldiers. Two had big guns pointed at her, big enough to kill a *nanuq*. The others held little guns in their bare hands. Below her, where the belly of the Raven had been, was only wind, and the ice far below.

"How many more of you?" barked the deep-voiced soldier.

"Just Granny," she whispered.

"I can't hear you! Sergeant Wilkins, get the boy down."

"I think it's a girl, sir. Permission to close the cargo bay doors?"

"Granted."

The belly closed again with a boom. Wilkins, a man no older than papa had been, put his gun in a pouch on his belt and lifted her down from the basket.

"The captain asked how many there are of you," he said.

"Just Granny. She's hurt."

"Where is she?"

Siksrik pointed to the crate.

A soldier with a little gun warily climbed onto the basket and peered into the crate.

"It's a woman, sir, dressed like the kid. Seems to be unconscious. I'll need a hand."

Two men lifted Granny down from the basket.

The captain seemed disappointed by Granny's appearance. Siksrik saw that on one of the belly walls, near the silver eggs, were pictures of millers' daughters with no clothes.

"Sergeant Wilkins and I'll take her to the mess room," said the Captain. "The rest of you, search every inch of that cargo." He gestured for Siksrik to come.

The two carried Granny into the Raven's gullet, and Siksrik followed.

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They passed through several chambers, each with men at work, before the soldiers laid Granny on a table. All the rooms were hot, like being too close to a fire. Granny wheezed loudly, the way she did when she slept on her back.

The captain spoke to the wall: "Doc, report to the mess room. You got a patient. Lumas, we found two stowaways on the cargo pickup. Monitor the DEW transmissions and see if you hear anything about it. Everybody else, keep your eyes open."

A man carrying a bag with a red cross hurried through the other door of the room.

"What happened to her, sir?"

"She was like this when we pulled her out. Fix her up so we can talk to her."

The man bent over Granny.

"Hey, you," said the captain.

"Girl. What the hell were you doing in the cargo basket? And don't try to hornswoggle me about it being an accident."

Siksrik understood only half of what he said, but Wilkins gave her an encouraging smile.

"To talk to the Raven."

"What?"

Clearly it was forbidden, which explained all the soldiers. Siksrik wished Granny would wake up.

"Granny said we must talk to the Raven," whispered Siksrik, "to make it stop the new suns in the North."

"Doesn't sound like the Russians, sir," said Wilkins.

"Well, *somebody* put them up to it."

Granny groaned.

"You just lay there, ma'am," said the doctor.

"Their *angakok* says not to move," Siksrik translated for Granny.

"Where are we, little one?" asked Granny weakly.

"Are you two talking Russian?" asked the captain. "Speak English."

"Granny hasn't been to school," Siksrik explained. "She only speaks Inuktitut."

"Doc, keep an eye on these two. Come on, Sergeant, I want to talk to you."

"They're loons, Sergeant." He sat in the navigator's seat, facing Wilkins.

"But not Russian loons, Captain. My little girl Rebecca, back at the base, is about this girl's age. This kid's no more a spy than she is."

"They boarded a warplane! The only atomic rocket plane in the world, on an H-bomb test flight, and they picked it. We're not scheduled to land for another two weeks."

"It's not your fault, sir."

"Ha! Tell that to the Pentagon."

"Maybe we should ask them."

The captain gnawed on a thumbnail. "We got our orders, Sergeant. Hey, Summers!" he yelled to the pilot. "What's our time to target?"

"One hour, forty-seven minutes, sir."

"Enough time to cancel," said Wilkins.

"It's not the scientists sitting in their seismic shacks I'm thinking about—it's Goldwater sitting in the White House. What's he think when the Pentagon calls and says the captain of the Eagle broke radio silence to say, 'Excuse me, I can't make up my mind?' I tell you, Sergeant, I was in the war and if there's one thing I learned, it's that you gotta make decisions."

"And they gotta be right," added Wilkins.

"Damn straight! I say we're GO for drop."

"Yes, sir."

He stood and walked back toward the tail, jostling other airmen in the cramped corridor. When he passed through the mess room, the old woman had her eyes closed again, but was muttering in her strange language. He nodded to Doc and made his way back to the cargo bay. Coville and the other four had the cargo spread and stacked all over.

"You find the beer?"

Coville shook his head and set down the inventory list. "No more stowaways, either, sir."

"Well, that's a comfort. You men have forty-five minutes to clear this out and jettison the basket. I want this bay clear an hour before the test drop."

"Yes, sir."

He crawled through the tunnel above the bomb bay, back toward the reactor. Through the waist gun windows he saw puffs of cloud flashing past, illuminated by the running lights. The horizon was growing darker. This bomb drop would take place by the light of the Moon.

Lieutenant Prescott was in charge of the four technicians in the cramped reactor room. He was scratching his head, and looked up when the captain entered.

"Get the spies all locked up, Captain?" he asked.

"Heck, Lieutenant, it's a kid and an old lady. But whoever let them on the cargo basket will be in a lot more hot water than me before this is over. Everything okay back here?"

"I dunno, sir. We got some aberrations in the core. Nothing you'd notice from the rocket temperature, but there's a thirty-percent ripple in the gamma level."

"They tell you what to do when that happens?"

Prescott smiled. "Yes, sir. In Navy Nuke School, they told us to surface."

"Maybe I better go check my chute."

Prescott chuckled. "Sorry about that, chief. I'll let you know if it looks serious. Might just be the detector."

The captain nodded. The room smelled like a giant radio set: hot vacuum tubes spiced with ozone and outgassing insulation. He missed the old-fashioned smell of aviation fuel, like coffee on a cold morning. Beyond layers of lead shielding huddled the atomic core and the superheated rocket chamber. If the problem was back there, they were flat out of luck, and really would need their parachutes. And the Pentagon would have his hide.

He turned and headed back toward the nose, squeezing past the men on duty. The old lady was still mumbling on the table. Doc gave him a shrug, but before he could speak, the radar operator stuck his head in from the doorway.

"Captain? There's a—"

"Hold on. I'll talk to you up front."

He followed the radar operator to his station just behind the cockpit. There was a bright green blotch on the radar screen, vaguely swirl-shaped. Bad weather ahead.

"Between us and the drop," he commented.

"Yes, sir."

"Well, as long as it's not like that at the target, too. Tell Summers to try flying above it. That should keep us out of the worst of it."

"She says she has pain all her days." Siksrik told the man named Doc. "It's how she knows she hasn't become a spirit."

Granny still lay on the table, minus her *anorak*, wheezing in between mumbled phrases that weren't addressed to Siksrik. Doc had felt Granny's head, announcing she had a lump. Of course; Granny had lumps everywhere.

"Do you know if she has any allergies?" asked Doc. "I need to know before I can give her pain medicine."

Doc tried to explain allergies, bewildering Siksrik. He finally announced he wouldn't give Granny medicine. Siksrik had already decided that if Granny wanted medicine, she'd make her own. She wished Granny could make the air colder.

The room had gradually tilted. On the table, Doc's magic objects rattled and nearly slid off before he caught them. Soldiers Captain and Wilkins entered and sat in chairs fastened to the floor.

"Her name's Siksrik," Doc told them "The woman's her grandmother and they live in a village near Chukchi Base. Siksrik says they just climbed in the basket—nobody stopped them."

"Not my real grandmother," corrected Siksrik. "My real grandmother went out on the ice and didn't come back."

"But this lady's a relative."

"Yes, and the *angakok*."

At the word, Granny opened her eyes and looked at Siksrik. She

struggled and sat up, despite the protests of the Whites.

"It's time to speak with the Raven," she said. She reached into her shirt for a pouch tied around her neck and began untying it with stiff fingers. Her lips were drawn back in pain.

The captain cleared his throat.

"What's she getting, there?"

"Charms," answered Siksrik.

"As long as it's not a bomb," he muttered.

The room bumped up and down. Clouds streamed past the small window, reflecting the room's light.

"It's going to be bumpy," said a buzzing voice from the wall. "The storm extends above our ceiling."

"Siksrik," said the captain, "did anyone outside the village suggest getting in the cargo basket?"

"Granny said the Moon Man told her."

"Who?"

"The Moon Man." She pointed out the window, but there were only clouds. Lightning flickered. The three soldiers looked at each other.

"What does this man look like?" asked the captain. "How long has he been coming to your village?"

"He doesn't come. Granny flies to meet him."

"Maybe she's seeing a bush pilot on the sly," said Wilkins.

"Oh, Jesus, Sergeant," said the captain. "The old lady has to be about eighty."

A bright flash from the window flooded the room, accompanied by an ear-splitting boom. The flash faded, and for a moment, so did the room lights. Then they came back on.

"Lightning strike," said the buzzing voice from the wall. "I think we're okay, but we'll be in this storm for a while."

"Santa doesn't like us invading his air space," said Wilkins.

"Hell, we nuked Santa four times already," said the captain. "He's not going to mess with us."

"Yes, Virginia, there is a Santa Claus," said Doc. "And *all* his reindeer glow in the dark."

The soldiers laughed. Siksrik remembered that Miss LaBerge had

told her Santa was an old White who lived farther north. Granny said Whites couldn't even make a decent igloo, so how could one of them live so far out on the sea ice?

Outside the window, a pulse of lightning curled into a ball, looking like a great eye peering at Siksrik. The eye faded back into the clouds.

Granny held her charms in one trembling palm, fingering them carefully as the room bounced up and down.

Watching her, the captain asked, "Did the man give your granny anything to take with her into the basket? Like maybe a radio?"

"Sometimes Granny takes presents to the Moon Man, but he just tells her things."

The captain nodded. There was another flash, bright as the first, making the captain's face look white as snow. A crash like breaking ice shook the sky, and when the lightning faded, the room lights didn't come back on.

"Summers?" yelled the captain.

Lights flickered for a moment, then died again. The shriek of the Raven had faded, leaving the sound of wind. Siksrik heard men yelling in the corridors. The captain got to his feet.

The voice she'd heard buzzing in the wall before called through the corridor. "Tell Engineering I need some power! Losing pressure on hydraulics, too!"

"Lieutenant Prescott!" roared the captain. "Let's get this bird alive again!"

"Working on it, sir!" came a reply from far away.

A soldier ran into the room, a light in each hand, and gave one to the captain. The captain followed him out, toward where Siksrik had exited the basket.

"Is the bird dead?" asked Siksrik.

"That's a figure of speech," said Wilkins. "Planes get hit by lightning all the time. Don't worry, we're not going to crash."

"Granny?"

"Hush, little one. I'm waiting for the Raven to speak."

Lightning through the ice forming on the window relieved the gloom. The room was tilting the other way now. Siksrik kicked her heels against the post supporting her chair.

A soldier hurried through the corridor from where the captain had gone. A few seconds later the lights came on, but not as bright as before.

A man spoke from somewhere up the corridor: "This is Eagle to Spectator Group. Current position is 84 degrees, 7 minutes north; 138 degrees, 29 minutes west. Game postponed because of rain. Will advise." He repeated his odd speech.

"Must be serious if we're breaking silence," said Doc, fidgeting.

Wilkins nodded.

The lights flickered again, then the captain's voice buzzed from the wall, "Anybody not on critical task, report to the cargo bay immediately and assemble survival gear."

Doc stood up.

"Siksrik," said Wilkins, "You come with us. Granny can stay here and rest."

"Granny, the soldiers say I have to go with them."

"It's all right, Siksrik." Wheezing, Granny fingered her charms and looked out the window. Long white hair concealed her wrinkled neck.

The cargo basket still hung where Wilkins had lifted Siksrik out of it, a short distance above the metal floor. But now soldiers worked around it noisily, with the thuds and scrapes of crates being shoved around.

"Coville," said Wilkins. "Double-check the bomb racks. Make sure nothing's armed."

"Yes, sir."

"Anybody know what happened?"

"Nathan said vacuum tubes went off like flash bulbs in the reactor control room."

"Can they fix it?"

Nobody answered. Their faces reminded Siksrik of her father's face when her mother died. The room was tilting sideways now, as well as forward, like floating ice overweighted by a sled.

The captain came through a tunnel and climbed down the ladder.

"We're losing it. Get your chutes and prepare to ditch." Scowling, he noticed Siksrik. "Sergeant, strap her to you. Doc, get a spare chute and put it on the old lady."

"Are we over water, sir?"

"Ice. Damn near as bad." He went forward.

"Maybe Summers can land it," someone said.

"Hell, he can't even keep us level in the air," muttered Wilkins. "Coville, don't be a moron! Get your cold weather gear on first. And forget the oxygen mask. We'll be scraping the ice when we jump."

Thunder boomed outside, accompanied by flashes from the tunnel above the silver eggs.

"Stay here, Siksrik. I have to get something from my bunk."

The others were too busy to pay attention to her. She sat on a crate, panting in the heat. Each bounce of the room caused the cargo basket to sway. The lights failed again, and the soldiers began cursing. Someone crawled over and around crates toward her, and by the light of someone's flashlight she saw it was Doc.

"Siksrik, I need you to help me with your granny."

He dragged her by the hand through the darkness. Other soldiers jostled her, nearly bowling her over with their gear. She ended up in a room that, by its feel, might have been the one where she'd left Granny, but a flash of lightning revealed that the tables were bare. Doc pulled her to a corner of the room.

"Down there." Doc was in a hurry.

Siksrik squatted and could smell Granny's presence, hear her wheezing. The *angakok* had wedged herself into the corner behind one of the chairs attached to the floor, like a wolverine at bay.

"Siksrik," said Doc, "I need to tie a pack on Granny. It has something in it that will make her float to the ground, so she won't get hurt when she jumps out of the plane. But she thinks I'm trying to hurt her."



Siksrik tried to translate, even though she didn't quite understand. Especially the part about Granny jumping. Granny wasn't a hare.

"The Raven says it will speak to me. I must wait."

"Maybe if you just put the pack on," said Siksrik, "the Whites will be happy and leave you alone."

Granny shook her head "You must do what they say. And I must not. The Raven has told me."

Someone ran into the room. Others were shouting outside.

"Doc?" It was the captain's voice.

"Trying to get the old lady, sir. She's wedged herself under the chair in the corner."

"Well, damnit, get her out! Two minutes till we ditch. *Two minutes*. If you can't do it, leave her!" He stormed out.

"Siksrik!" Wilkins was calling for her. "Siksrik!"

"She's in the mess room, Sergeant!"

Wilkins' boots pounded the corridor. He had a flashlight, and it reflected onto his face. He wore a heavy coat now, with the hood thrown back. Slung over one shoulder was a bulky pack.

"Come on!" He dragged her back toward the big room. "I told you to stay put! Why didn't you?"

She didn't answer, and he was in too much of a hurry to notice. A cool, pleasant wind blew in the corridor now, and when she got to the big room, she saw dark clouds through the open belly of the bird. A man moved a long stick, and abruptly the big cargo basket fell through the opening, a length of cable whipping after it.

Wilkins had put his pack on, and now stooped to face her, setting his flashlight on the floor. The plane bounced and tilted, knocking him to his knees. The light rolled to the hole and disappeared.

"Siksrik, the plane is falling and we can't stop it." He reached into his pocket. "Here."

He put something in her mitten, a soft bundle.

"My daughter gave me this. It's her teddy, and she gave it to me to

keep me company. I want you to take care of it for me. Okay?"

Siksrik nodded. By the reflected glow of other flashlights, she saw that the bundle was a *nanuq*, small and fuzzy, with no claws or teeth.

Wilkins wrapped a strap under her arms and tightened it, pressing her against him.

"You take care of the bear," he said. "I'll take care of you."

The captain's voice roared again. "All right! We jump now, or we don't jump at all. Push the gear out, then start jumping, by twos. We have *got* to stay together. You drift a half mile away, we'll never find you. Light your flares when you're down and head for your buddy, then a survival crate. *With* your buddy. Then regroup and we'll wait for the rescue planes. Questions?"

"What about Summers, sir?"

"He and I go last. Ready?"

A chorus of yessirs answered.

"Kick the gear out!" He turned and ran.

Boxes leaped down into the clouds, lines trailing. Cloth puffed from the boxes like smoke, then the clouds swallowed everything. Two soldiers jumped after the boxes.

A man stumbled through the corridor, struggling to fasten the straps of his pack.

"Doc!" said Wilkins.

"I had to leave her." He sounded like he was crying. "I tried to pull her and she started biting. How the hell was I going to get a chute on her?"

"Okay. Stick with me. Jump when I jump."

"Granny?" called Siksrik. She tried to pull away from Wilkins.

Wilkins picked her up and jumped through the open belly. They fell into the clouds and Wilkins' pack opened, spilling its contents, cloth that rolled upward into the darkness forever. Lightning flashed in the form of a ball, a great eye of the Raven peering down at her. She saw Doc swimming in the air. As thunder crashed, Wilkins' cloth billowed into a balloon almost like the one she and Granny had ridden. It snapped her upward, and Wilkins'

grip on her tightened. She pressed the magic *nanuq* against her.

"Jesus, it's cold," said Wilkins. He was still looking at the receding bird. "Come on, guys," he pleaded.

It was quiet now, floating in the clouds. She tasted snowflakes with her tongue. Lightning flickered.

"There! Two more chutes." He looked down at her. "I'm real sorry about your Granny."

"She will speak with the Raven," Siksrik said solemnly.

Lightning flashed again, and abruptly she heard the scream of the Raven. For an instant the clouds parted, and she caught a glimpse of it as she'd first seen it from the balloon basket, a moving star in the darkness. Then the clouds folded around it like great wings, and it was gone, its roar receding into the storm.

"That's impossible!" said Wilkins. "Everybody jumped except for...."

Siksrik floated toward the ice, holding the *nanuq*. ■

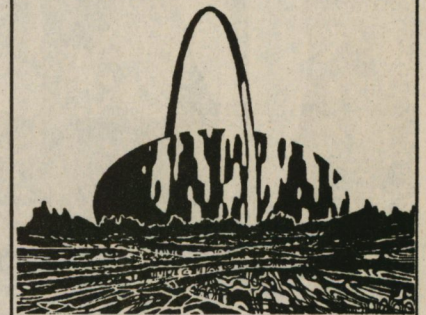


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THE DIMENSIONS OF THE DEED

Robert Reed

Illustrated by Kelly Faltermayer

The Coli were coming back to Earth.

It was an experiment gone wrong.



They had a public agreement with the U.N. Every coli destined to hit the desert within two hundred miles of their lab belonged to them. The newly completed China Wall let those coli pass without so much as a warm breath of laser light. Three kill-teams were currently on standby; ten more teams were in training. Later, as the bombardment worsened, the fall-zone would be narrowed accordingly. A hundred-mile radius, then fifty. Then twenty. Then ten. And after that point, only the most promising adults and spores would be allowed to come home.

Every reasonable precaution was being taken.

Every reasonable person knew that the best people were working day and night, no expense being spared, trying their very best to save the world. Explaining how was Leon Butterfield's job. A tall, imposing man, intelligent and easily charming, he served as Media Relations Supervisor for Kill-Team One. In plain words, he was the PR animal sent out to manage the press, answering their changeless questions while conveying that business-as-usual spirit.

"This one could be messy," Monroe warned him, shouting over the roar of the rotors. "Near the highway and this little-shit town. A real B-movie scenario, don't you think?"

Leon nodded, reading his copy of the spotters' report. An isolated desert community finds itself threatened by a monster that has fallen from the sky...it was a movie made a thousand times, the storyline ingrained into the culture's subconscious...

"And it survived, too." Monroe handed him the most recent recon photographs, warm from the printer. "A big quick bug. Look. It's already got its legs out and working."

The coli's body was a long gray cylinder, stumps showing where its solar panels had been attached. The legs resembled heavy ropes, each one tipped with cutting tools. Coli were named for a glancing resemblance to the common gut bacteria, *Escherichia coli*. Bigger than most homes, it was built from ceramics and metals, a solid-fueled rocket in its gut and a tough, adaptable computer in charge. Those ropish legs were useless for motion; Earth's gravity pinned them wherever they landed, thank goodness. But this looked like the rare specimen that had weathered its re-entry and crash landing, finding itself healthy, legs deploying and slicing into the desert soil while the mind decided what minerals were cheap and how it should build its darling children.

Monroe said, "Oh, fuck."

Leon blinked and looked up. "What is it?"

His associate handed him a different photograph, one showing the town and road...and a bus? A school bus, he realized. But repainted green, which meant it wasn't for school kids. A sightseers' charter ran out of Las Vegas, but they used an old Greyhound bus. And it wasn't one of the official news wagons, Leon knowing them on sight. Chances were that it belonged to one of the passionate groups who did nothing but patrol the desert, listening to civil defense transmissions, hoping for a coli to roar into view.

The news teams played that game, too.

And news teams meant cameras and air time, which were what passionate groups needed more than breath itself. A small town, a living coli, and now protesters. Leon tapped the photograph. "Whoever they are," he groaned, "I hope they've got enough sense to keep out of your way."

"I don't," Monroe replied. "I hope it's those assholes who tried to throw blood on us."

Cow's blood, Leon recalled. And a PR nightmare.

"This time," Monroe promised, "we'll kick the shit out of them."

A boyish man despite being forty, Monroe had a boy's attitude toward confrontations. "Don't kick anyone," Leon advised. He was staring at the other six members of the kill-team, and he reminded them, "Any protesters belong to me."

"Sure, we know that." Monroe laughed, taking Leon by the shoulder, telling him, "You'll do fine. You always do fine."

Personal confidence wasn't the problem, thought Leon.

"They're idiots," Monroe declared, "and you'll talk circles around them. A verbal shit-kicking, am I right?"

The problem here was that he disliked Monroe. It wasn't any one trait. It was the whole package that bothered Leon. Yet nobody was better at butchering the coli for his colleagues back at the lab. He might be an insensitive boob, but he knew the bugs better than almost anyone, and

if asked, Leon would boast of the man's sterling skills.

"A verbal shit-kicking," said the boyish man, full of bluster.

And Leon was good at his job, too. He could smile at will, like now, studying the photographs again, that plain gray cylinder looking like a bacterium stuck to a plate of rough, desiccated agar; and he thought about everything, and nothing, getting himself ready for his own subtle kind of combat.

The chopper set down between the coli and the town. Leon climbed out, then Monroe and the others flew off to find flat ground where their heavy equipment could be brought in and set up. Working near a functioning coli was relatively safe, provided you took precautions. The kill-team would wear special foam suits that served as camouflage, mimicking the ground's heat signature and its texture. Novelties made coli curious. But if you understood them, you could evade their cutting limbs. Unless a second coli fell on your head, there was little chance that they would harm you.

Climbing a gradual slope, Leon brushed the dust from his coveralls and looked at the tiny town. It was barely worth a name—a few houses and a filling station. A pair of news wagons were parked beside the old green school bus, cameras floating like so many tiny helicopters. Distant hum-vees had brought a handful of National Guardsmen. A lone state trooper strode back and forth, trying not to look outnumbered. But the protesters—three dozen, at least—seemed calm, even docile, probably numbed by the endless bus ride.

Justice Now! read one banner.

Criminals Walk Free! read another.

This had to be the group from Texas, the law-and-order types who were demanding prosecutions and hard prison terms. Leon had been briefed about them. They believed that everyone from the original project had to be held accountable. Monroe, for instance. Plus the hundred engineers and assorted specialists

who had built the first coli, using off-the-shelf machinery and some brilliant simplicity. The coli on the desert was a direct descendant, hundreds of generations removed, and most of the original team were now employed by the U.N. Like it or not, they were the genuine experts on the bugs. Right or wrong, Leon knew, criminal trials would just make a bad situation infinitely worse.

And besides, where was the criminal intent?

Did these people truly believe that their enemies had *planned* to put the world at risk?

"Beautiful morning, isn't it?"

John Kramer interrupted Leon's reverie. A handsome round face flashed a smile. John was one of the CNN troopers, this strange invasion serving to make him a household name. "Nice of the bug to land close to a road," the reporter observed.

Leon laughed. "Did you arrange it?"

"Sure." John nodded at the distant coli, remarking, "Sort of like an old monster movie, isn't it?"

"Is it?" Leon responded. "I hadn't noticed."

"All we need is some plucky young couple to save the world."

Leon smiled and said nothing. Out on the desert he could see a long blackened streak made by the bug's exhaust. Chances were that it had exhausted its fuel in a bid to kill its momentum. Earth was a deep, deep gravity well, and most of the coli—the ones allowed through the China Wall—shattered on impact. Leon had his work cut out for him. He had to prove to a math-illiterate world that this was nothing but an unlikely set of circumstances....

"Where's the bug from? The Belt?"

Most were. The Moon had its own population, but the lunar regolith was impoverished, too few volatiles to make adequate rocket fuel. "Soon as Monroe does his biopsy," Leon promised, "I'll give you our guess. Early afternoon, probably."

Element ratios from the hull could pinpoint a birthplace, sometimes to the exact asteroid. Most

reporters didn't understand how, but John had a good layman's sense of things. He nodded, satisfied. Motioning back at the town, he said, "Nobody's hurt, but it was some wake-up call. When the rocket passed over, it busted every window. Some of the locals haven't caught their breath since."

Leon was sympathetic, but he kept gazing at the desert. Well past the coli, on a wide flat wash, big choppers were setting down the generator and the cutting lasers. "Twenty years from now," he remarked, "people can tell their grandkids about all this."

There was a pause, then John said, "Oh, oh."

Leon turned and saw another reporter on the march. It was that kid from Las Vegas—what was his name?—and the kid showed a salesman's smile, saying, "Mr. Butterfield? I'm Tad Lemons. We've talked before—"

"I remember," Leon said, his voice careful. Cool.

"—and I was wondering, since we've got some time to eat—"

"I'll be happy to brief you, Mr. Lemons." The man was twenty years his junior, yet Leon tried to sound respectful. "As I was telling Mr. Kramer, as soon as we know anything—"

"Actually, I'm not interested. I mean, is there going to anything all that new?"

Before Leon could answer, the protesters erupted, lifting their signs and crying out with a practiced aplomb. *TRIALS NOW!!!* one sign read, held up to the nearest camera by a vigorous, infuriated old woman.

"Actually," said Lemons, "I was wondering about a dialogue...a little informal discussion...."

Bracing himself, Leon asked, "With whom?"

"The Justice Now president. Madeline Pogue." The salesman's grin brightened. "Do you know her?"

"I've never had the pleasure."

"I know what you're thinking, but she has credentials. A degree in science—"

"In what?"

"Oh, biology. I think" Lemons started placing imaginary chairs on the ground before them. "Just the three of us, the coli in the background. We won't see her supporters, okay? No interruptions. Just you and Madeline and a fair exchange of ideas."

There was no such thing. Leon's job existed because ideas were never fairly exchanged, emotions and misinformation coloring every opinion; and it was up to him to navigate through these obstructions, defending the U. N. policies by using measured statements and gray truths. What did he know about this group? They weren't fundamentalists who believed that the coli were bringing Armageddon. Nor did they throw balloons filled with cold cow blood. Justice Now made rational sounds, he recalled, and this might be the ideal chance to blunt their movement. Lemons' station was watched by the people most at risk, nobody else being bombarded today. This was Ms. Pogue's natural audience—

"Mr. Butterfield? What do you think?"

"Sounds fine," Leon replied. And smiled. "Why not?"

When the first coli had been launched—ancestor to millions—Leon was working as a freelance science reporter. He had interviewed some of the project leaders, winning their confidence with his genuine appreciation of their work. The promise of cheap metals from the Belt seemed well worth the paltry thirty-billion-dollar investment. He told a skeptical public about the mission and its target, a small iron-rich asteroid, and when the first of its descendants found their way home, following an orbiting beacon into a high, safe orbit, Leon was invited to have a firsthand look at the operation. *The harvest*, it was called, everyone beaming with joy.

Coli weren't alive. They were factories, automated and self-replicating; it was official policy to emphasize that distinction.

Yet most of the world, inside the project as well as outside, spoke of

them as if they were genuine bacteria, the words *bugs* and *plague* coloring everyone's view. Like their namesake, coli were tough and flexible. And sadly, they had a tendency to mutate. Key instructions could be lost during replication, and if the novel bug could survive, then it would spawn its own odd, inventive strain.

"Whatever happened," Monroe liked to say, "it was some kind of a one-in-a-trillion accident. Redundant commands were dropped, but nothing that would kill the beasties."

"Dropped how?" people would ask. People like Leon.

"Who knows? Heavy nuclei impacting on the computer itself. Or maybe some kind of programming error missed by every one of our triple-checks." A vague smile, and he would add, "Take an encyclopedia. Shoot it with a shotgun. And imagine that the only thing you destroy is every reference to the state of Ohio. I'm talking about that kind of specificity."

The project had seemed like a resounding success. That first coli spun an enormous solar sail, riding light to the target asteroid. Legs tasted the crust, absorbing what was useful; solar panels were built, then a first generation of car-sized spores. The coli covered their rugged world, digesting it. And then came the laser beacon, a monochromatic shout for them to come home.

The adults launched themselves, beginning the long smooth fall towards Earth. The prizes were their hulls. When Leon finally met Monroe—in orbit, at the celebration—it seemed like nothing could go wrong. A small investment, plus genius, had enriched the world. No more strip mines; no more economic bottlenecks for poor nations. "And this is just the start," Monroe had boasted. "These coli have some very flexible programs. They can live on any sunlit world. Triton, if you're patient. They'll adapt to almost any material. Not enough metals? Then their micromachine bellies build ceramics instead. But what if they land on an icy moon? Then they use organics

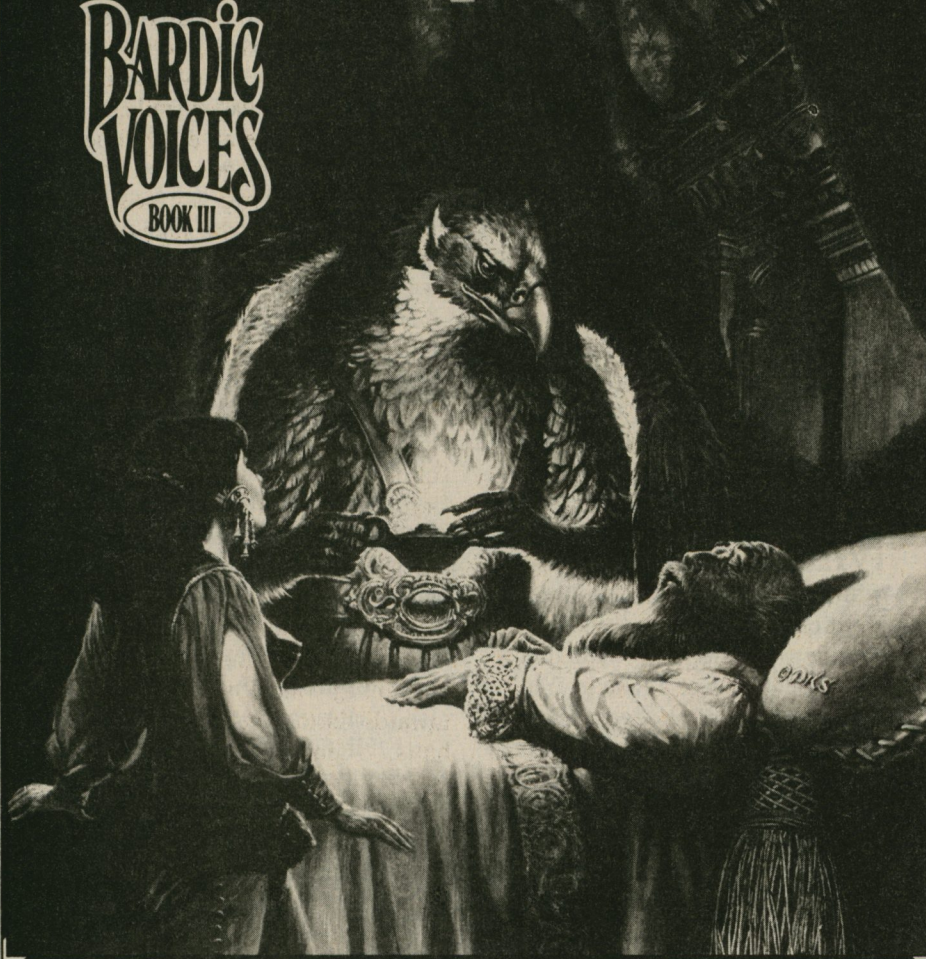


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and water ice, and they're like so many smart comets. "

Leon didn't like Monroe, but he found the enthusiasm infectious.

"You should see the possible growth rates," said the young man. "And think what we could do with millions of them! They could bring water ice from Mimas or Callisto. Mars could get a new ocean. Maybe even the Moon could have one, too. All we have to do is act like traffic cops, telling the bugs where to go."

"But what if they get lost?" Leon had felt compelled to ask. "What if they don't follow our traffic laws?"

"Won't happen. Never, never." Monroe had dismissed the possibility with a snarl. He gestured at a nearby monitor, one of the bugs being drawn into the prototype factory, and he promised, "A year of free beer if any of them go wild."

Yet one of them did just that. The best guess was that two adult coli were mangled, probably in a high-velocity impact, then together, using incomplete programs, they managed to produce at least one viable spore. It was a possibility never envisioned. Wild-type bugs, descendants of that first one, ignored every beacon, craving raw sunlight and fresh ores. Under ideal conditions, a single coli could double itself every twenty days. A renegade became a thousand renegades in less than a year, then a million just as swiftly. Luckily that kind of success was rare. And equally fortunate, one of Monroe's colleagues found an early renegade up on the Moon. The telltale gaps in its programs were identified. The United Nations was informed at once, the dangers obvious. And within half a year, after a flurry of coordinated panic, the anti-missile China Wall was reactivated, its eyes and weapons turned around to face the incoming menace.

Leon had seen semi-secret estimates of the coli numbers. Tens of millions of them were scattered over a thousand asteroids, plus Mars and the Moon. At current rates, they would saturate the Moon in the next three years. To their eyes, it looked like an asteroid—delicious, in other

words—and that was a fortunate quirk. Moon-born coli could only gaze up at their pretty blue neighbor.

"We get the unlucky ones," said Monroe. "The cripples. The sloppy navigators. Or the ones with bad eyes." He liked listing reasons to feel lucky. He loved to drink beer, denouncing the people who painted apocalyptic images. "Spend a few hundred billion, do the smart things, and we'll end up better than ever. I promise you."

Monroe never bought the beer. Was that why Leon didn't like him?

Or was it because the man had never, even in a glancing way, admitted to any errors in judgement?

Once, just once, Leon mentioned that 'year of free beer' promise.

And Monroe responded with outrage. "Hey, I thought we were friends!" Then he shrugged the question aside, winking and showing a sloppy smile. "Everything's going to work out. Wait and see. A thousand years from now, and people'll look back on us as heroes. For a lot of reasons, I bet."

Maybe so, Leon hoped.

Although he'd settle for being hated, if it meant that their species had found the luck and the fortitude to survive.

Madeline Pogue, president of Justice Now, looked like someone who had looked hard at Death. A slender woman, too thin and too weathered to be pretty, she had the bright cold eyes of a fanatic. Yet she seemed aware of her eyes, softening them once the cameras were nearby. She made herself into a reasonable, even moderate creature, starting the discussion by stating, "What's happening is a crime. You can't argue otherwise. We've already spent fortunes defending ourselves, and there's no end in sight." A brief pause, then she added, "The Earth is in jeopardy, Mr. Butterfield. You admitted as much, just last week—"

"I know what I said, thank you." Leon tried to sound firm, unruffled. "And we agree in some ways. Terrible things have happened. I won't deny it, there are dangers. But what

we need is to work together, solving our problems in the quickest way possible."

"It's going to get worse," she reminded him. Wearing running shorts and shoes, she resembled a jogger at a desert spa. "According to your own project's estimates, impact rates will double in the next three months—"

"Yes, how do you respond?" Lemons interjected. Sitting between the combatants, he seemed concerned that he might go unnoticed. Gesturing at the distant coli, his expression smug, he asked, "Are we going to have twice as many of *these*?"

"Of course we will." It was public knowledge; Leon couldn't deny it. "But please remember, we allowed this impact. Our defensive net could have vaporized this object in space. We let it fall because we want it."

"What happens when the Wall fails?" Madeline let her eyes harden, for an instant. "The U.N. says that in five years, even with the most optimistic building schedule, we won't have enough orbiting lasers. What's happening here will happen everywhere. More monsters will drop. The fastest ones will carry as much force as small atomic bombs."

Which was why the China Wall would single them out as targets. Slower coli with fuel would slow themselves, struggling to come down intact.

"Ten years," Madeline announced, "and they'll fall at the rate of a hundred thousand every hour. Isn't that right, Mr. Butterfield?"

"First of all," he said, "computer projections are complex and subject to change. Secondly, growth rates will slow." He paused, acting as if he had all the time in the world. "With or without us, the coli will start interfering with each other. Tripping over each other, in effect. And of course the Moon will take the brunt of the impacts. It's really our second Wall—"

"What happens when both Walls crack," Lemons asked, his voice shrill. Sharp. "What do we do then?"

The dangerous coli would be singled out and destroyed. Coli

falling into the sea would be ignored; what harm could they do underwater? New lasers would protect populated areas—plans left the lab every day—and there was serious talk about letting some of the coli survive in desert regions. They couldn't wander. Why not let them manufacture new solar panels, then destroy them and use their panels to power the big lasers?

But that wasn't the subject. Madeline wanted trials for the coli designers, and Leon tried to focus on her vindictiveness. "Ms. Pogue," he said with a smooth, business-like voice, "I know the numbers seem enormous. And I agree, we've got a credible danger. But while we're in this tight corner, trials would be foolish. These people that you blame are our best hope of victory. They know our enemy. They recognize the dangers. My personal belief? If they were put on trial, they would be exonerated. No jury in the world could label them criminals. But trials take time. They wouldn't be free to work. This war won't be won with just lasers. It needs innovative weapons, weapons like those we're building in our laboratory and in labs around the world." He paused, breathing as if winded. Then he said, "I just wish you could appreciate their hard work and genius. If you could, I'm sure you'd applaud them. I know it."

The cold eyes grew large for a moment. What was she thinking?

Leon added another brick to his argument. "Nobody has been killed, almost nobody has been hurt." Team Two had a casualty last month, a leg removed from its careless owner. "Look out there. Can you tell me that you see a monster murdering people? No, you can't. What we see is a machine, harmless if you keep your distance. A broken machine, and people we can't quite see are trying to find ways to fix it. To put us back in control again."

"You know," said Madeline, "I'm not the crazy person you imagine."

Leon blinked, saying nothing. It was his experience that the crazies were the first to claim lucidity.

"All I want, and all we deserve, is justice." She waited for a moment, then said, "Simple justice."

As if such a thing existed, Leon thought.

The protesters, possibly aware of the their leader's words, broke into a low, somewhat angry roar. Leon hoped their microphones wouldn't pick up the interruption. John Kramer was watching with a sympathetic smile. He was in Leon's camp. Mistakes had been made, but scapegoats were the worst solution.

"Well," Lemons announced, "we seem to have reached an impasse."

Madeline was staring out at the coli, her expression unreadable.

"Anything to add, Mr. Butterfield?"

"I'm not vindictive" Leon began. "I want what's best for the world, and I think that in a very few years we'll have the means—"

Madeline rose to her feet, taking both men by surprise.

Glancing at the nearest camera, she said, "I want to take this debate to a different venue. One more appropriate."

And suddenly she was running—a strong, purposeful stride—moving down the hillside, traveling toward the coli in a straight, insane line.

Leon couldn't catch the woman; he knew it after a dozen strides.

Glancing over a shoulder, he saw the protesters surging, swamping the Guardsmen and the lone trooper. Lemons hadn't moved. He looked stunned, confused. Who else could catch Madeline? Nobody here, thought Leon. Too many distractions, too many pounds. For an instant he thought about running for the humvees, but by the time he could reach one and start it—if he could find keys—Madeline would be out of sight. His only hope was that someone would warn Monroe, then Leon could help the kill-team find her and remove her with minimal fuss. He hoped.

The woman was a pronghorn, her legs taking two strong strides for his wobbly three. They were half a mile from the coli, then a quarter

mile, and Madeline paused and turned, shouting back at her pursuer, "You look worried, Mr. Butterfield."

He was. They were going to get too close, without camouflage, and he wasn't in control. "What are you doing?" he called out. "What do you want, Madeline?"

But she was running again, rebuilding her lead.

One of the cameras flew past him, rotors blurring, its single blunt eye focusing on the crazy woman.

Just as she wants, thought Leon.

He slowed to a trot, trying to rest and coax her to do the same. Both of their microphones were working, their bizarre debate being recorded.

Cupping his hands around his mouth, Leon shouted, "Listen to me, please! Let me explain—be reasonable, please!"

She kept running, not so much as a backward glance.

He made tired legs move, the ground flattening and then climbing, his quarry moving among boulders and brown thickets. For an instant, he lost track of her. Panic gave his legs life. He came around a dense mat of brush and saw her standing less than sixty yards from the coli, her back to it, her eyes watching him close the gap. She lifted a hand in warning. "No farther," she called out. "Stop there."

He took a couple more strides regardless.

Madeline retreated, placing herself on the edge of the danger zone.

"Okay, I'm stopping," Leon promised.

"Mr. Butterfield," she observed, "you look terrified."

Because he was. The ground beneath them was vibrating, the coli's long legs cutting into the hard rock. It was like being on the edge of a construction site. "Too close is when your teeth start to rattle," they had told him, in training. And sure enough, he could feel every filling, every cap, plus the shivering bones in his skull.

"What were you going to tell me, Mr. Butterfield?"

For an instant, he couldn't remember. A second camera drifted

near him and hovered, watching his face. "We're developing countermeasures," he managed to say, "and we'll win. I have no doubts—"

"I know all about them," she interrupted.

"Robots," he shouted. "Man-sized. Like viruses with diamond mouths. I can show you the prototypes in our lab."

"I'm sure you could—"

"We'll build tens of thousands of them, then launch them by railgun. We can litter the asteroid belt with them. Each one can kill dozens of coli, eating into them—"

"Like a virus, I know. And what about the other millions?"

Tad Lemons was approaching at last, his dress shoes scuffed and his right leg limping. He stopped some forty yards behind Leon, fear making his face pale and simple.

Stay there, thought Leon. You've done enough.

Turning back towards Madeline, he said, "What about the tiger-coli? That's what we're doing here, in part. We're studying ways to change this machine, to rebuild it, making it into a predator—"

"—That you'll seed the Belt with. I know. I'm a trained biologist, Mr. Butterfield. I understand these concepts."

A few hundred tigers could prosper, if done right. With better onboard computers, they would remain under firm human control, every tiger attacking the wild coli one at a time, replacing its guts with a tiger's guts—in effect, doubling its numbers with each feeding sequence.

"You *hope* we can control them," said Madeline. "But what if these tigers mutate? What if they fall here? Coli with teeth—"

"Precautions are being taken," he snapped, angry now.

Frustrated.

Behind the woman, lifting in a probing arc, was one of the coli's rosy limbs, gray and twisting as it dropped short of her by less than five yards. She flinched, bits of pulverized stone striking her from behind. But she didn't move closer, holding her ground and even managing a

grin, asking him, "What's next? Will you tell me about the whales?"

They were just a proposal, at least so far. Giant machines would be built in orbit—probably no more than a handful of "juveniles"—then they'd be released to wander around the Solar System. Their hulls would be the perfect lures for coli, designed to mimic the spectral properties of metallic asteroids. Each coli would be captured with tentacles, torn apart, then its hull and guts would be absorbed by the increasingly enormous *whale*.

"If certain technologies can be mastered," said Leon, "why not?"

"Will we live inside them?"

He was aware of the cameras, particularly the one focused on his face. "It's just a suggestion, at this point...."

"They'll be miles across and spinning. Isn't that the plan?" Madeline licked her lips and inched closer, retreating from the robotic limb. She had to shout for him to hear her over the drilling, saying, "Miles across and full of air, heated and lit up. Am I right? The whales would maintain a living environment, and people could build homes. Our children could. Our grandchildren."

If it worked, yes. Eventually, yes.

Leon inched forward, closing the gap while he shouted, "That's one scenario. You're right. We've got some plans at the lab, and they're intriguing." A pause. The sound of shattering rock made him wince, then it softened enough to let him say, "It might happen. But it might be better to build smaller, simpler machines first. Fish before whales, if you know what I mean."

"A lot of fish, I hope." Madeline wore a knowing expression. "In five or six decades, regardless what we do, coli are going to start falling from the outer solar system. Not by the millions, but by the tens of billions!"

Worst-case scenarios, and secret. Leon bristled, hiding his emotions and reacting according to years of practice. "A very, very few coli have made it to Jupiter and past. I don't know where you found such ridicu-

lous numbers, but you've clearly misunderstood—"

"I have not!" she moaned, glancing over a shoulder at the burrowing limb. "They're your estimates. The coli don't like the dim light, but the ice and organic material are easier to work with. Ganymede alone has some two million functioning coli!"

Again she looked back at the limb.

He took a step, shrinking the distance between them to less than eight yards. Maybe seven.

"Earth won't survive," Madeline declared. "Ten China Walls can't protect us, and our oceans will be poisoned by the coli bodies, and our cities will be flattened, and our climate will fail—"

"Not true!"

"—and the coli won't be coli anymore. If they can mutate once, it can happen again. The more of them that live, the worse our prospects become."

Behind her and to her left, walking with a smooth practiced motion, was Morgan, dressed in his lumpy foam suit, camouflaged and looking more than a little ridiculous. He resembled some cartoon character set to life, his eyes moving from the coli's limb to Madeline and back again.

Leon swallowed, then shouted, "We'll beat them. Or the very worst, we'll have to learn to live with them."

"Abandoning the Earth," she said, her voice angry. Shrii.

"Maybe we'll build those whales." Leon wanted her attention fixed on him. "If they reproduce at even a modest rate, and if we can wait for a century or so, then there'll be millions of them for us, all waiting for us." He was borrowing a speculation from Morgan, the man drunk one night and proud of his vision. "Maybe what's happening to us—maybe it's a stage that every intelligent lifeform goes through. We leave our homeworld, moving out into space...!"

She dismissed him with a wave, a sneer.

"Don't you agree, Madeline?"

JANUARY 1995

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VOIMA

THE IMMORTALS HAD RUN OUT OF TIME



"You're the one who doesn't understand." She shook her head, hands made into fists. "Our crime... what we've been doing ... don't you see how enormous it is?"

She was trembling, appearing ready to collapse.

Monroe was close, closer than Leon, and he began to lift one of his foam-padded arms, enough of his face showing that Leon could make out the smile. Morgan was enjoying himself. He took another step, then paused, and one of the cameras noticed him, turning in the air, guided by its operator or by its own internal programs—

—and Madeline asked, "What happens to the coli that get away? What, Mr. Butterfield? They've been riding their light sails and slingshotting past Jupiter... and what happens to them—?"

She paused, eyes fixing on the camera.

Why is it looking over there? she seemed to think.

Then she looked back over her left shoulder, and Morgan jumped at her, too slow and taken by surprise. The pronghorn made them look old and fat, both of them chasing her along an incline's lip, Leon trying to keep an angle on her, then tripping on one of the fifty million rocks in this damned desert, spilling forwards and rolling in the worst possible direction, coming to a stop where the coli could plainly see him.

He was something unusual, it thought to itself. Something of use, perhaps.

Leon watched one long limb reaching for him, and he tried to move, pains shooting down his back, his legs feebly kicking... and he thought how ironic it would be, him the first to die at the hands of these monsters. Perhaps the only death, if things went very well—

—and a hand grabbed him, pulling him up the rocky slope.

No, two hands. Different hands. One large and gloved; one smaller and bare, and feminine.

The drill sliced into stone not two yards below him, the sound of it

obscuring the voices. Leon watched faces, watched their mouths.

"Are you okay?" Morgan seemed to ask.

Madeline asked, "How did you get down there?"

"Can you move?" said Morgan.

"I'm all right," Leon growled, feeling embarrassed and bloodied and absolutely ridiculous. Anger gave his voice volume, and he looked at Madeline, shouting, "I was trying to save your life!"

"I wasn't trying to kill myself," she responded, shaking her head with a kind of horror. "I wanted us to debate in a better location, that's all. Just like I said—"

"But you almost killed me!" Leon replied. He climbed to his feet, saying, "Because of you, I almost died!"

She mouthed the word, "Sorry."

Then, while the cameras watched, he said, "What kind of person are you? What kind of person endangers others?"

"Sorry," she said again, apparently sincere.

But the cameras were in the wrong position to see her face, and what billions of people could see, that day and for most of the week, was Leon's bloody, dust-covered and outraged face asking Madeline and the world, "Who in hell is the monster here?"

It was quite the moment.

"You should see the polls," Monroe reported, smiling and nodding as he sipped on his beer. "They've shifted five points our way. My guess? You'll get a promotion out of this, and a raise."

Leon touched his scabs with his cold beer. Monroe had bought the beer; it was a first.

"Have I thanked you? Because you really put that bitch in her place." He punched the closer shoulder, adding, "Everyone agrees. You're quite the little hero tonight, my friend."

We aren't friends, thought Leon. Saying nothing.

The bar was a prefab building in the middle of the laboratory grounds,

and its few patrons were occasionally glancing over at the two men, sometimes smiling, sometimes speaking to each other, probably retelling the story for the umpteenth time.

Leon ignored them, taking a sip of beer before saying, "What Madeline mentioned... at the end..."

"What did she say? I've only seen the last part of it—"

"Coli are leaving the solar system. Is that right?"

"Sure." A shrug of the shoulders. "They're sloppy navigators, at least some of the time. Say they take a shot at the Jovian moons, miss and get kicked right out of here."

"How fast are they?"

Another shrug. "With a solar sail and ideal conditions... well, they probably could catch the old Voyagers before too long."

"How long to the nearest stars?"

The smug, boyish face grew puzzled. "Ten thousand years, give or take. But of course most won't pass near another star—"

"Can they live that long?"

"Coli aren't alive," he replied, laughing. But Leon didn't act amused, which puzzled him even more. "I suppose they'll ease into a kind of hibernation. A good set of solar panels might produce a minimal juice, if they're patient. And they are. Enough to keep their parts from vacuum-welding, maybe. Maybe a few might make it across. One in a thousand, if they're lucky."

"Then what happens?"

"Where? At the new star system?" He shook his head. "I don't know. What do you think would happen?"

"If they find asteroids, the coli prosper."

Monroe agreed. "I'm sure they'll find some sort of rubble. Every star has to have its own entourage."

Leon finished his beer, setting it down with finality.

"What's the matter?" asked Monroe.

"Nothing," said Leon.

"You don't look happy," his nonfriend observed. "What happened to that winning smile?"

He didn't answer, looking out the tall grimy window beside their table. Evening had fallen, and sometimes, like now, the China Wall would destroy an incoming hazard, protecting California. Judging by the direction and brightness, Leon guessed that the target was above Los Angeles. He counted three silent flashes. An adult coli, he reasoned. It had taken a lot of abuse before it vaporized.

Turning back to his companion, he spoke with a low, serious voice. "Why do we think that alien technologies are rare? Any thoughts?"

Monroe snorted. "Because we don't see them? Is that what you mean?"

"We don't see them," the PR man agreed. "But if one of them made one self-replicating machine, wouldn't its descendants be everywhere? If our own coli can move from star to star, infecting solar systems—traveling a light-year every ten thousand years, let's say—they could cross the Milky Way in a billion years."

"A long walk," Monroe observed.

"But our galaxy turns," Leon responded. "Some stars move against the grain. Think of an enor-



mous vat of growth medium being stirred in someone's lab. Introduce a single bacterium. How long does it take for that coli to be everywhere?"

Monroe said nothing, watching him.

"Ours are mutating. By the time they reach Alpha Centauri, they'll be improved in a thousand ways." With a damp hand Leon wiped his forehead, then said with a soft, unhappy voice, "Maybe we are the first technology. Maybe we're just the most dangerous. Either way, our coli are going to move through space, and every living world is going to be crushed by them."

"You don't know that," Monroe complained.

"If we are the first," Leon muttered, "then we may very well be the last ones, too."

"Hey, this is the best day of your life. Cheer up, for christ-sake."

"Don't you feel any responsibility? Even a little?"

"If these other lifeforms can't evolve fast enough," asked Monroe, "is it my fault?"

Leon waited for a long moment.

Then he asked, "Want to see me smile?"

"Yeah. Go on."

He did. The instant that his companion's head struck the floor with a solid, satisfying *crunch*, a big and honest beaming smile broke out on his face.

God, Leon thought. It's been too long! ■

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Edited by Theodore R. Cogswell

Advent:Publishers, Inc.

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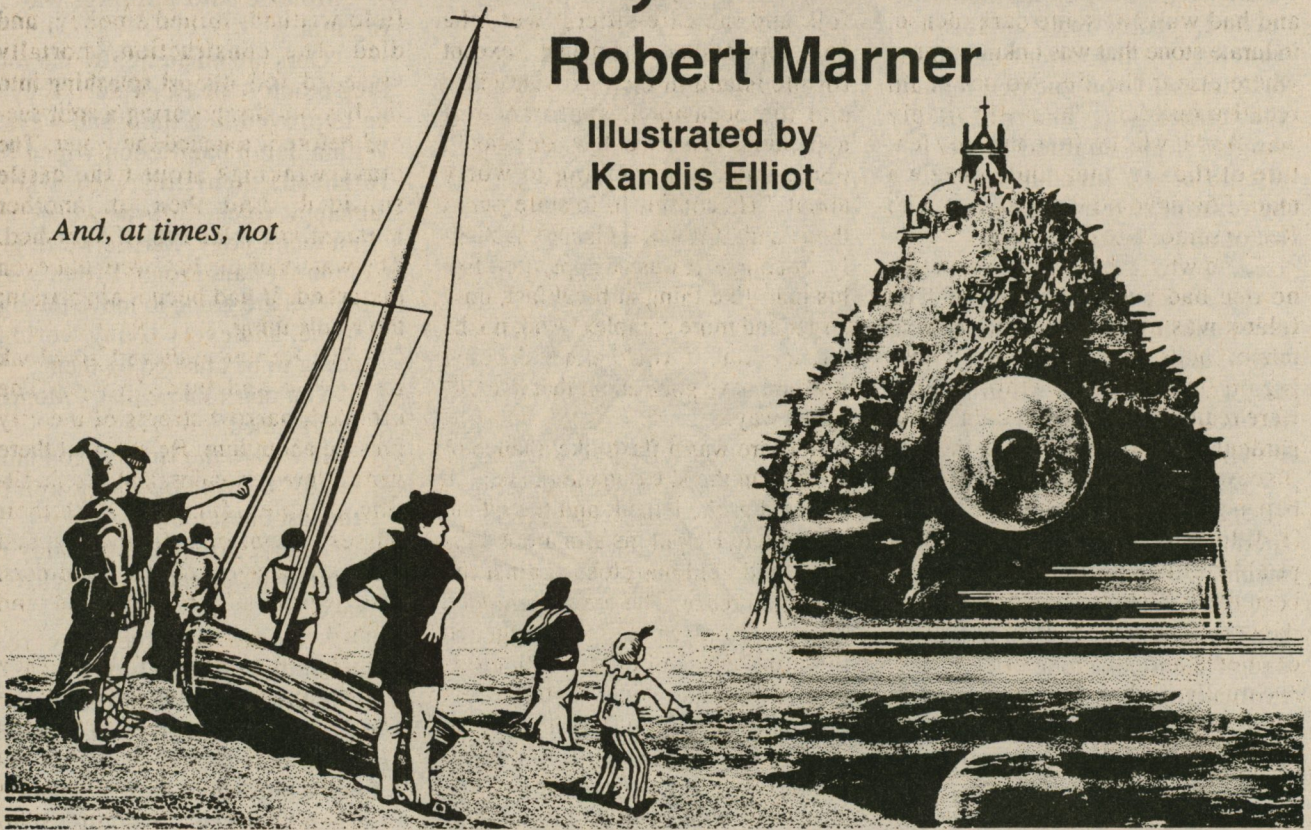
—Algis Budrys

AT TIMES, AN ISLAND

Robert Marner

Illustrated by
Kandis Elliot

And, at times, not



The natives of the city began, one afternoon, to see things in the bay. They reasoned, some of them, that it was a purely natural process. Mattias the Miller even said “It’s not so bad, really, I mean, an island rising from the waters so suddenly is not usual, but it is not unheard of. It doesn’t completely block our access to the sea, and while it’s ugly, it’s not really dangerous.” On hearing this—for he happened to be going by the bakery at the time—the Rector paused to consider. Finally, he decided the idiot miller’s remark was not, quite, stupid beyond belief, so he let him live and went on his way.

The Rector had a lot on his mind. And at breakfast, an apparition had entered the room, tall and wrapped in garments that looked stiff and were metallic in color, its face shielded by a semi-transparent visor. Small lightnings leapt, unheard, about its head and shoulders. No one else in the room noticed it. But it was moderate-

ly plain to the Rector, transparent but real. It turned its head from side to side, as though looking, and then, satisfied, without a preliminary word, it had turned to the Rector and said, in a perfectly normal voice: “Try to keep your people out of harm’s way,” and then had vanished.

It was not the first such apparition in recorded history, but it was the first in a long time, and it appeared only in records kept by the Rectors. The records did not reflect what the apparition said or did; each succeeding Rector was presumed to know that. And, thinking about it, this Rector did not see any point in recording what his apparition said. What was the point of recording an admonition that simply restated what the Rector already knew to be his primary job?

The Rector had in fact easily been able to continue to eat without betraying his experience to the others in the room. He had, however, finished quickly, gathered up his cloak, and

left the castle, and walked down the twisting streets, toward the bay. He wanted to look at the new island again. And thus it was he overheard the miller’s judgment, on his way. He shook his head. The emergence from the waters of an island with towering headlands was *not* natural; this was not the accumulation of silt, or even some other sort of geologic accretion; this was the emergence from the waters of a towering prominence of land that looked for all the world as though it had been there for millennia. It was plain to the Rector what was happening; the world was experiencing a time-shift, and he powerless to stop it, as his ancestors had been powerless when it happened sporadically in their times, and no one knew when such episodes would end. If, in fact, they did end, rather than gradually take over people’s memories so that what appeared was said to have always been. He thought perhaps that was the truth of it. The castle where

he had eaten breakfast, for instance, had apparently been there from the city's forgotten beginnings—no one could even guess how long that was—and had walls of some dark, dense, indurate stone that was unknown anywhere else in the city. No one could recall a builder. The castle simply was. And it was far from the only feature of the city that could puzzle a man if he devoted thought to it. The Rector sometimes did.

And why, for instance, was it that no one had ever been inland? The inland was plain to see, brown and monotonous, with low shrubs growing on it, and very low hills which were really just ripples. It didn't look particularly hospitable, but in the first place who knew what might not lie beyond the horizon, and in the second it didn't look particularly inhospitable, either. But no one had ever been there. They lived in the city, and they eventually died in the city, most of them, and the rest died at sea, eventually. Fishing was not altogether safe; storms blew up, or legs got tangled in the nets, for instance, and so forth. But no one had ever proposed being a farmer instead, just as no one could account for the large segment of the population that had unlimited amounts of money but just sat in the cafes all day, nibbling, sipping, and staring with empty eyes. They did not mate, nor did they respond to conversational gambits. On the other hand, they did no harm, and they represented a considerable source of income.

Now the Rector looked out at the bay, again, and saw that the island had grown a castle at its crown. And there seemed to be certain preparations up there—he caught the flash of what might be sunlight on armorings and weapons. The Rector peered out at it, while a crowd gathered around him. "What do you think?" a crowd voice cried, and the others around him made emphatic noises to indicate that they, too, wanted to know what the Rector thought.

If it attacks us, the Rector thought, *we haven't a prayer*. In fact, the city had no defenses and no army; no one had ever attacked it. No one

had ever even appeared from inland or the lands across the sea, if there were lands across the sea. It seemed very likely they in the city (normal folk and the cafe-sitters) were the only population of the planet...except for the island in the bay, suddenly, and the occasional appearance of apparitions to a select few. He said: "I don't think it's anything to worry about." He continued to stare out at the island, if it was an island. Actually, of course, it was an apparition like his man-like thing at breakfast, only larger and more complex. And, no, he did not think it would attack the city; it would have gone about that in a different way.

There was a flash like a lance of light from the sky outside the island, directed at the island, and the island shuddered. He put his arm around his wife, and held her close against the onshore breeze. The breeze whipped at his three-piece suit, and tugged at the attaché case in his left hand. It fluttered her skirt about her thighs. He looked around him. All about him were other men in suits, staring out to the bay and hugging women. Children—all blue-eyed and tow-headed—circulated among them, looking up into the adult faces and occasionally finding their parents. He saw that a half-dozen or so had found him and his wife, whatever her name was.

Now the island was in a fever of activity. A force-field had appeared in the air at the edge of the island, and floating inside it was a...construction...from several centuries in the future, the Preceptor guessed by the look of the thing, and there were signs that...the Preceptor peered...yes, the city on the island and the construction were definitely at war. In fact, as he stood and watched, there came to his ears, louder and louder, multiple spangings and crackings that were, he decided, the discharge of unimaginable weapons. Light cascaded down the sides of the island, and the water of the bay boiled. Thunders rolled. "Oh!" said the crowd of men and women, and "Ooh!" came from the children.

An eye appeared in the air; a giant, transparent eye, looking at the

city. "Sorry," a titanic, disembodied voice said, and the ground shook beneath the Rector's feet with it. Then the eye faded out. The force-field writhed, turned smokey, and died. The construction, mortally wounded, fell, almost splashing into the bay but disappearing a split second before it touched the water. The brave winkings around the castle subsided. And then, in another moment, the island itself vanished. The waters of the bay were not even disturbed. It had been a apparition; the whole thing.

The Rector gathered his cloak about him and turned to go. The crooked, narrow streets of the city pressed about him. He saw that there were a few new cafes, and people sitting at tables, fumbling with their purses, examining the money, and then, with a shrug, calling out orders. They wore silver, crumpled and stained.

The Rector ignored them. They would not speak to him in any case—him or anyone else. And in fact the cafes were not open to the Rector and his kind. Something stopped the feet of those who tested this condition, now and then. So no one tested the condition very much at all.

He turned a corner in his hose and doublet, musing on whether it was not too late in his life to seek out a wife. But a Rector's wife had to be proof against almost unbearable pressure, and he thought, on reflection, it was not a good gift to confer on some girl who merely wanted happiness.

An apparition appeared before him suddenly, wearing cloth-of-gold with just a trace of soot and smut upon it. "We have won," it said. "The city of Lacuna will not change."

The Rector had to fix the monthly accounts, distribute a share of today's catch to the poor, see to the Spring census; he really had no time to spare. "Good," he said perfunctorily. Apparently there were times when it was changed, and the people went about with attaché cases and tow-headed children in technological splendor until the next time. It was, at bottom, wearing. He pushed past the apparition. ■

REFLECTIONS IN AN EMPTY POOL

Steve Carper

Illustrated by Bob Hobbs

*The aliens had stolen the Washington Monument.
Nevertheless, the people persisted.*

Cullen awoke amidst the tumult of the other thousand refugees as the sun's rays lighted their tent. Before he could draw a peaceful breath, memories of Lila's death hit him, her absence a space that filled his world. In silence he showered, dressed, made the bed, breakfasted. He left his possessions neatly stowed under the bed; the Conquistadors saw to it that nobody stole. Another quiet day in occupied Washington.

"Off on your rounds?" the camp director asked.

"Nothing else to do," Cullen replied.

"What did the aliens take yesterday?"

"The Garfield statue and the G.A.R. Monument."

"Alphabetical order?"

"You're looking for it to make sense," Cullen said.

"Don't wear out your shoes. You don't know when you'll be able to get another pair."

Cullen warmed himself by a brisk walk to the National Mall, where word of the aliens' latest acquisitions spread quickly. Chill winds penetrated his clothes, signs of the impending winter. Protesters had chained themselves to the Ulysses S. Grant Memorial at the base of the hill on which the Capitol Building used to stand. Their reflections wavered in the water of the adjoining pool.

Packs of raggedy children from the D.C. slums sped past Cullen, loud a *cappella* song bouncing from one adolescent throat to another. He liked the songs, their complex rhythms, simple structure. Folk art. He heard the phrase in Lila's voice, art a term she used whenever she beheld beauty. "I've got lots to show you, lots," she had said when they came to Washington. The month before she died, trampled in the panic and riots as the alien ships landed, had been a series of small epiphanies for him. Insights had been few since her death; he dedicated this one to her. Smiling, he stopped at Joe and Nancy's bench in front of the National Gallery of Art.

"Any activity today?" he asked.

"Just individual sightings,"

Nancy said. She was a formerly heavy woman made thin by lack of proper food. The aliens had just begun to allow a resumption of food deliveries from the west and south. In the meantime, Nancy's skin sagged and folded on top of her body as if it were a cloth she wore under her dress.

"The bastards're all over the Mall, though," Joe said, his leg propped up on the wooden slats, a prosthetic foot on the ground nearby. He hadn't left his sleeping place by Ford's Theatre fast enough the day of a taking. "The police are standing by to put up barricades if necessary."



A thin boy raced past, snatching up the blanket Nancy had folded over the back of the bench.

"Goddamn fool," she yelled. "Get back here now."

Air flurried and whirled in front of her as a Conquistador appeared. With the grace of a movie cowboy, the alien wheeled its mount around, flying after the boy. He hugged the blanket to his chest, zigzagging toward 4th Street through the uncut brown grass. The "horse" caught him in an eyeblink, churning its many silent legs as it hovered in exact conjunction with the boy's path. The Conquistador unclipped a tool from the band across its chest. Yellow light struck the boy, disintegrating him.

"Bastards," Joe whispered. "Bastards, all of 'em."

Blanket in hand, the Conquistador returned to Nancy's bench. It separated from its mount, creating a seam where none had been before. With ceremony wholly out of proportion to the act, it aligned the blanket exactly as Nancy had folded it and climbed back up on the mount, merging into its flesh. In seconds the two, or one, were gone.

Nancy pulled the blanket around her, holding it to her eyes as she cried. "He could've had the blanket," she said, again and again. "I would've given it to him."

"It's been an honest world these past eight months," Cullen said. "That's hard for people to adjust to." The Mall was suddenly devoid of children and sound, more so than usual. People spoke in hushed tones of few words, as if afraid their voices too would be taken if brought to the aliens' attention.

"Today's the day," Joe said, as he did every day. He spoke directly to Cullen, ignoring Nancy. "Why don't you take your walk down to Lincoln and see."

Cullen started every day with the long walk down the length of the Mall, past the Washington Monument, all the way to the Lincoln Memorial.

"You don't know what this country means," Lila had said when

they first arrived in Washington. She had worked for the Department of the Interior, processing parks grants out of its Des Moines regional office when she seized the opportunity to move to Washington with a raise and promotion. She worked for the government joyfully.

"Every time I got to travel to D.C. I spent a little more time exploring. Washington's great—well, public Washington anyway. I'm going to tour you around until you contract an incurable case of patriotism."

"Already got one," Cullen said.

"You just think you do," she replied and they tumbled onto the flag rug Cullen had bought her as a gag Christmas gift the first year they were married and made love while shouting names of generals and war heroes.

A Conquistador hovered over the bare spot where the Smithsonian Institution headquarters used to be, another by the National Museum of American History. Their takings were erratic, several in a day, then none at all for days or weeks. It had been weeks, perhaps why the boy had been so foolhardy as to attempt a theft.

A bicyclist, his gaze in the air, ran into a jogger at Cullen's side.

"Are you hurt?" "I'm okay." "You all right?" Their words merged in a breathy swirl of concern. "I'm just fine," the woman insisted. Cullen didn't press the issue and the bicyclist hurried off. The woman scanned the skies. If a Conquistador thought she'd been truly injured it would have appeared to fly her to a hospital. Nobody wanted that. Their kindness was too much to bear.

On the far side of 17th Street Cullen strolled along the cool waters of the Reflecting Pool, the elongated brother to the one at the far end of the Mall under the Capitol. His face bobbed alongside him. Every once in a while a streak overhead marked a Conquistador's passage. Cullen dawdled, as he always did. He could make the 2000-foot walk last ten minutes. At the end of the Pool he decided to put off seeing Lincoln and

made a 90-degree turn toward the Vietnam Veterans Memorial instead.

The Memorial had no walls and yet you entered it. Paradox. Lila had helped him to appreciate that. Another of her legacies.

"Art can be majestic, like Lincoln, like so much in Washington," she would say. "But people find it hard to trust majesty these days. For the last 50 years or so, artists have been trying to pull back and see how simple they can make their art and still leave enough complexity to touch us all."

Color. Mood. Space. Cullen had struggled to grasp the words, guided by her examples. But talk about spaces in art meant nothing until he saw the Wall.

They'd first gone there not because they'd really wanted to see it, but merely because it was near the Lincoln Memorial. Vietnam was a sixties name, distant and confused here in the late nineties. Older vets dropped bitter comments from time to time, but their whole lives were so bitter he couldn't tell if that made the war special or not. Lila insisted on going to the Wall.

"Don't grouse. We're doing all the monuments and memorials, right? You liked the others once you saw them."

She grabbed his arm, led him away chattering. Cullen never tired of bathing in her aura of words. Though he held his own in conversations, he didn't have the fountain of commentary on the world that she let loose wherever they went. She probed and explored every glint of sun between high clouds, every piece of paper wafted across their path, every stranger's face. After five years of marriage, her vitality still awed him. Listening to her, watching her face glow in the early March sunshine, Cullen didn't notice that they had reached the Memorial until they were already in it.

In it. That was the surprise. There was no building, only a space created as the ground sloped down while the Wall's top stayed level. Yet as the number of names on each

black panel lengthened, Cullen felt the Memorial encompassing him, folding its arms like wings around his body, pressing each individual inscribed name against his flesh.

Lila grew as silent as he while they passed the flowers and medals and mementoes lining each panel's base, passed the people for whom the Wall was their last personal, tangible memory. Lincoln's Memorial invited you to look on with awe, awe and pity and maybe more, but only to look. This Memorial drew people in, sought their touch, their participation. Ten feet tall, it was deliberately larger than life—names floated far above viewers' heads, reached down to their toes—yet as small and intimate as a letter. A weeping woman braced herself against a black panel, fingers straining toward a name two feet too high to reach. A few steps further, a man in a wheelchair laid a neatly folded flag on the brick at the Wall's base. Eyes sought that special name from among the many, yet were indelibly aware of the thousands of others.

Lila and Cullen reached the center, seventy panels in, made the sharp turn and started out, toward the last chronological name. Cullen felt his spirit, so tight within him going in, free itself as the war's end beckoned and its heavy, unbearable burden of names lightened panel by panel. By the last, with its single line of names, Cullen felt cleansed, purged. Lila cried against his shoulder for a long time after. They never felt closer in Washington.

Lila died two weeks later.

They're around the Washington Monument."

Cullen blinked. That wasn't Lila's voice, Lila's memory. An older woman he recognized from his vigils around takings shook his arm. "The police are setting up barricades around it just in case," she said. Cullen made an effort to lift himself out of his memories, to carefully mute Lila's voice inside his head. She was dead; the Conquistadors were here in her place. He accompanied the gray-haired woman to the site of their latest work.

The barricades had gone up just in time. Cullen stared helplessly from behind the red-painted National Park Police sawhorses as the Conquistadors started to dismantle the Monument. A swarm of the crested-headed aliens rode their horses around the shaft, blue light glinting from the tools that worked to separate the aluminum cap from the stones covering the pyramidion at the tip of the column. After several minutes' work the cap lifted, hovering visibly above the rest of the shaft. The aliens dropped back a safe distance. Silently, the aluminum pyramid rose straight into the blue sky until it disappeared. A cloud of individual stones succeeded, followed by tiny bits that were probably floors, windows, stairs, and other pieces of the viewing deck at the monument's tip. Soon a flat-topped column stood bare-headed to the sun.

"Damn shame," a policeman next to Cullen said.

"Think it'll ever end?"

The cop shook his head. "They picked up the Francis Newlands fountain the other day."

"Who?"

"Exactly. If they take that, they're going to strip us of everything."

"I heard some people talk about putting up new ones to replace 'em," Cullen said.

"Maybe someday. Remember, it took maybe 50 years to raise the money and get the design and all for this," the cop waved a hand up and down to indicate what was left of the Monument, "to be built, and that was for Washington in the good old days. We got nothing."

"We got dead," Cullen said.

"Family?"

"Wife."

"Sorry."

A sickly murmur went through the crowd. The blue light appeared again on the remainder of the shaft. The policeman said, "Sorry," a second time. The word covered everything.

All day a spiral of the marble slabs that formed the facing on the Monument soared into the sky with

the weightless ease of a peel of styrofoam rising from the outside of an empty bottle of pop. Ascending with them was an inner spiral of granite blocks, thin at first, then thicker and thicker as the aliens reached lower to the ground where more weight had to be supported. The day grew intolerably cold as the November sun hid behind the clouds that seemed to lower as quickly as the Monument did.

By late afternoon the Monument was gone. Even the ring of flags surrounding it had been taken. All that was visible was a gigantic hole, perfectly square with level and precise sides: the outline of the Monument's concrete foundation.

"What a show," a woman in a hard hat told him. A former engineer, the unbuilding of Washington hypnotized her. She was a regular to the takings. "An absolute beauty, this one was. My favorite monument next to the Eiffel Tower. Wish I could have been there to see that one taken too."

"Why aren't there others like it?" Cullen asked.

"We think differently today. Smaller, intimate. Giantism scares people."

"We're small enough, what's left of us," Cullen agreed. He turned to go, but her voice stopped him. "Hey, watch where you walk. There're still too many Conquistadors around. Something else is going to go."

Cullen set off back toward Lincoln, back along the Pool, disturbed by a sudden sense of loss. He stopped, puzzled, looking at his face in the water, when the thought hit. The Washington Monument's reflection was missing. The long, skinny Pool had been the perfect mirror for the giant obelisk. Cullen wondered if the picture takers had thought to capture that image while they still had the chance.

A shout warned him just in time. Cullen looked up to see the swarm of aliens return, taking up position around the Pool. He ran back across the pathway, almost to the D.C. War Memorial, then turned in wonder.

Our Authors

The Conquistadors hovered at hundred-foot intervals, like an honor guard at a parade. Suddenly a blinding flash of blue light filled the air. With massive dignity the water in the Pool rose into the air, a flat ribbon of blue within the blue. In seconds it disappeared from sight, the Conquistadors lifting with it. Cullen returned to the Pool's edge; even the concrete base was totally dry.

He stepped in. The Pool had been shallower than he expected, its wall rising only to the top of his knee. Maybe 20, 21 inches high. He walked across its width, stepped easily out on the other side, wondering why the aliens would take the Monument's invisible base and leave this behind. He climbed back in, looked into the cold, empty sky. No need to run now. In a way, this was the safest site in Washington; the aliens never returned to the emptiness of previous takings. Cullen marched across the width again, thinking of Lila, of her constant threats to wade barelegged in these cool waters on the warm spring days of their month together in Washington. He looked around, seeing Lila everywhere, seeing.... The picture inside his head startled him. He climbed out of the pool and ran back down the Mall.

The next day Cullen stood in the Pool again, in the slightly widened area nearest to the vanished Washington Monument. Joe had strapped on his foot and limped down, holding on to Nancy. The woman in the hard hat met them there, pushing a black vet in a wheelchair. More of the regulars joined them. Three Park Policemen stood guard, as honor rather than protection.

"Ready?" he asked.

Joe had borrowed an instant camera for the occasion. "Go ahead."

Cullen took the piece of wood he had scavenged from the rubble, a thick 4x4 joist, 21 inches long and perfectly smooth after he had spent the night cutting it down to size and sanding until his arms ached. With as much craft as he could muster, he had painted Lila's name and date of

death on the flat top. It looked slightly amateurish all the same but he didn't care.

"In place of the Washington Monument, I dedicate Washington's Memorial," he said. Cullen propped the wood carefully against the Pool's edge, not straightening until Joe said, "Got it," and put the camera down. He backed off, allowing the others to put in their memories. A pile of bricks. A chipped-down bollard. A surprising construct of steel piping with a glass top, that from the engineer.

Those out strolling the Mall stopped to ask what was going on. Pockets of conversation formed. Others with cameras stopped and took pictures of their own.

Cullen thought of what the pool would look like in a few weeks, months, years. Hundreds, thousands of the little constructs, each different, each personal. Pockets of individuality in a space big enough to memorialize the thousands who had died. Not a Monument, but a Memorial. There was a difference, Cullen thought. The pool had as little majesty as did the conquered world around them, but it would draw in all those who wished to come by and enter. It had the power to become art. Lila would be pleased.

A swarm of the Conquistadors hovered over the nearby John Paul Jones Memorial. Everyone ignored them. ■



Steve Carper's published books include *How to Tell if Your Kids Are Using Drugs*, co-written with Timothy Dimoff, and *Milk Is Not For Every Body; Living With Lactose Intolerance*. His science fiction has been published in *Galaxy* and *Asimov's*, among others. He is writing 30 entries for the *Encyclopedia Galactica* project. **Rob Chilson** is a Kansas City, Missouri, author with numerous science fiction credits, including a number of novels. In his own quiet way he is a master in the SF field. **Stoney Compton** went to Alaska in 1967 for the summer, and never left. He has been a gandy dancer on the Alaska Railroad, a cameraman for a Fairbanks television station, and operated his own tour company. Currently he works for the State of Alaska. He was first published in Robert Silverberg and Karen Haber's *Universe 1* anthology. **Eliot Fintushel**, a baker's son, is a traveling showman and teacher who has twice won the Solo Performer's Award from the Endowment for the Arts. He is at work at an SF novel called *Please Don't Hurt Me*. **Robert Marner** previously appeared in *tomorrow #4*. **Donna McMahon**, 35, is a native of Vancouver, B.C. She has an extensive background in non-fiction writing, editing and production work, but this is her first fiction sale. **Robert Onopa** teaches at the University of Hawaii, and lives on the windward side of Oahu. Some years ago he published a novel, *The Pleasure Tube*, which I still say is magnificent. He has recently published a story in *F&SF*, which is part of his new novel. **Robert Reed** has most recently published *Beyond the Veil Of Stars* from Tor. It is the latest in a long string of strikingly original books. His next novel will be *An Exaltation of Larks*. He has published stories in *F&SF*, *Asimov's*, *Universe 16*, *Tomorrow*, and elsewhere, since winning the first annual award in the L. Ron Hubbard Writers of The Future Contest. **George S. Walker** is an engineer specializing in digital signal processing. He lives near Portland, Oregon, with his wife and two children. "Granny in the Flight Path" is his second fiction sale, and he confesses that he has never been farther north than the 60th parallel. ■

A RAM IN THE THICKET

Eliot Fintushel

Illustrated by Bob Hobbs

They lived in a future where today's icons had become godlike

Before Elvis there was nothing.

—John Lennon

It was getting dark outside. Once more I looked at the vidprin of Abraham's latest victim and failed to experience empathy. Call it galactocentrism. I'd seen enough of these postmortem shots to paper the Crab Nebula, and I'd gotten used to the human stiffs, but Xesan anatomy still made me cringe. I couldn't tell which of those limp pseudopods held the sentient parts and which it took a dump through. And Memphis was getting impatient.

With one graceful finger Reverend Memphis nudged his shakti's chin, and she lowered her head to his shoulder. Nestled in his lap, the amorous creature—an Earthling in her twenties—had been arching toward his lips as he spoke and nip-

ping at them like a goldfish. Now she resumed fetal position, naked against his torso, her face hidden in the folds of his robe.

I was glad not to have to look at her eyes. There was something disturbing about them—an inaccuracy in the lobotomy, no doubt.

"Why don't you let me worry about Abraham?" I said. "We're drawing a bead on him, Padre. Trust me." I was tired. I wanted my Martian cocoa and my percale sheets.

"No," the Reverend snarled. "I only trust The King." Eyeing me through his wild brows, he leaned forward, a bull ready to lock horns, and I got a whiff of his Vitalis. He hadn't gotten into the Blue Moon Boys, the Elvites' regional ruling body, by being sweet. Under the waves of black fabric which comprised his vestments—little more

than a sack tied off at wrists, ankles and neck—I detected a wiry frame of hard muscle and cruel, angular bone, like that jawbone of his, big as an ass's. "Tell me your thoughts about Abraham, Inspector."

The boys called him Abraham because of the Old Testament story. God tells Abraham to kill his son. Only, in the story, he doesn't go through with it. *Our* Abraham killed six times on Xesis and on Earth, and twice in transit on intergalactic vessels. No ram ever showed up—the creature of the Bible; everyone our Abie courted died or disappeared. His victims were always priests.

This is what Abraham shouted at his victims while their blood—or ichor—ebbed away:

"What is the meaning of life?"

Sometimes there was this preface: *"My child, My child..."* And



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sometimes, autopsies revealed, he continued beating them, even after they had expired.

"Well, I remember something like this nine or ten years ago," I said, "some crazy Earthman attacking people with a knife and asking questions. But nobody ever got killed, did they? Just shook up."

"No. You're right. That was just a nuisance. This is quite serious. It brings to mind the Old Enemy."

"Satan?" I said.

"No. I am not referring to the Old or Middle Testaments, but to the New. In the Book of Las Vegas, Chapter XII, Verse 3, we read: 'The stillborn twin of Elvis was spirited away from Tupelo by polka demons and raised to become The Enemy, a slayer of stars. His name was called Manson...'"

"Right! Of course! Charles Manson!" Even I knew that.

"The Old Enemy spilled the blood of the starlet Tate."

"Yes. Fear was his sacrament," I remembered. "He claimed that it opened people to the truth."

"Justifying even murder! Tate's home was not far from The King's residence in the California State," the Reverend said.

"That's when Elvis started stockpiling guns."

"Yes, and that is why we priests, like the King of Western Bop Himself, train ourselves in weaponry. You do know your scripture."

"I know it. I don't like it."

"Ripe for conversion!"

"I mean no offense, Reverend," I said, "but it's possible our killer is one of your holy men."

"You are not a believer," Reverend Memphis sighed.

"I am a believer," I said. "I just don't believe in any of your answers. I believe in questions."

"Perhaps you are the murderer."

"Or you. On the other hand, you might be his next victim, Padre."

"Or you."

He wasn't thinking, of course—I'm not Abraham's type, no robe, no shakti, no nostrums, no bullshit. It was just a wild retort by the Rev. But it gave me an idea. I began to look

him over very carefully: the shakti, the vestments, the shaved pate, the ramrod spine...

"Find him, Inspector. No one dares wear the cloth any more."

...The sandals and jewelled rings, the cash, the smell...

"You dare," I said.

"Don't be disrespectful. I am not speaking for myself alone or for the clergy alone. I am speaking for religion, for Elvis. Without Elvis no culture can endure."

...As if he were followed everywhere by castrati waving sensors, but it was just his aftershave...did he splash that on top of his head as well...?

"Reverend, whether or not that's good, frankly, I can't say. But I'll get him. And soon."

"Crazy!" he said approvingly. "My child," he added, stroking his shakti's long, yellow hair, "you are very direct. You have intensity, curiosity..."

"Yeah," I said, "I have a classical education, and I used to be a studio man on synthhorn too." He ignored my comment, though it was actually the truth. "Be careful," he continued. "These traits may also be detrimental to your spiritual practice. We must be humble. We are all hound dogs, you know."

"Thanks," I said. "I'll bear that in mind."

This is the transcript of a portion of a tape made by a security audio scanning device aboard the interstellar slowship *Mystery Train*. These are presumed to be some of the dying words of one of Abraham's victims. The officer responsible for monitoring the device was drunk and asleep. (He has since been cashiered.)

I see something. I don't know what it is. I don't want to see nothing. I don't care. Leave me alone. I don't care. No, I haven't been thinking about nothing. Leave me alone, I told you. It's all over the place, up and down and inside and outside. It's too bright. Leave me alone. I don't want none of this weird junk. I

want to live, goddamnit. I wanna be me! That's all. I just wanna be me!

It sounded to me like he was lying.

Xesis can sneak up on you.

I am not partial to intergalactic travel. I'm too old. I didn't grow up with it the way some of these young turks have. They step in the door on the Milky Way side and step out near one of the Cepheids. I can't do that. I have to temporize a little, take a few days, decompress. It's like the ancient computers, when they had to make them lap-size to accommodate people's paws, even though the hardware could fit in a flea's butt. I like to feel that I'm going somewhere before I actually arrive.

Besides, I'm afraid of bumping into stars or going blind. This is my personal phobia. There's no need to hide it from you. Ever since I heard of Heinrich Olbers' Paradox, in High School Astrophysics, I've believed it to be true, and I have this fear. Don't laugh. This is how Olbers reasoned, a hundred years before Elvis:

1. By our best-confirmed theories and most reliable data, the universe is isotropic: the distribution of matter, on the large scale, is uniform.
2. Consider the observable universe as a series of concentric spheres. Then each more-distant sphere's skin contains proportionately more stars, for if not, the larger, outer layers would be thinner than the nearer, and the universe would not be isotropic.
3. Therefore, our night sky is a plenum of starlight, as bright as the sun itself. There is no darkness at all.

But, of course, we don't see it that way, do we? Olbers suggested a cosmic "absorbing medium" to resolve the conundrum. Others say the light is red-shifted, that the universe is expanding away from us, that the hydrogen available for star fuel is limited, and so on. I don't buy it. I

never did. I always believed: there's something wrong with the way we see, not with the way we think. I try not to dwell on it. I take the slowship.

Still, Xesis can sneak up on you, even on a slowship like *The Sneer*. I was sitting at the bar, sipping a marginally passable Grenadine Bomber with a faint methane smell to it—Venusian bootleg, no doubt—when that now-familiar outline hit the vid-screen: bluish, oblate, peppered by twenty craggy moons. The bar chamber was empty, the way I like it, except for me, my conk, and the bartender, a Weenie, who was dangling from the ceiling cabinet, polishing glasses with his tongue.

"There she is, Father," my conk told me. My concubine for the trip was a *Sneer* issue; I didn't have time to hunt up a free-lance, and I thought I'd have an easier time with the slowshippers. Besides, Memphis had recommended her. Sahar was a native of Xesis. She managed to look more humanoid than most, thank God. As it was, we didn't copulate, but just capered with a semblance of affection to make the passage easy. I wouldn't have procured a conk at all—they never interested me much—but that would have been less credible for a man of the cloth.

Yes, I was the bait. Goodbye, hair! Hello, robes!

"Isn't it beautiful, Father Isaac?" my conk sighed through an unseen orifice. (By the momentary swell of her gown, it was somewhere behind, in the thoracic region.) "My own Xesis! Actually, my family is from one of the moons, but I've been living on the planet itself since I was post-larval."

Post-larval! I shivered to think what might be slithering, cinched, under the darts and gathers of her dress.

The bar chamber became transparent as we arrived at maneuvering distance of the planet. I hate that. You feel like there's nothing holding you up, the walls, floor, ceiling full of stars. Sahar oohed and encircled my waist with a couple of tendrils which, in their latex sheaths, seemed a bit like arms.

"How many times have you done this?" I said.

"Oh, never!" she said. "This is my first reentry!"

"Your first trip off-planet? Your first concubinage?"

"Yes. Don't you like me?"

"Sure. I just assumed you'd been living aboard the *Sneer*, like the others, going back and forth without disembarking...."

"No. I just left Xesis a few days ago, and now I'm coming back. Isn't it glorious? Look! That was my moon."

"Wait a minute," I said. The bartender was beginning to show some interest. He lowered himself from the ceiling cabinet by a rectal thread and sat beside my tankard like a hairy tar ball, waiting for a break in the conversation. "I thought they weren't letting anyone off the planet except by government pass."

"Yeah," she said, "because of the Abraham thing. But that doesn't affect me."

"Why the hell not?"

"I'm a Xesan."

"Elvis! They're letting off Xesans? But maybe Abraham is masquerading as a Xesan!"

"Don't be silly," she said, nibbling my ear. Actually, gumming it.

The barkeep took the opportunity to deliver the ancient greeting of his trade: "Everything OK?"

"Everything's perfect," I said, "...son."

"Anyway, *he's* not Abraham," Sahar whispered into my ear through lips I knew would flop out like Elvis's belly if the cosmetic stitchery ever came loose.

"No," I said, "but *you* might be."

"Or you," she said. I'd heard that before.

The barkeep had begun, despite my discouraging stare—a grimace which had once stopped the greatest solo tenor on Earth in the middle of his cadenza from the twenty-fifth row back—to strum his rectal string. It was an ancient melody, with religious overtones that I found soporific: *Don't Be Cruel (To A Heart That's True)*.

"Or maybe it's Elvis," I said.

She pulled away from me. "You're bad," she said.

"It comes with the cloth."

The bar started filling up as we went into a holding orbit around Xesis. They were mostly Earthlings and human colonists from other planets, with some Xesans made up, out of colonial sycophancy, to look human, more or less. They were all government, of course, maintenance of one sort or another: agricultural consultants and interplan officials, quark fusion engineers and bio-transport people. Since Abraham, every individual entering Xesis had to be government. Well, there were also a couple of Andromedan Elvite monks, of whom I steered clear.

If Sahar was right about the laxity of the Xesan quarantine, any one of these drinkers, the humans anyway, could be Abraham.

A very tall, fat Xesan, dressed, like Sahar, as a human, deposited himself beside me, invading our table—an execrable custom of space travel—when all the others had filled up. There was a faint odor of formaldehyde about him, and he was dressed in a voluminous bubble suit, all the rage inside the asteroid belt. Sahar seemed uncomfortable at his arrival. She squirmed into my lap and twined round me; from this safe vantage she gave him the fisheye.

The 'man's' whiskers, a sunburst of greasy corkscrews, dusted my forehead as he turned to address me: "We who are about to die salute you," he said. Then he laughed.

I spoke next: "Hunh?"

"It's what the gladiators said to the Romans."

"Is that a joke?"

"Time will tell. Abraham's still down there, isn't he?"

"Yeah," I growled, "unless he's up here...son."

The Weenie bartender, who had been whizzing about like a tether ball, taking orders, took the big 'man's' "Aqua pura, if you please." Exotic.

"What's your business on Xesis, Reverend?" he asked me. Reverend. That word. I had to stop myself from looking around to see who he was talking to.

"I've been assigned to the colonial mission, my child, serving the spiritual needs of the embassy staff."

He laughed. The Weenie yoyoed down to 'hand' him his water, and the 'man' guffawed so, he splashed us with it. "Sorry," he said. "It's just so funny! I can't help myself."

"What's so funny?"

"You're no padre," he said, "any more than she's an Earth girl."

Once more, I summoned all my mental resources for the *mot juste*: "Hunh?"

He glanced under the table in a way that made me look as well. He was holding something in his lap; at first I thought it was a Laser Point, small and lethal, but it was a much older tool—a gimlet with an ornate wooden handle. He pushed it forward into my lap and looped some of my threads on the gimlet's point. In the most charming manner imaginable, he inclined his head to the side—like a dog before a lava lamp—and said sweetly: "Won't you come into my parlor, *Reverend*?"

"He's not a human," Sahar said. She had not seen the little drama under the table. "Don't go."

"Don't embarrass him, dear," I said. "Why don't you amuse yourself here while I talk to the gentleman? Is that all right with you?" I asked him.

"I prefer it," he said.

I had to pull her off me like chokeweed from a tree. I don't know what they see in shaktis. I ordered her "anything but the Grenadine" and got up to accompany my 'man' to his room. He immediately slapped his 'arm' around me to lead me out. I could feel his 'fingernails' in my shoulder.

The floor was still transparent. It was like walking on stars, and I do not find that pleasant. We could locate ourselves by the outlines of things, as if moving through a pencil sketch. When we crossed the hallway and entered his chamber, however, the walls were opaque, and I was very grateful.

The door winked shut behind us, and he pinned me against it with one brute 'hand,' while, with the other, he rubbed something against my lip,

bruising it. I felt a vague numbness, harmless but irresistible, creep through my body. The look on his face, inches from mine, was almost apologetic.

"You don't like the see-through, do you?" he said. "I've been watching you. There are a lot of things you don't like."

"You wanna tell me what this is about?" I asked the Xesan.

"I was about to ask you the same thing. Why are you pretending to be a priest?"

"Aren't you pretending to be a human?"

"No," he said. "I'm not."

He shimmied and shoved his way out of the amorphous bubble suit. I could have run then or turned the tables somehow while he was shaking off the last of his bubble suit, but somehow I just didn't feel like it. My mind was racing, but I just ran my tongue over the bruised lip; it tasted like fennel, and I couldn't help licking and licking it like a fool.

He *was* a Xesan underneath. I nearly gagged at the sight of him naked, a scabrous hulk of ooze and blubber. But then, he *wasn't* naked. Suddenly, out of what could have been an anus or a vagina—or a mouth for that matter—a human hand emerged. The arm followed, then a long, bald head, the torso and the rest of him, sweaty and completely human.

A double disguise!

He stood before me, smiling. Now he *was* naked except for a scanty loincloth. He was thin but moved with power and intelligence even in the small gestures—rubbing a wisp of fake protoplasm from between two fingers, or pursing and relaxing his lips over and over as he cased me.

"Abraham?" I said.

"Yes, Lord?" he joked. He was not smiling.

"But I'm no priest. You know that. What do you want with me?"

"You disgust me," he said, "with your petty likes and dislikes. Your transparent ruses! Your little life! Memphis was wrong."

"*Memphis*?"

"He sent you to me. He is one of my people. I have many Memphises feeding me. They want to know the truth too."

"The truth?"

Abraham lifted his arms straight up over his head, paused as some sort of frenzy came over him, and then brought them down on my shoulders, pressing me to my knees. "Memphis said you had the question. He said that in your heart you screamed it."

"Screamed what?"

"Was he wrong?" Abraham struck me across the face with the back of his hand. I fell onto my side. He kneeled over me. He pressed the gimlet to my throat. "We were wrong about all the priests. The vestments fooled us. We thought the truth was buried in them. We thought if we took away all their excuses, *in extremis*, it would be revealed."

"What would be revealed? What are you talking about?"

"Questions are like gimlets, aren't they?" he whispered. I could feel blood trickling down my neck onto my collar bone. "You drill in. You bore till you feel it prick something solid. That's where I come in, Earthman. I pry it out, see what's there. But have you been drilling?"

"No!" I shouted. "No, I don't give a damn! I never gave a damn!"

"*My child, my child...*"

I closed my eyes.

"...I believe you." He threw the gimlet aside. I opened my eyes. He towered over me. He loathed me. I wanted to cry. I wanted to kill him. I wanted to shout something in my defense. But I did nothing. Inert, I watched him climb back into his Xesan hide and then into the human disguise. It took a long time. When he was done, he said, "You've been a waste of time. I'll send in your conk, Inspector." He retrieved his weapon from the floor where it lay, and he left me there.

The Slowship *Sneer* had landed on Xesis, and most of the passengers had already disembarked. Sahar curled beside me in Abraham's room. We lay on the floor like nested bowls just where Abraham had left me. I

had never before made love to a conk. If not for the warmth of her body against my back and the calming rhythm of her breath, I would have let go the thread of sanity and fallen into hell.

I still couldn't speak to her, except to repeat, as I stared at the opaque ceiling, "*What is the meaning of life?*"

"It's all right, baby," she said.

I could not bear for her to see my eyes.

That was ten years ago. I let the slowship take me home. Sahar took care of me, never leaving Abraham's room until we were on Earth again. It wasn't the drug that disabled me; it was the question. I let all the vidaxes from home office go unanswered and sneaked off the ship, wedged between two big Jovians, my face hidden in my lapels.

I heard that the priest killings stopped. Only Elvis and I knew why—and Memphis's ilk, I supposed. So I had been Abraham's last victim, for I was certainly dead!

For ten years I've been hiding out in cold water flats and flophouses, gigging in cheap bars on my synthhorn, even doing an Elvite Rock from time to time, always splitting as soon as I got paid. Ten years at the end of Lonely Street. Ten years avoiding humans and interrogating the peeling paper on a tenement wall while the stars wheeled round without me. *What is the meaning of life?*

Then, eight days ago, Memphis found me. I never bothered to lock my place. I think, in my heart, I was hoping to be robbed and killed.

"I didn't know places like this existed any more," he said, sweeping away cobwebs as he invaded my flat with his Vitalis and his shakti. She was a new one, in pink plastic knee boots and hair layered high in the pious Elvite fashion. She clung to his side like a Siamese twin. Memphis himself had increased in importance; he was now wearing the bejeweled white jumpsuit with gold brocade and the flowing cape reserved for Intergalactic Archrockerdaddies.

"And I certainly didn't imagine that *you*, with your precious preferences, would choose to live in one."

"I don't live," I said. "I exist. Isn't that what you think of me anyway?"

"What are you talking about?" he asked me. He dusted my folding chair with his cuff and settled into it. The shakti relaxed into his lap and slung her arms around his neck.

"Don't be cruel," I said. "Don't pretend Abraham didn't tell you about me."

"What? The killer? What would he tell me? How would he talk to me?"

"Relax, Reverend. Abraham told me everything."

"What exactly is 'everything'?"

"How you fingered me for him. How you thought I..." I was trembling, out of control. I didn't feel like I was crying; felt like someone was using me to cry with, shaking the tears out of me, sobbing with my guts.

Memphis persisted: "What? How I thought you what?"

"You thought I had been questioning. You thought I was ripe, damn you. You sent me to him to be killed, to have the answer pulled out of me. But you were wrong. I haven't got it. It's not in me, Padre. I never gave a damn."

"The answer to what?"

"Please don't make me say it." But I wanted to. I had to. I had been thinking and saying nothing else for the past ten years.

"Say what? Make you say what?"

"*What is the meaning of life?*"

"That's it?"

"Yes."

"That's all of it?"

"Yes, of course it is."

"You fool! You've been on the run for ten years because of that line? You thought I was in cahoots with Abraham? Me? You believed him? So that's what happened on the *Sneer!*" The shakti cautiously removed herself from the Reverend's lap. Obviously, she had not seen him reach this emotional pitch before, outside copulation. She turned away

from us, with the excuse of a lipstick and a compact.

It had become pitch dark outside, and my one window, turned mirror-like beside Memphis, showed me the other side of his face, crueller than the one he gave me, less ironic and more violent. We were making a row. The disheveled Moon Man from down the hall peeked in as he passed by on his way to the communal john. (I've never figured out what they do in there.) His snake was with him, and a little boy who stopped by from time to time to scar them with lunar caustic. They leaned in through the casing as if on civil alert. A few seconds later a workman joined them, a plumber who had been scavenging copper from decayed portions of the building.

"Shove off," the Reverend barked at them.

"It's all right," I managed to say. "Everything's all right." Memphis's shakti, responding to his nudge, sashayed to the door, closed it in my neighbors' faces and didn't let go of the knob until the tumbler clicked. Memphis looked at her again, and she contemplated the lock. It was a door of ancient design, preserved in the dark, low places of Earth where losers like me, gravel and bilge water, settled. She mastered it and locked us in, then stayed there, leaning against the jamb and gazing into her tiny mirror.

"Listen to me, Inspector," the Reverend continued, taking my jaw in his hand to make me look. "You are the only person we've ever found who has survived an attack by this maniac—if you can call this survival. Nobody else even knows what he looks like., You've got to help. He is killing our people again."

I stared at him.

"You don't believe me, do you? You still think I'm what that murderer told you."

"I don't know what to believe."

He let me go. "I'll make you a deal," he said, "Come with me. Leave this place. Help me find Abraham, and I'll tell you the answer to your stupid question."

The shakti laughed. Reverend Memphis smiled. "Oh, shush," he

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told her. Then to me: "You know it's true. You know I have the answer, don't you? You know I can tell you the truth."

There were no more tears in me. I felt the wind go in and out of my chest, but there was nothing there. He and the girl were still smiling, though he seemed to be trying not to. I said what I had to say, what I believed, though it made me hate myself and him: "Yes. I know."

He immediately stood. The shakti rushed to his side. "Come on," he told me, "we're going to Xesis."

He unlocked and opened the door, and the little boy fell in, the Moon Man and the plumber on top of him, with the snake hissing between them. The shakti kicked at them in disgust, and they scattered.

I left everything I had there—which was nothing—and went with Memphis.

And Abraham lifted up his eyes, and looked, and behold, behind him a ram caught in a thicket by his horns; and Abraham went and took the ram and offered him up for a burnt offering in the stead of his son.... And the Angel of the Lord [said]: ...I will multiply thy seed as the stars of heaven.

—Genesis XXII, 13-17

Life is funny that way. I am walking on stars.

I've got to get this straight. It's all so new, and I want you to understand. I don't want you to have to go through the hell I've seen, and I don't want you to be meat for some Abraham.

Reverend Memphis took me in tow, booked passage on a slowship to Xesis—Abraham's venue of choice—and kept me in his rooms for the flight. I heard their lovemaking day and night, Memphis and the shakti, like fat men nibbling junk food. I hated the sound. The softness of my bed was like that too, and the delicate meals he ordered for us—armadillo from the preserves at Graceland, patés of lunar mushroom—the wines, the exotic incense, the first generation recordings of

Elvis 45s. Every sensum lashed and humiliated me.

What is the meaning of life?

Occasionally, I was capable of conversation. "Why is he killing priests again?" I asked Memphis.

"Why did he ever stop?" Memphis said. I had no desire to tell him. "The authorities have never caught a rabbit—that much is certain. They are completely in the dark. Why the lapse of ten years? I don't know. Do you?" He peered at me strangely, half smiling, as if with some hidden joke.

"How can you know the most important thing and not know a little thing like that?" I said.

"Do you doubt me?" he asked.

I had to say, "No."

"You'll go out soon," he told me. "Make yourself available to Abraham. He may well be aboard this ship. We are going back and forth along this circuit, my child, until we find him or he finds us."

"Then what?" I said.

"First this." He handed me a small capsule, a suppository, and motioned me to the bathroom to put it in. I had never seen a transmitter like that one, but then, I'd been out of the picture for a decade.

"And then this," he added. As I took the capsule from him, he slipped his hand into the ample fold of his left sleeve and gripped something inside. A point of steel gleamed through the net of threads.

This pleased the Shakti. She cupped his face in her hands and kissed him on the mouth. I did my business with the capsule and left them wrestling and laughing there. But before I went out into the passageway, I said, "And then you'll tell me?"

"What?"

"Then you'll tell me."

"Yes. Of course, Inspector. Then I'll tell you."

They were laughing into each other's mouth again. I left.

I remember shading my eyes to the harsh light of the passageway. It seems like darkness to me now. Every concentric onionskin of space is filled with stars, the farther the

vaster and thicker with stars. The night sky is a plenum of white light; only, you cannot yet see it.

I remember how Sahar first seemed to me in her native form, unabashed, pooling her gelatinous members into the recess outside the barroom portal, with no attempt to seem human. In the course of ten years she had pleased people so well that they learned to enjoy Xesan anatomy. She was beautiful. I could see it now, squinting through cataracts of memory. She was beautiful as a moth is or a slug, sunlit, gleaming on a garden rock.

"Father Isaac!" she called out. I saw the small cilia ringing her midriff shudder. Her color darkened with affection.

I ducked into a doorway, but she followed. I found myself in a closet filled with cleaning implements, autovacs and small, dirty robots hanging, humming, on wall hooks or scattered underfoot along with rags, buckets and open jugs emitting sharp, eye-watering fumes.

A tendril snaked through the doorway. Its tip, undulating, climbed head-high and said: "Isaac, you naughty teddy bear!" The rest of her seethed in. "Why are you hiding from moi?" After her fashion, she kissed me, and I remembered everything: her smell, the taste of her on Abraham's floor, the revulsion at first, and then the pleasure, the warmth of every caring nook and tuck of her, washing away my dread...for a moment.

"Sahar," I said, "don't take it personally. I've been hiding from everyone." I knocked over a can of dry lubricant at my elbow; Sahar blew the stuff back into its container and set it right.

"Why?"

"Don't you remember?"

She was all over me. I could have swooned for pleasure and relief, but I pushed her away. "You don't want me?" she said.

"It's not that."

When a Xesan cases you, it's like gooseflesh pointing at you from all over their body. "What then?" she asked me. "What have you been doing for ten years?"



I couldn't speak.

"Is it still the same thing?" she whispered. It was dark in there. It seemed to be getting darker. She rubbed her gland, swathed in diaphanous silk, against my thigh, and I stiffened.

I said, "Yes." I said, "I still have to find out. It's killing me, Sahar. It's killing me, but I can't spit it out."

The little sunflowers in her skin, the curious peaks that had leaned toward me, dissolved. "I have to go," she said quite suddenly. "I have to meet somebody." Sliding away, she made a sound against the floor like a bath mat peeling off the tub, as she always did when she was hurried.

Numb, I had not even realized that it was the Slowship *Sneer* we were traveling on, until I ran into Sahar. The bar looked different. There was an altar to The King where some tables had been, and people had to sit in booths along the wall. Each booth had a small antique jukebox connected to the Elvis simulacrum on the altar. The Weenie bartender—I don't know Weenies well enough to know if it was the same one—was ejecting a drunken patron from one of the booths by pummeling him like a little wrecking ball. It was crowded, and the Weenie had a hard time guiding the poor fool out of the room.

I went in and took the drunkard's place. I was surrounded by nonhumans with greasy duck's ass hairdos that smelled like genuine antique pomade. They were expensively dressed and made up to look like Earthling businessmen, in white tee shirts with folded-up short sleeves holding packs of Luckies, blue suede shoes form-fitted to their hopelessly odd feet.

All at once, I was in a nightmare. They were all Abraham, doubly disguised. They were pointing their gimlets at me under the table.

"My child, my child," they said....

"What's yours?" the Weenie asked me.

"Huh? Oh," I said, "I don't care. Just give me something." He clucked at me and flew off.

"It's going to go up," the one on my right said.

"You mean down," said the one next to him.

"No," he said, "I said up and I mean up. I like Xesan timber futures too."

Across the table they were chuckling under their breath and elbowing one another conspiratorially. Finally, one of them said: "That whole market is for jackasses. Go with deuterium products and you'll never have to fly slowship again." Then they *all* laughed.

I am not holding them up for ridicule. Such folk do what they must, like all of us. If it had not been for them, I would never have seen Olbers' vision. I didn't understand that at the time, of course; that's the point. I couldn't hold myself in any longer.

"What does it mean?" I said.

The conversation stopped. It was like a chain reaction. People at other booths stopped talking and leaned to listen.

"What does... what?" asked the man next to me, who was, of course, a Xesan inside. (And inside *that*...?) He spoke for everyone.

"What is the meaning of life?" I said.

They all backed away. Someone yelled, "Help me!" The three on the other side of the table immediately got up and ran out of the bar screaming. The two remaining on my side squeezed themselves against the wall, popping out of their human costumes and prostheses like pudding boiling out of a saucepan.

"It's him! It's Abraham!"

My neighbors rushed under the table to make their escape along the other side of the booth. Twenty humans—or their like—were crowding the door, pushing one another aside, funnelling through. Two or three others were lying on the floor, moaning or still screaming as they groped toward the passageway. The Weenie was leaping from head to head in a panic. The simulacrum Elvis was grinding and spinning like a button on a string as he sang "*I want no other love!*" to an empty

room, or to me. "*Baby, it's just you I'm thinking of.*"

Then, for a brief moment, I was completely alone, without living beings and without Elvis. I had the illusion that the entire ship was empty. It was quite silent except for the ubiquitous humming of the atmosphere controls.

Sahar was at the door. She pointed at me, and Abraham himself came in. He was dressed as before, in a loin cloth, but he had a little paunch now; he was hairy and unkempt. Nor was he as spry. His posture a bit more concave, his face more turbid, the eyes were less clear and darker. He held the gimlet in front of his nose, flexing his wrist to pulse it back and forth like a metronome.

I stood up. "Kill me," I said. "Do whatever you like. I'm not afraid of you. I have to know too."

Never blinking, Abraham inched toward me, stopping a few yards in front of me. "You were right about him—he's bursting with it," he said to Sahar, but he was looking at me. "She's an ichneumon fly," he told me, "one of those wasps that push their eggs into hawktails and fly away. The babies hatch and eat their way out. We planted many such eggs, Sahar and I, twenty years ago, and a second crop ten years later when the first one came to naught, in priests at first, and then in others. Now comes the second harvest. So far, nothing! But with you...who knows?"

"You lied about Memphis," I said.

"Certainly I did. It was Sahar who chose you for me. If I'd told you that, she would have been of no further use to me. And, of course, it was helpful to keep you away from Memphis. You wanted time to cook, *my child.*"

"But Memphis *knows.*"

"Don't be stupid."

"I'm not being stupid," I said. "I can tell. I've been gnawing this bone for ten years! You and I are both fools, but *he* knows. Only he'll never say it, not even if you impale him like the others. He'd only laugh at you."

"Kill him," Sahar said to Abraham, "Please kill him. Don't draw this out. He wants it. We all want it. Don't be cruel, my love."

The haggard fellow in the loin cloth took three more steps and bruised my mouth as before. The taste of fennel! He pressed the gimlet against my belly this time. Again, I felt blood trickle.

Sahar screamed and slumped forward, dead. My cheek lolling against Abraham's shoulder, I watched her tremble and tremble and stop trembling. Abraham turned round, slicing me with the gimlet, then fell backward against me, and I smelled flesh burning as we fell together.

It was Memphis. His Laser Point still surrounded by a haze of heat waves, he looked like a fairy tale merman caught in a tide pool. The muck he was standing in had been Sahar.

I was looking up at Memphis from the floor. Abraham's cadaver covered me like a clammy pelt. Behind the Reverend—or was it a dream?—the King of Western Bop, in simulacrum, was climbing to the top of a laser-projected shower stall to escape a crowd of screaming bobbysoxers, ecstatic gopi girls with scarves and frills. The Hillbilly Cat, radiating spines of pink light, was in tatters; like Bacchae, they had torn off his clothes and shoes and would have taken his skin as well, had not the Jacksonville Police cleared them out of his dressing room. There they were, the cops, big as life, to save him.

Father Memphis leaned over me. The shakti's ankles crossed at his belt line, her hands clasped at his sternum; she was riding on his back, peeking over his shoulder at me.

"Tell me," I said.

Now two security women grabbed the Reverend's elbows while a third, reaching round the shakti, pressed a baton across his throat.

"Get off me, you goons," Memphis demanded. "That's *Abraham!*" The three heavies looked down at Abraham and me. They released Memphis.

"Tell me," I said.

He leaned close. Embarrassed, the guards permitted him everything. "Are you hurt?" he said. "Are you dying?"

"You promised."

He must have seen my blood; his head jerked away. Then he forced himself to look at me again. "All right," he told me.

They were peeling Abraham off me. Then someone was pouring cold liquid over my wound and bandaging me. It was no use.

They were lifting me and carrying me. Father Memphis's face floated above me like the Moon, motionless in the Earth's old sky.

He was walking beside me, talking at me furiously, explaining something. Sometimes he laughed. The shakti's hair would whip across his face from time to time, eclipsing the crazy eyes. I felt the Musical Gates of Graceland open.

Socrates saw it best on hemlock, dying, but hazily even then. Anaximander before him was very close. He said that the sky was an opaque dome and that the stars were pin pricks through which the ubiquitous, surrounding brilliance shone. Later science, opening its grand doors from galaxy to galaxy or quark to quark, like a chicken, thought it a triumph to peck through a fence around which there was open passage.

Olbers was right to question but wrong to answer. The only "absorbing medium" is ignorance. There is no occlusion anywhere, and everybody knows it, but hides. There's no need to listen to Memphis. He's right, of course, blabbing away. They're all right. With my eyes closed, I see skies, mountains, flags. When I open them, the earth steams and people run about. The farther I look, the more light I see. Please tell them. Tell everyone.

There's no need to kill or to die. A ram is in the thicket. ■



LAST RESORT

Donna McMahon

Illustrated by Margaret Ballif Simon

It had stood, essentially, forever

I was staring at the ruined garden that day, through the only eye I have left outside. I can still see a slice of the weed-choked tangle that used to be my singing copse. The copses were planted on platforms that rose and fell, spinning the hedgerows to play the breeze, but now the plates lay sunken and tilted, and their delicate flowers have long since been engulfed by the brambles native to this planet.

I was looking at high magnification through a gap in the foliage where I thought I could discern remnants of my perimeter wall, when something blocked my view. I turned down the zoom and found myself looking into a human face—a face that seemed to be staring right back at me.

This was impossible, of course, since my monitor is hidden in a deep

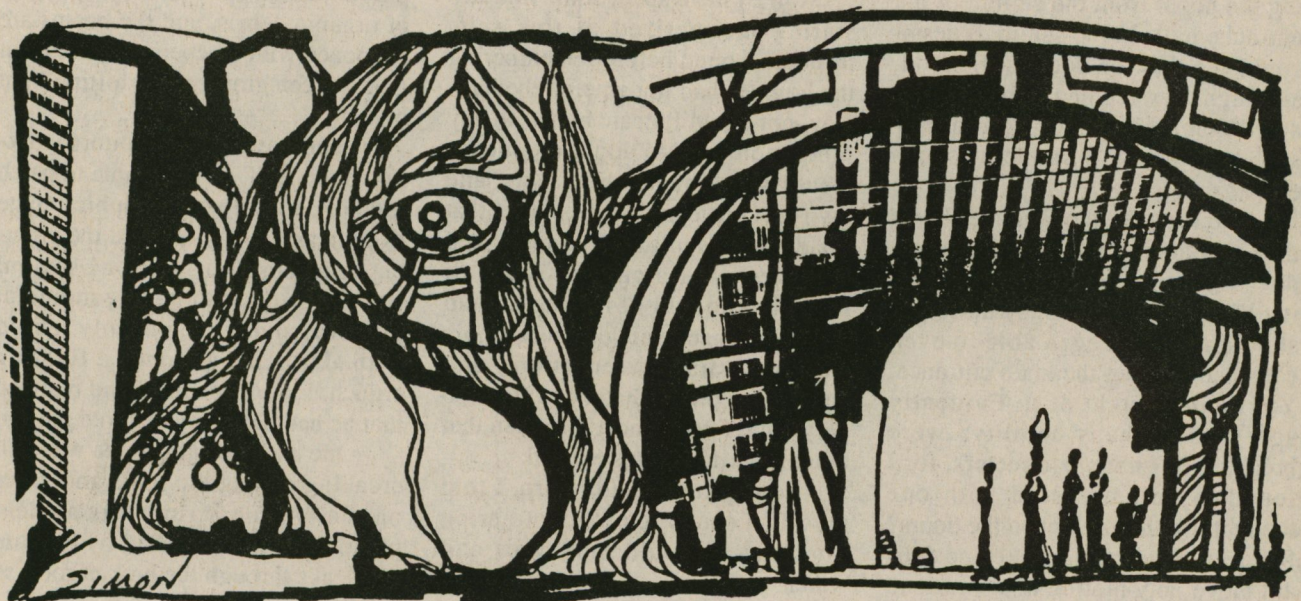
recess between two pillars. Nonetheless, I was startled and the surge of unusual input wakened my interest. I was surprised to see a human so close to the Resort. The descendants of the workers probably still live on the site of the original service town, but they seldom venture near here, and never past my perimeter.

The human was standing very still and seemed to be watching and listening intently. It had unruly short brown hair, darkly tanned skin, and large gray eyes which stared for long seconds and then shifted nervously about. As I watched, it appeared to decide that the clearing was safe and moved a few steps out of the bushes. When I saw its whole body, I realized that this was not a hunter, but a preadolescent male child in homespun clothes and worn leather sandals. He was gripping a battered and

stained metal machete, which was slightly too large for him to hold properly.

The boy worked his way gradually towards the main doors, above which my monitor sits. He appeared increasingly nervous and several times the sound of a bird rustling in the bushes was enough to send him fleeing for shelter. But he kept returning and each time he came closer. Sweat was gleaming on his forehead as he stared towards the grand entrance, and I suddenly realized from the angle of the sun that it was a late summer afternoon and probably very hot.

I had not considered seasons or temperatures for a very long time, except as an abstract enemy that chipped at my walls, and it was such a curious sensation to rediscover these concepts that I nearly failed to



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notice when the boy finally raised his machete, walked straight towards my doors, and thrust the long blade forward.

For just an instant I flinched, but of course there was no sensation. As he was almost directly below, I could not see him well, but it soon became evident from the sounds that he was clearing away vines in front of the entrance. After a couple of minutes of slashing and tugging he stepped back, and there was an expression of awe on his face.

I have not seen the main entrance in many years, but I remember its glory vividly. Soaring marble pillars framed doors so massive that eight men could walk through them with arms outstretched. A giant star map swirled across the doors, inlaid with precious metals and giant cultured gems, which caught the sun's reflection in the day and were illuminated by lasers at night.

What the boy saw in the blaze of afternoon sunlight could only have been a pale vestige of its original wonder. Nonetheless, there can be nothing else like it remaining on this world, for he stood transfixed for several minutes. Then he began to pull again at the creepers, so fascinated by his find that his fears seemed temporarily forgotten.

I urgently wanted to get a better view, but the only other working monitor in the area was inside, facing the doors from the ceiling of the entrance hall. In the semidarkness I could see that the doors still stood, although they seemed to be sagging a little on their hinges. Could they still be opened, I suddenly wondered?

The thought shocked me. I was the Custodian of the Resort, and my directive was to protect and maintain it. Without specific instructions I should not have been able to even consider opening the main entrance. Yet I *had* thought of it. Evidently age, and perhaps senility, were breaking down my parameters, for I found myself obsessed with one thought. Could I still open the doors? Suddenly I wanted to make one defiant move, any motion at all, instead

of remaining paraplegic among the crawling, trickling, slithering intrusion of nature.

It was an impulse from some forgotten depth of my being, and I acted on it that instant by activating the main doors.

They should not have opened. The auxiliary motors had been lying dormant for a thousand seasons. but—impossibly—the machinery did work. As I fed more power to the motors, they began to wheeze and then to drag at the long-frozen portal. Doors that had once glided silently began, with much screeching, to lumber inward. One door moved only a hand's width before sticking, but the other shuddered forward for a quarter of its full arc before settling into place with a final thump. The motors revved shrilly for a moment, then gave a rasping cough and died.

For the first time in centuries sunlight and air spilled into the lobby, waking a dull gloss on the walls, illuminating flecks of gold and blue on the floor, and sending flurries of dust careening into the brilliant air. And, as swiftly as I had moved the doors, I regretted my action. How could I have split open my most preserved innards? Once again I tried to start the machinery in the hopes of closing the doors, but there was only a faint whirring and they remained immobile.

I must have spent some minutes staring mesmerized at this self-inflicted wound before remembering the boy. He had not entered the hallway, nor could I locate him with any other monitor. No doubt the movement had frightened him away, and my first consideration was relief that I had one less intrusion to face. And yet, there was a curious sense of loss: the thought of having human feet walk once again on these floors wakened strange sensations and ancient longings. I had been alone so very long, I had almost forgotten that other thinking beings existed.

Perhaps he would return, I told myself. I could do nothing to bring him back. I could only wait and watch.

Two days later he did return—at least I believe it was two days, but my mind is increasingly inclined to wander, so it may have been longer. I had watched the searing footprint of the afternoon sun on the ancient floor and seen the first drops of rain blow in and begin to gnaw at the brittle edges of the cerulean tiles. I was examining hairline cracks in the best-preserved segments, when a shadow fell across my field of vision and I looked up to find myself studying a familiar shape.

The boy was silhouetted in the open doorway, legs poised for flight, machete clenched in hand, peering into the twilight of the foyer. For several moments he remained still, listening. Though I could not see his face, his movements betrayed fear and wonder as he began to venture, a few cautious steps at a time, from the doorway into the entrance hall. He stared about him and craned his neck to follow the arches that rise in succession to the gigantic domed roof of the Great Hall.

Even in ruins the Great Hall is beautiful. The soaring marble beams were poured in place and they have endured almost unscathed, save for patches of green, gold and brown lichen mottling their white surface. Once, of course, there were multi-hued windows filling in the lattice-work of the roof, but now the windows and crystal sun sculptures lie pulverized on the floor under layers of organic debris, and the beams are festooned with creepers and ivies that give a green glow to the shifting light below.

I still have three monitors working in the Hall, so I was able to patch together a crude holographic image as soon as the boy reached the circular ballroom floor. He took several steps, staring with gaping mouth at the roof, and then suddenly tensed with alarm and assumed a fighting crouch. I scanned ahead and realized that he had heard my mad old janitor.

One rust-eaten machine was still creaking among the roots and vines on the ballroom floor. Its ancient photo cells were washed by the rain that leaks through the broken roof, so

each morning it would lurch painfully into motion along the track its wheels had worn into the floor. Sometimes I wished I could stop its futile toil, but more often I was glad that it still worked, however lamely, because it was the last moving piece of equipment from the old times.

The boy crept forward until he was close enough to observe the robo. With my closeups I could see that he was wide-eyed and trembling as he crouched behind a low heap of rotted vegetation and bird dung, watching it. What purpose, I began to wonder, could entice a child to such a place? He looked to be only about twelve years old, yet he was the first person I had seen enter this ruin since the exodus. Looters who tried in the early years had been repulsed by the perimeter defenses, and their descendants had not returned.

Once again the boy began to move cautiously toward the robo, tensed for some sign of recognition from it. The machine was fairly large—about two thirds his height and considerably more massive. Along the outside edge of its path it had built up a moraine of dust and detritus higher than the boy's knees. He walked still nearer and then, only a few arm's lengths from it, stopped and startled me by calling out loud.

"Lastreezor!" he cried, in a shaky voice. Then, louder, "Lastreezor! I have come to talk to you!"

The accent was atrocious, yet I recognized the words. The robo's two remaining nozzles continued to hiss at the floor. The mosaic tiles had long since worn through and it was scouring the gray plasteel subfloor.

"Lastreezor!" called the boy again, still louder. "Please speak to me. I beg you. It is important that I talk to you!" His voice reverberated through the cavernous space, disturbing a few birds in the roof who added their plaintive cries to the eerie scene. "Lastreezor!"

'Lastreezor?' I wondered, and then realized that it could be a corruption. Officially the complex was named Xanadu, but it had been dubbed "The Last Resort" by the technicians and craftsmen in the ser-



vice town. Well, I was the Custodian of The Last Resort, therefore the boy must be speaking to me.

To me! I had not spoken to a human in centuries and was not sure that I even remembered how.

The boy called to the robo again, and this time his voice had an edge of weariness and despair. Finally, in frustration, and with what bravado he could muster, he gripped his machete in one hand, his dagger in the other, and, stepping over the debris dike, walked right up to it. He shouted at it at point blank range. It kept cleaning. He stared for a moment and then kicked it. The rusted side buckled and, with a horrible whirring and scraping noise, the entire mechanism collapsed. Dirt and leaves spewed into the air while the startled child stumbled back.

Distress surged through me. That had been my last robo and this dirty, ignorant savage had destroyed it in a fit of temper. I wanted to drive the creature out—to punish it. There was only one thing I was yet able to do. I activated all my speakers at full volume and let out a tremendous roar.

It was useless. The roar was a pitiful squawk of static so feeble as to be almost inaudible. My speakers had been designed for subtlety and unobtrusiveness, and the music system for the ballroom had long since perished. The raucous, spewing birds in the roof could make far more noise than I.

But the boy's sharp ears had detected something, and he spun in the direction of my nearest speaker. With a nervous backwards glance at the metal carcass, he began walking towards the north wall. And as he approached, my anger dissipated. There was no point mourning for a rusty derelict that I had often wished to shut down myself. Moreover, it might be possible to talk to the boy. Was I so mad as to drive away this opportunity? I produced another burst of static and he walked towards it, searching the shadows for the source of the noise. When he was within what I judged to be range, I spoke slowly and as clearly as I could.

"I am the Custodian of Xanadu. Is it I you wish to speak to?"

The tones were harsh with age, but the boy's eyes showed that he could hear me. And though he was trembling with fright, he stood his ground and answered.

"Are you Lastreezor?"

"I am the Custodian of The Last Resort—this place. Do you seek to talk to me?"

He clearly could understand at least some of my speech, but he looked confused and kept scanning the walls and ceiling in an attempt to find the source of the voice.

"Are you a...Machine?" he asked. He spoke the word with an odd sort of reverence. I am not precisely a machine, but neither am I anything else that this boy would understand, so I decided to answer in the affirmative.

"I am."

"Where are you?"

"If you look up to your left," I directed, "you will see a small round button on the wall. Down a little. There. That is my eye." He spotted the glassy disk which was just above him, roughly at eye level for an adult, and it was a strange sensation to have wide, intelligent eyes staring directly up at me.

"Are you from the before times?"

"Yes. I was here when this Resort was built, and a thousand men and women danced in this Hall."

The boy looked inadvertently over his shoulder, but clearly this concept was more than he could manage. Then, with a suddenly intensity he asked:

"Are you a Computer?"

This was an unexpected question and I was puzzled by the sudden hope in his voice. I was not sure how to answer.

"I am not a computer, although my functions are computer-driven." I had not expected that to be understood, and it wasn't. The child looked confused and disappointed.

"You are not a computer?"

"I am a CEMS, Type 4," I said, but I had to pause to search for a meaning for those long-unused words.

"I am a Cyboretic Extended Maintenance System. My function is to maintain the resort complex in a state of optimum operation, to provide for the needs of the visitors, and to coordinate resort security, information and emergency systems." I was receiving an uncomprehending stare, so I dredged my memory to try and explain the words more simply.

"I used to clean this place and repair it. I provided food and entertainment for the people staying here, and protected the resort from damage or intruders." That last caused a pang as I recalled the open door.

"I am looking for a Computer. Are there any Computers here?"

"There are computers here, but none of them have functioned for a very long time."

The boy's face was despairing. "They are all dead?"

"Yes."

As I watched the child's face in the muted light, trying to understand what he wanted, I was surprised to see that he was beginning to cry. I watched intently. I do not cry, of course, but I often know a feeling of piercing despair that cannot be described any other way, and his tears awakened my empathy. But I did not know how to express it.

"Why do you need a computer?"

I finally asked, seeking to understand, at least, if I could not help, but the boy turned unheedingly and began to walk away. I called again, but he continued, then broke into a run and pelted for the door, sandals thudding on the compost-heaped floor, and then slapping across the tiles in the foyer.

"Come back!"

I replayed the sight of tears welling in anguished gray eyes and wetting the contours of a small face, and it stirred me as the breeze had stirred the motes of dust in the entrance hall. Bits of memory and half-grasped images swirled in my mind, pricking my sluggish thought processes and waking my consciousness. I began to think, to remember, and to question.

What had become of the musicians, technicians, gardeners, chefs,

actors, courtesans and other workers for whom the shuttles never returned? What society had their descendants built? And why had this one small boy dared to cross my eroded perimeters? Again and again I replayed his visit, analyzing his movements, appearance and speech and considering what I could have done or said to persuade him to stay. For I was remembering something else—something which had come to be such a complete part of me that I had stopped noticing it. Loneliness. This tiny taste of human contact had released an all-consuming need for more.

At first I tried to stem the flood by reviewing the boy's visits and watching through the front door monitors, but as the days passed it was not enough. With only endless monotony in the present, I escaped into memories of a glorious time when the rich and powerful had flocked to Xanadu to play. These fantasies enveloped and comforted me until I was no longer aware of my remains, half-digested by the forest, or the harshness of the weather wearing incessantly at the foyer floor.

It was the partial collapse of the north wing that brought me back—back into the throbbing of emergency alarms and the screaming fury of a typhoon. Hail hammered against the walls, trees splintered in the forest, and tremendous bursts of thunder erupted overhead. Through the black tempestuous night I listened to the enormous forces unleashed around me, mixing the voices of wind, rain and earth into a symphony spanning a range no human ear could follow. I was filled with an unfamiliar sense of exhilaration—almost as if I could smell the vibrant air and feel its icy strength.

By dawn the storm had passed, and in the first gray light I activated my viewers to survey the damage. The roof of the north wing had cracked, sending floodwaters into the Great Hall, which had become a shallow, rubbish-choked lake. In the late morning the sun began streaming through gaping holes that had been torn in the vines on the roof. Where it

touched the ground, plumes of mist rose into the sunbeams, transforming the scene into a steaming primeval swamp.

I was watching the glittering insects criss-crossing the beams of light, when I heard splashing in the entrance hall and realized that I once again had a visitor. The shafts of light made it difficult to see across the room, but I soon recognized the boy as he picked his way across the muck to my monitor. It was the same boy, certainly, but something seemed oddly different about him.

"Morning, Lastreezor," he said casually as he reached the wall.

"Good morning," I responded. He started violently, and his face betrayed a succession of shock, delight, and apprehension.

"You've returned!"

"Returned?" I asked. "I cannot leave this place, therefore I cannot return."

"But you didn't speak. It's so long since you talked, I thought you had died, or maybe that I imagined it."

So I had entirely lost contact with reality. This was disturbing, but not very surprising.

"How long has it been since we last talked together?" I inquired.

"Almost a year," he said. "Will you talk to me now?"

A year! I contemplated his words with shock. He had used the word for local year, which made it more than two standard years that I had been oblivious. I had thought it only a matter of days. That explained why the boy looked different—he was older. His hair was straighter, his face leaner, and I could see from his height and broadening shoulders that he was entering puberty. He was still visibly frightened by this encounter, but his mannerisms were more controlled and his voice lower and more confident.

"Certainly I will talk to you," I said. Then I realized that I had no idea what to say. But I had to say something. He was shifting uncomfortably from foot to foot as if he would retreat at any moment. Finally, I tried a question.

"Why did you come here?"

"I wanted to see what damage the storm had done. Or did you mean before?" He folded his arms nervously. "I came because Falcon was dying—my sister. She was my twin sister." There was an adult sadness in his eyes as he paused briefly, remembering. "In school we learn about Computers and other Machines from ancient times. Lots of kids don't really believe in the Gospels of Electronics or Biotechnology or The Return, but I do. And I thought of this place. I thought that if I could somehow get in, I could find a Computer and tell it what was wrong, and it would be able to help me to save her. Of course people say you die if you try to enter the buildings, and I knew I'd be in trouble if I got caught, but I figured that I had to try. I thought maybe a small boy might sneak in where a large man couldn't. It was a foolish thing to do, but I was very young then."

"Did she die?"

The pause this time was longer. "Yes. The doctor said it was a kind of blood disease and she couldn't do anything to cure her." He had been staring at his feet; now he looked up at the monitor, almost accusingly. "I came back again and again and asked, but you wouldn't answer. Why?"

"I...fell asleep," I said, and it was not, after all, far from an accurate answer. "I am very old now, and I sometimes become forgetful. I did not know that you were here."

"Oh." A pause, and then with an attempt to sound casual that was belied by the tension in his voice and hands: "Could you have helped?"

"No. I am sorry, but the medical diagnostic and treatment systems lost integrity...that is, died, many years ago. I would have been no use at all."

"Oh." He seemed somehow relieved to hear that answer. There was a short silence, and I began trying to think of another question when the boy suddenly stepped backwards, glanced nervously up at the sun-pierced foliage, and then at my monitor.

"Um, it's getting late. I'd better go before someone misses me."

And before I could reply, he had darted off across the room and I was left staring in confusion and anxiety towards the entrance, without even the sense to use my outside monitor.

The days were impossibly long. I could not retreat into memories for fear that I would lose touch again and miss him when he came back. When I ran out of conversation to practice, I watched through the entrance and counted the tiles in the lobby time after time. I did not consider the possibility that he would not return. I could not.

I waited eleven endless days.

"What is your name?"

"Farad."

"Where do you come from?"

"I live in The Town," he replied with a tone that suggested this was self-evident and the question a silly one. Nonetheless, the silly question put him more at ease, for he moved a few paces away and returned dragging a heavy object, which he seated himself on. I had to examine the object before I realized that it was the rust-eaten casing of the cleaning robo.

"I am surprised that I can understand you. Do you all still speak Standard?"

The boy looked at me quizzically, but replied. "Of course we do. We learn grammar and poetry and the Gospels at school so that the people from the stars will understand us when they come back, and not think that we're savages because we don't have metal machines like in the old days."

"Have you come here often?"

He was still apprehensive, but as he talked he gradually began to relax.

"Sure. Well, sometimes, anyway. At first I didn't want to come after Falcon died. But then I came back because I wanted to know if there really was a voice in the wall and I didn't imagine it. And, well, I kept coming because I like it here—it's a place where I can get away and be by myself. Falcon would have loved this hiding place..." His voice trailed off momentarily, before continuing with determination and more than a hint of bravado.



"I used to be afraid, coming here alone, but now I'm used to it. Of course, I can't come very often and if I ever get caught I'll be in big trouble, since it's forbidden to go past the memorials. But I still come. I like to sit here and read about the old days. It makes them seem more real. I want to be a Technician some day and sit on the Committee, so I'm trying to learn as much as I can."

He paused, and I could see growing excitement in his eyes as he turned them toward me.

"You must know all about the old times and Science and everything. Would you tell me about them? Please?"

Tell him? I grappled with the concept. "I will tell you whatever I can," I said. "What would you like to know?"

"Everything," he stated, as if it were obvious.

Everything? I paused blankly. What could I say that would interest him? No doubt what he wanted to hear were accounts of the galaxy's history and its technology, but I had only the vaguest knowledge of such things and my memories were now confused. But it was imperative that I find something to say—something that might induce him to come back and talk to me again.

Fortunately the boy grew impatient and interrupted my floundering thoughts. "Why are you still here?"

The question was astonishing, but it prodded me into automatic speech.

"I am a cyboretic system," I said, then realizing that he probably did not understand the concept: "I am part of the building. I cannot leave."

"What is a cyboretic system?"

"A cyborg is an entity that is part human and part machine," I explained. "Even a very sophisticated computer does not have the flexibility of a human mind and cannot be programmed with human emotions or experience, so systems were built which combined both human and electronic capabilities."

He digested that explanation for a while, his foot bumping against the

casing beneath him, and then looked up, deeply startled.

"You mean that you are really a person? A human being?"

"I was at one time," I said. "The brain within this system is a human brain." Then, slowly, as much to myself as him, I said, "Yes. I am a human being."

And fell into vertigo. As if some long forgotten door had burst open, snatches of sensation began reaching into my consciousness. Odors formed, and then tastes, triggering a tantalizing cascade of images and emotions that flickered at the edge of remembrance. Then, abruptly, before I could grasp any of it, the sensations dissipated, and I was again looking at the dust-specked image of a young man, his face slightly distorted by its proximity to the lens. I noticed, irrelevantly, that he was now tall enough to look directly into it.

"Lastreezor?"

"I am here."

"What happened? Why did you stop talking to me?"

"There was a problem with my systems," I said, for I could think of no other explanation. Farad looked worried, and I found part of myself curiously pleased by his concern. "I am, after all, very old, and I am beginning to break down."

"You made a very strange noise," he said. "You aren't... you aren't dying are you?" he asked.

Automatically I checked my systems. The instruments recorded a brief chemical disturbance in my brain. The system had applied several tiny electrical shocks, and all functions were now within acceptable parameters.

"No, I am not dying," I told Farad. "It was only a fluctuation."

He moved away from the wall and sat again on top of the casing, wrapping his arms around his knees. The expression on his face had become intensely serious.

"Does that mean that you are going to live forever?"

"For a very long time, yes."

"I have often wished that I could live forever. Sometimes I dream about living long enough to learn all

there is to know—of finding a way to build machines and spaceships again, so that we can go out to the stars and find out what happened to the others.” He paused, his face troubled. “But it’s just a dream. Falcon wanted to live forever too, and she died and so will I. I am glad that you won’t die, though, because I will always have you here to talk to, even when I am old.” He paused again, and looked around him. “But I wouldn’t want to live here—it’s too lonely.” Another pause, and then he looked up at the monitor, frowning. “Do you like living here, Lastreezor?”

It took me some time to consider the question, for it was one that I could never have formed myself. “No,” I said at last. “I do not like living here. But I do not have any choice.”

Eleven. The number came unbidden to me and I could not ignore it. Eleven visual monitors still work. Originally I had more than 400. Soon I would have no vision, and then no audio. The emergency generator, sheltered beneath the building, is capable of operating for thousands of years. It was impossible to know how long I might remain alive—alone without light or sound.

For the first time I regretted talking to the boy. I had not wanted to remember fear.

That evening, as the light faded under the green-fringed arches of the Great Hall, I distracted myself with questions that I had never before considered asking. Who am I? Who was I? How had I come to be here? The impetus of Farad’s questions had broken down the last of my conditioning, just as his kick had disintegrated the staggering robo.

I searched my memory, trying to reach before Xanadu, but I could recall nothing, and instead I found myself immersed in vivid recollections of the early years following the evacuation. Back then my conditioning was strong, so I continued with routine maintenance and did not think about loneliness. And when small parties of ragged, starving men and women tried to cross the prime-

ter defenses, I had not hesitated to repel them. Now, centuries too late, I mourned for the once-beautiful woman with tangled blonde hair whose clothes hung on her emaciated frame. She died creating a diversion for a young man, who made it less than halfway across the manicured lawn before a robo with a repair laser split his skull in two. In the closeup, an instant before his death, I can see his face clearly. It is Farad’s face.

“Lastreezor?”

For a second I thought that the long-dead man had spoken; then I realized that Farad was calling me from the Great Hall. With difficulty, I pulled myself back from the grotesque kaleidoscope of memories.

“Lastreezor?”

“I’m here,” I said and immediately the irony of the words struck me, but Farad did not appear to notice. He stood fidgeting, and then sat down abruptly, arms folding and unfolding.

“I couldn’t sleep last night,” he finally started. “I kept having terrible dreams. I dreamed that I was trapped inside a wall and couldn’t move, and I was yelling through a little hole but nobody could hear me.” He paused awkwardly.

“I couldn’t forget what you said. I thought you were a machine. I didn’t know that you were human, and somehow that makes everything different. I always thought that they were so perfect, the old ones, but now.... Surely it was an evil thing to put you inside a machine like that! And then they left you here—by yourself. Why?”

There was almost a tone of pleading in his voice and I understood it. He did not want his idyllic dreams of the past or the impending Rescue from the stars to be marred. No more did I. Yet I had also discovered a new sense of curiosity about myself. And, most important, I found myself moved by his distress.

“I do not know how to answer you,” I said finally. “There is too much that I will never remember.”

“But how do you feel? I mean, you do feel things, don’t you? I can

tell by what you’ve said. Don’t you miss being human—I mean, having a body? Don’t you want to get up and walk away from here? And how did you come to be in the machine? Did you choose to do it? Why?”

I picked my way through the barrage of questions, uncertain of what to say. I did not wish to upset him further, and yet, whether it was some remnant of my programming or a natural disposition, I was unwilling to lie.

“Yes, I experience emotions, but I do not believe that I am able to miss being a human, because I cannot remember what it was like, even though I know that I must once have had a body like yours. Yes, I would like to be able to leave these buildings and go past the perimeter walls, but there is no point in wishing for the impossible.

“As to whether I chose to become a CEMS unit...it is recorded that I volunteered.”

“But do you remember?”

“No.”

“Well, if you don’t remember, then you can’t know,” Farad protested, his voice ringing with all the righteous indignation of adolescence. “I can’t believe that anybody would volunteer to become a machine in a wall!”

“They might if they were very old or badly crippled,” I suggested, but Farad was not in a mood to listen.

“And then they left you behind. I mean, I always heard about our ancestors and how they were left behind, but that doesn’t seem real. They’re all dead, centuries ago. But you’re still here! How could they do that?”

Farad was now pacing beside the wall.

“If it had been me, I would have come back! I wouldn’t have left people behind and I wouldn’t have left you here. I think those people were cowards and I don’t want to study their Electronics any more. I don’t want to learn how to make people prisoners inside walls. And I don’t want to make spaceships if it means going out and finding them again. I hope they never come back!”

As I watched him gesturing excitedly, I felt sudden fear. The boy no longer wanted to know "everything" about the past—he would abandon my stories and my ruins and leave me alone. I had foolishly hoped that he would keep visiting me until he grew old. I thought desperately, seeking some argument to keep him near.

"Farad, let us suppose that the builders of the resort were evil and dangerous people. What then? What if they return?"

"Return?" He stopped, startled. "You don't really believe that, do you?"

"It is still possible that their descendants may come exploring and rediscover this planet. Would it not be best to be prepared?"

Farad's face underwent a series of expressions as he digested this idea, and I stayed silent. I had used the only strategy I could think of to keep him interested in the past.

After a while he began to pace again, and then he spoke.

"I hadn't thought of it that way before. You could be right. But, I have to think about it some more."

He paused for a moment, then glanced towards the entrance. "I'd better go. I'm supposed to be at school."

"You will come back?" I asked. Some of my anxiety must have penetrated even the rasping metallic tones of the speaker, for Farad, who had already started for the door, halted, turned, and walked back.

"Of course I'll come back," he said, looking searchingly at the lens, almost as if he expected to find a face behind it. "You didn't think that I'd leave for good, did you?"

"I thought it possible."

"I wouldn't leave you here alone," he said, and there was a gentleness in his voice, almost as if he were speaking to a child. "You are my friend, Lastrezor."

He stood hesitantly by the wall a little longer, then gave a faint shrug and said good-bye. I watched him walk away, picking up speed as he remembered that he was late. His footfalls, heavier now than they had used to be, echoed on the floor, then I

listened carefully for the faint swish of his passage through the grass which grows upon the Grand Avenue, and the rustle of brambles as he pushed his way into the forest.

That night, on a whim, I accessed my outside front monitor and rotated it up to the limit of its arc where I could see a portion of sky above the trees. I tried to imagine that I was Farad, lying stretched out on my back with crossed arms pillowing my head, staring straight up, and in my imagination I found that I could expand that small slice of stars to encompass the full sky's sweep from horizon to horizon. As the hours passed I became entranced by the act of creating galaxies that wheeled ponderously across the blackness, and shooting stars that flared in arcs towards the trees.

At dawn color began to return to the trees and bushes around me, and I realized with shock that the flowering brambles creeping through my windows were beautiful. I had regarded the brambles as my enemies for so long that I was blinded to their beauty, but I realized now that this sea of life was no defacement. It was draping my decayed walls with a new elegance.

And for the first time I found myself wishing that this peaceful place would remain the way it was. What would happen to Farad's people if our civilization returned from the stars? I could not be sure, but the prospect made me uneasy. Farad asked 'How could they do that to you?' and I had no answer for him.

I spent the day studying my ruins with new eyes, and then waited impatiently through the dusk for the stars to blossom again. And as I watched the glowing galaxies, I listened more closely than ever to the eerie cries of the night forest. Eventually I began to imagine that I could hear something rustling through the grass on the Avenue. At first I thought it was a trick of the wind, but the sound grew louder. Startled, I rotated my viewer and immediately saw a bobbing, flickering light approaching the Great Hall.

It was Farad. He was holding a candle out before him, with one hand cupped around the flame to protect it from the wind. He moved with haste, stumbling occasionally on the rough ground. I was alarmed. What had prompted him to make such a difficult journey in the dark? In the black void of the Great Hall he became disoriented, and I had to guide him to my monitor by calling out.

"Farad! What are you doing here? What's wrong?"

He did not answer, but busied himself dripping wax onto the robo's casing with unsteady hands. When the candle stuck firmly to the wax, he sat down on the dirt beside the casing and pulled his legs up to his chest. His face was haggard and tear-stained, both knees were skinned and he was shivering. He wrapped his arms tightly around his legs for warmth, then blurted out:

"I got caught. Izra saw me coming out from behind the Memorials. He says if he ever sees me around here again he's going to tell, and I'll be executed because it's the death penalty for anyone who goes past the Memorials!"

Burying his face, Farad gave way to a storm of pent-up ragged sobs. I waited, controlling my anxiety, until he wiped his arm across his face and then looked up at me for the first time.

"Maybe Izra is wrong," I said, trying to avert my fears as much as his. Farad shook his head.

"No. The First Committee forbade anyone to go past the Memorials on pain of death, and it's still the law. I don't think I would really be executed. But I could be banished. And then I wouldn't be able to finish school or be a Technician or even see my family again for years and years." Despite his attempts to be composed, the tears were breaking through again.

I stared at his huddled figure, trying not to think about the consequence of this sudden news.

"Farad, why did you risk coming here tonight?"

"I had to," he said, and his voice was anguished. "I had to at least say

goodbye. I...I didn't want to just leave you here."

He truly regarded me as a friend, I realized, and in the midst of my own rising despair, that gave me a small pulse of joy. But it was a bitter joy. If I also regarded him as a friend, I must not endanger him.

"You must not come again," I said, forcing the words out.

"But..." Farad started to protest and then caught himself. Finally he just nodded helplessly, and looking away through the darkness, he whispered, "I know." There was a long silence between us and I began searching futilely for a way to say goodbye.

"Lastreezor? ...Are you sick?"

The abrupt question took me by surprise, but I answered. "I cannot be sick in the way that you can, but I am...breaking down. You could say that I am sick."

"Will you get better?"

"No. I will continue to deteriorate until eventually my systems fail, but that will take a very long time."

I did not want to think how long that might be. I focused desperately on recording every detail of Farad's appearance.

"What if...what if the old ones came back. Could they make you well?"

"No. At least, that is extremely unlikely. They would undoubtedly shut me down."

"What if...well, if you could call somebody to come and shut you down. Would you do it?"

"Yes." Fortunately the ancient monitor could not convey my bitterness as I added, "I would have shut myself down long since if it were possible, but I was not built with the capability of doing that."

"I see." There was another pause and it seemed now that he had difficulty continuing. "You mean that you're sick. Like Falcon. And you want to die."

The analogy disturbed me, but his statement was correct.

"Yes."

He stared at his hands, his entire posture radiating tension, and then began to speak rapidly, his voice so

quiet that I could barely make out his words.

"When Falcon was dying she kept getting sicker and sicker, and we gave her medicine for the pain but after a while it didn't help. Finally one day she asked for release. For a long time afterwards I was angry at Falcon for giving up, and the doctor for making her die, and mother for calling the doctor. I guess I didn't believe that it would really happen." Farad's voice was unsteady, and he paused to wipe his nose on the back of his hand.

"I know now that it was selfish and wrong of me to want Falcon to live when she was in pain like that. I should have let her choose sooner instead of telling her all the time that I wanted her to stay. She was the one who was dying, and I spent all my time making her feel bad for leaving me behind." He was blinking rapidly, staring unseeingly into the darkness. Finally he looked up at me, eyes glistening with intensity.

"Lastreezor. I have to go away and leave you. I won't be able to come back for a long time—maybe never. If there is a way I could...shut you down...would you want me to do it?"

I spoke with no hesitation. "Yes, Farad."

There was an intense stillness between us. As the candlelight flickered across Farad's face, I thought I could catch glimpses of both the younger child and the man he would become. And despite my sudden new hope, I found myself feeling regret that I would never know his future.

Then I knew what to say.

"The door to the control room opens from the main hallway, and I can guide you to it. There is a switch in the room which I will describe. It should turn off the auxiliary generator. But first, I want you to make me a promise."

"A promise?" Farad looked up.

"Years from now, Farad, when you've become a Technician and are sitting on the Committee, I want you to return and bring your people with you. It's time you regained Xanadu and learned from it. And then, if the

others do return from the stars, perhaps you'll be ready."

Farad's face showed a succession of conflicting emotions, but I could tell that he was pleased. Finally, he spoke in a strong and serious voice.

"I promise. We'll be ready—I'll make sure we are." Then, more quietly: "And Lastreezor.... If this doesn't...well, work...remember that I won't leave you behind like They did. I will come back."

I looked at him and wished that I could smile.

"Farad, you already have."

I saw from the hall monitor that Farad was able to open the Control Room door. I hope he is successful in his task, but I will not let myself fear his failure. Instead, I will listen to the breeze in the treetops and be calm. For I have remembered myself. If I must wait out the centuries deaf and blind and alone, I will decorate the void with landscapes of my own making, and people it with creatures of splendor and magic.

My sight will fail, but I am human and my vision knows no limits. ■

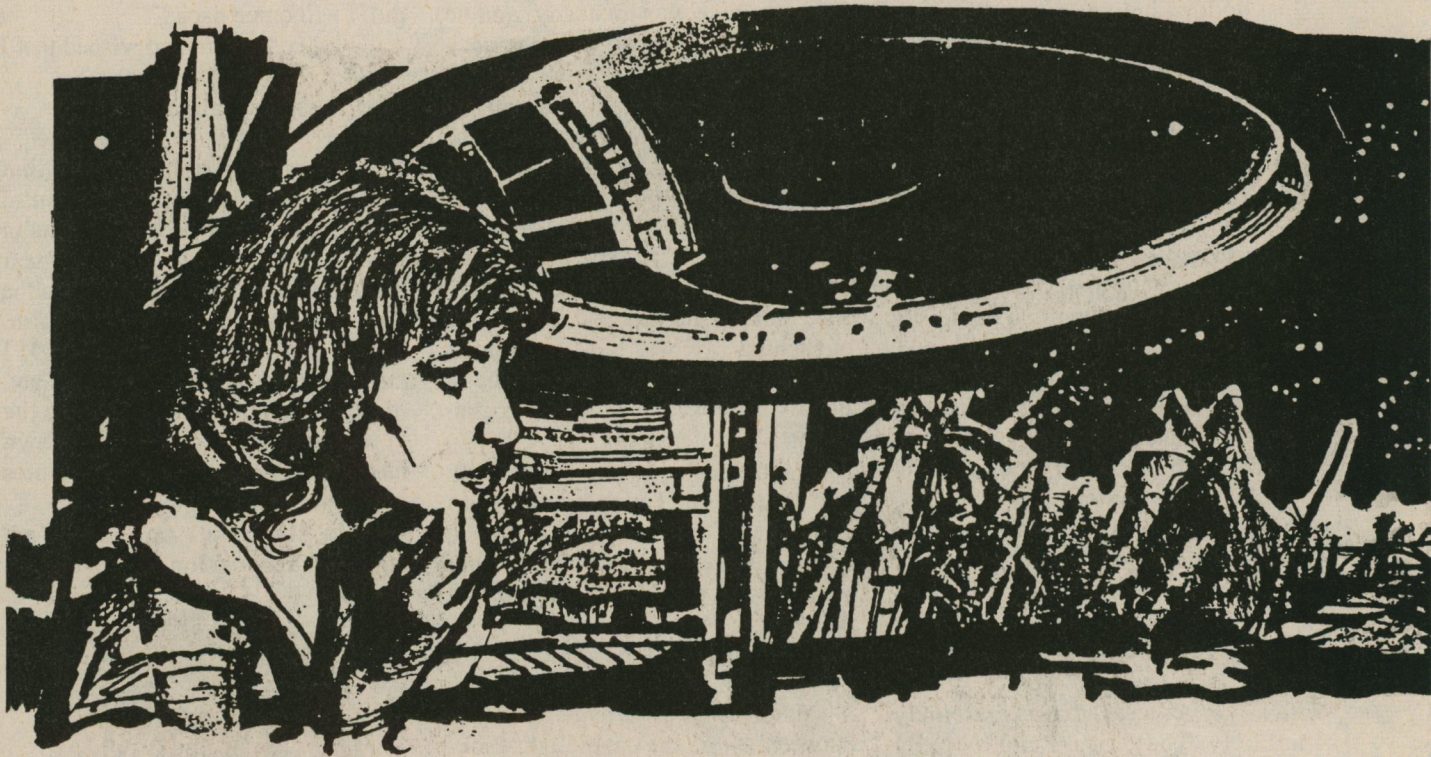


WHEN THE SHIP CAME

Stoney Compton

Illustrated by Margaret Ballif Simon

They had been alone and forgotten for centuries. Then the ship came. They had something to teach it



The profanity lay in perfect execution. Entrails webbed out across the smooth wooden deck. Pegged down with a still-green sawthorn, the sacrifice pointed stiff appendages to the four quarters of the world, forming a mockery of the sacred sign.

Samit slowly scratched his bristly jaw while he puzzled at the true meaning in the mess of feathers and guts. His bare toe touched the small rib cage. Colder than the deck.

After noting the nuances of the splayed bird, he pulled the sawthorn out of its center. This seemed more sedition than blasphemy. A practiced kick sent the wasted meat splashing into the calm water between four-ring and three-ring of the great raft.

"You didn't see this until your last patrol?" he asked the silent guardsman.

"No, sir. Large Moon set early and Small Moon is coming up right behind Jael. For about three spans it was very dark. I didn't want to kindle a torch...."

"You were correct to waken me...Avik, isn't it?"

"Yes, sir!" he replied, obviously pleased. "Guardsman First Class."

"Don't mention this to anyone else, Avik. Carry on, Guardsman."

The first direct rays of Jael rose above the eastern horizon as the man hurried to complete his morning patrol.

Samit carried the star-metal-tipped staff of the Maa, his symbol of

office. On occasion it also proved to be a formidable weapon.

With daybreak the people of Concordia began to stir out of their wooden abodes. Women called to sleeping children. Kitchen noises issued from all directions.

The morning breeze carried the odor of frying weedcake, causing his stomach to grumble. Crossing the last catwalk to the bridge deck brought him into view of the Capin's sentry. The Maa smiled beneath his heavy mustache as the young guardswoman abruptly stiffened to attention.

"Anything to report?" he asked softly.

"No, sir!" she piped. "All is quiet."

"Your relief will be here soon."

He pushed past her flat "Sir" and edged through the door. Another armed guardswoman confronted him in the narrow passageway.

"The Capin still sleeps, Maa Samit," she said politely.

"My apologies and regrets, but I must speak to her as soon as possible."

The young woman inclined her head smartly. "Yes, sir. If you'll wait in the duty office, I'll awaken her."

"Sacrifice? What kind of sacrifice?"

"Chicken. Expertly done, too."

"This isn't Bellday. Have you asked the Cassock about it?"

"No. The sacrifice was on the deck in front of the North Chapel door, not inside."

"Oh." Her stern mask of command slipped for a blink, and he saw the uncertainty of youth flash and fade. "This is more serious than I

won't be idle time for heresy, or sedition."

"But that won't last forever. Do you think you can find the people behind this before we finish the red fish run? Breaking tabus shouldn't go unpunished."

"I'll do my best, Capin."

"I know you will." Her sudden smile gave him a lift, which surprised him. "Will you break fast with me, Maa Samit? Bayrn is using the last of



Samit wearily walked across the antechamber and dropped his bulk onto a padded bench.

My years are beginning to show.

The thought carried a coldness with it, reminiscent of north drifting.

Capin Jeen padded barefoot into the room, tying the belt of her soft-cloth robe. Samit stood abruptly and gave her an abbreviated salute.

"Good morrow, Maa Samit," she said with a wave of her hand. "You have a need to see me?" She slid behind the desk of blackwood and settled into her chair, eyes alert. "Please sit."

Samit slouched into a comfortable position. "A sacrifice was found this morning, just before dawn."

thought. It's the heathens, isn't it?"

"Yes," he said softly, "I'm afraid it is."

"You...took care of it?"

"Yes, Capin."

"Good." She chewed her lower lip. "Those of the new religion are growing bolder, aren't they?"

"It would seem so. First this talk about wind-catchers, and now this. I think the small grease-fish harvest left too many with time on their hands."

He stretched. "Word on ten-ring has it that they're already fighting among themselves—a schism in the schism. In just two links we'll be in the midst of the red fish and there

the dried flatfish in the weedcakes."

"My thanks and regrets. But my wife is expecting me right about now."

"Of course. Well then, until the return of the Ship."

"Until the return of the Ship," he said mechanically.

A new sentry patrolled the bridge deck catwalk. Her polished breastplate of evilfish leather reflected the morning sun as she saluted smartly. He hurried through the formal streets of two-ring and three-ring. Nobody loitered near the site of the sacrifice.

As he approached the maze of market stalls on five-ring, he slowed.

Rani's standing order was to bring home a vegetable for evening meal if he could find something fresh. The aura of rich dirt and night-soil permeated rings five, six and seven—a reminder of human cycles and needs.

He stopped at a stall that displayed thick, purple-tipped flowers. Chickens cocked their heads and eyed him from a cage behind the proprietor.

"Good morrow, Maa Samit," the dirt-man said. He pointed to the vegetables. "These are fresh cut this very dawn. Only a tenth-piece each."

"Did you venture from five-ring before dawn, Famir?" Samit picked up two of the vegetables and peered at their stalks. Moisture still oozed from the cuts.

"Where would I go? I've more than enough to do right here on five-ring. I haven't been across a catwalk before noon in over a link-set. If you're not going to buy those, I'd appreciate it if you'd put them down."

"I'll buy them. Would you throw in some wrap-weed to keep them fresh?"

"Well, since it's you...." The dirt-man pulled the end of a broad, translucent sheet of wrap-weed up to counter level and deftly sliced off a length with his shell knife. As he wrapped the purchase he glanced up at the stocky Maa. "So was there something to see on another ring at dawn?"

Samit stared impassively back. "Not to my way of thinking."

Famir held out a callused palm. "Two-tenths, please."

Three children raced past, laughing and shrieking. Samit dug out the worn coins and dropped them into the waiting hand. "Until the return of the Ship." He turned toward home.

"Yeah," Famir's voice floated after him, "until the return of the Ship."

Religion, Samit reflected, was becoming complicated on Concordia. Was Famir's attitude an indication of an impious man or was he part of the new religion? Names and faces had constantly flicked through his mind since finding the chicken.

He kept rejecting the one name that stuck to his mental fingers every time he sifted it out. Lots of people raised chickens. At least it wasn't a goat. His penurious nature would have demanded use of goat meat, even if its death was an act of rebellion.

Rebels. Religious rebels, or just rebels? Why couldn't this be happening on one of the other raft cities, or on one of the rich islands?

By the time he put foot on south four-ring, the sun blazed down fiercely. Already the morning breeze had died to a whisper that reached no further into the floating city than seven-ring.

"Daddy!" Gordo crowed from the side yard. The small, golden-haired boy swarmed into Samit's arms. The Maa hugged his youngest child to him fiercely.

"Mamma says that I get to sit next to you at breakfast because I was so much help today already!"

"You are a good boy. I will be honored to have you sit by me. Here, carry my staff into the house and put it away."

Gordo's eyes rounded as he gravely accepted the two-meter badge of office.

"You spoil that boy," Rani said from the stove with a twinkle in her eye. Samit stepped into the kitchen.

"That's what small children are for." He ran his hand down her back and patted her behind. "What gossip flies in the air today?"

"Fear," she said, turning back to the stove. "Sit. Your breakfast is ready."

He watched her face as she served him. Sometimes it seemed she had always been by his side and not just for the past fifteen drifts. Over the long drifts she had thickened, become wrinkled, and gray flecked her hair. By the same coin her constant love and affection had deepened and taken root in his soul.

Five living children had issued from that body. Four still received nurturing when they needed it, no matter how busy her day. One was dead. But only Gordo shared the house with them.

"Fear of what?"

"Omens in the night sky. Growing beliefs about sacrificing to the drift rather than the Ship. Arguments over a great wind-catcher for Concordia and guided destiny rather than one of drifting."

He swallowed his first bite of food. This thing again! "Our people have drifted true since the death of the Ship. Why should we change now?"

"My husband," calm reproach flexed in her voice, "you asked me what gossip came with the sun. I am telling you, not agreeing with it."

"I know that," he said shortly. "Sacrificing to the drift! What kind of omens?"

Rani stopped moving about the kitchen and sat across the thick table from him.

"Streaks of light in the night sky," she said evenly. "Very high up."

"Falling bits of star, like in my father's time." He took another bite of weedcake.

"This one didn't fall and make great waves. It scratched fire across the heavens from horizon to horizon, following the path of Jael."

Samit found it difficult to swallow his food. He drank tea before responding.

"You talk as if you saw this thing yourself."

"I did." Her eyes grew larger, almost capable of swallowing him.

"A dream?" he ventured, laying down the cooling food.

"No dream. I was awake, emptying my bladder. The night was warm and the stars seemed to call to me." She swallowed. He thought she might have blushed slightly.

"You actually heard voices?"

"Of course not. It was lyrical, that's all I'm saying."

He bit off a nettled response, sipped tea, and stared into his carved cup as he sat it down. "You were pissing and felt lyrical. Then what happened?"

"If you continue to be rude, I won't tell you anything," she said flatly.

His face burned beneath the stubble. Frustration at her sideways expla-

nation was not a good reason to be short with her. There was a side to her that he still didn't understand. In their collective youth many arguments grew from his inability to perceive her nuances. Finally he just decided to be as accepting as possible.

"I'm not trying to be rude. I just stated the facts like a good investigator."

"You stated them rudely. I'm not a wind-catcher advocate who has urinated on the Capin's door. I'm your wife."

"I'm sorry I was rude, Rani," he said, dissipating his momentary anger.

"I watched the thing—it looked like a small, bright bead—as it went overhead. It didn't frighten me. It made me feel like a child again, somehow."

"Why didn't you wake me?"

"By the time I thought of that, it was gone. Besides, you always get angry when I wake you for reasons you don't agree with." She pushed off her chair and rattled utensils at the stove.

"Which quarter of the night did this take place?"

"About a span before you were called by the guard. Was there anything unusual on the morning patrol?"

"Not in the sky." He took another bite of his now-cold weedcake.

"But there was something unusual?"

Briefly he told her of the blasphemous bird carcass in front of the chapel.

"Who would dare such a thing?" she asked wonderingly.

"I've been asking myself the same thing since I saw it."

"Maybe somebody just doesn't like chickens, Daddy," Gordo said at his side. Samit had forgotten that the child was there.

"Maybe so, little man. But don't say anything to your friends about it, okay? We'll keep this a secret between the three of us."

"Sure, Daddy! Just like the other secrets."

"Yes. You're a good boy, Gordo."

Samit wondered yet again if he would have married had he known he would become the Maa. The Maa had to appear a bit harder than ironwood, brighter than the noon sky, and as unswerving as the path of the drift. It was difficult to be part of the Maa's family.

Once there had been a deputy who worked with him. But the man's wife, daughter to one of the rich fish-leather processors, had grander plans for her husband. She didn't like the constant, careful evasion of her neighbors over trivial matters that they thought might stretch the laws of Concordia.

Between the social distance the community maintained, and the hours her husband spent at his obligations, enmity formed in her. Samit sighed at the memory. Darwayne would have made an excellent Maa in time. And it was the only high office that wasn't hereditary.

He hoped his old deputy was happy overseeing the tanning of evil-fish hide for his father-in-law. In more ways than one, the job smelled too much to ever suit Samit. "It's all in the drift," he muttered to himself.

"Did you say something?" Rani asked.

"If you see that light in the sky again, come and wake me."

"As you wish." She bent over Gordo and touched his head fondly. "Son, you need to hurry. The proctor will be starting her lessons shortly."

"Yes, Mama," he said dutifully.

Samit felt constant amazement at the good nature of his youngest son. Maybe there was something to the old wives' tale that a man begets what he feels at the time. Gordo had been conceived in a state of quiet, tender lovemaking.

His oldest son had been a product of hot lust. Sticky bellies lunging at one another in youthful sexual exuberance, seed screaming to be planted between fecund thighs, had begat Ansul. The son who despised him. Samit again forced his mind away from the one name that kept coming up in his mental net.

Gordo skipped out the door to attend day-lessons at South School.

Rani moved lightly back across the room.

"Are you going to sleep now?" Her eyes were open pools of emotion. Samit felt a welcome familiar stirring.

"Yes. Would you like to lie down with me?"

Her smile answered.

"Samit. There's something in the sky, Samit! Wake up."

He slapped at the insistent hand shaking his shoulder. "Stop it, needta sleep!"

"Samit!" Rani said roughly. "You are needed."

Discipline finally cleared his mind of sleep. He sat up and rubbed gritty eyes.

"What's happening?" he asked calmly, concentrating on her voice.

"There's a guard at the door, the Capin wants you immediately. There's something in the sky."

"Well, why didn't you say that to begin with?" He leaped up and pulled on clothing.

"I did, you old fool," she said fondly.

"Where's my staff?" His blood began to thunder in his ears. Rani handed him the rod without comment.

He bolted from the house. For just a moment he searched the sky but saw nothing. Then he moved quickly, following the guardsman toward the Bridge Deck.

"Make way!" shouted the sentry at the catwalk when she sighted Samit's staff. "Make way for the Maa!" The buzzing crowd parted, but some shouted questions.

"What is it, Samit?"

"Is it really the Ship?"

"Will everyone die now?"

"Was it wrong to believe in the Drift?"

For a moment he saw Ansul's face, and the moist, gleaming eyes staring opaquely at him, before the youth became lost in the throng.

The Maa pushed through the people without answering. What in the name of *Jihad* was happening?

Capin Jeen paced back and forth across her office. Cassock Wye

flipped through his copy of the Holy Log with such unholy haste his jowls were bouncing.

"It speaks of transceiver settings and wave lengths! I have never understood any of these communication entries! I always thought they were just holy mysteries!"

Samit paused for a moment to enjoy the sight of Wye losing control. Old convictions hardened, but this was no time to gloat. Besides, as Maa he had to pay lip service to the official religion. He saluted Capin Jeen formally.

"You wanted to see me?"

She stopped pacing and stared at him with strange eyes. He realized that she was as close to panic as the Cassock.

"Something," she gasped. "Flew. *Over* Concordia. Something very *big*." She controlled herself with great effort.

"A sea roc?"

"Not a bird. 'Twas shiny. It made a sound—didn't you *see* it?" she shrilled and resumed her pacing without waiting for an answer.

"No. I was sleeping. Where did it go?"

"Away!" She flung out an arm and shook her hand in the air. "I don't know where. I have the entire guard out watching for it. They'll sound the evilfish alarm if—"

A high whistle cut through the room. Cassock Wye burst into sobs and fled down a dark passageway. Samit ran toward the door.

Pandemonium swirled around the bridge beck. Four guardswomen with ironwood pikes kept the townspeople off the catwalk. In the tower above the bridge two guardsmen shouted and pointed at something Samit couldn't see.

He went up the nine-meter ladder as fast as his tired legs could carry him. Once at the top, he flopped wheezing onto the platform, willing the dancing spots from in front of his eyes.

"Wh—what the swive is going on?" he gasped.

Both guardsmen stiffened to attention and saluted.

"Flog that! Tell me what's happening!" Samit pulled himself up to the top of the wooden shield.

"That thing flew over us some time ago. Now it's—back...." The guardsman broke off and simply stared.

Samit blinked, but it didn't go away. Then habit engaged and he inspected the thing carefully.

Still a league away from outer ten-ring, the object seemed impossibly huge. It floated in the water ponderously, no, not just floating—it moved. It left a wake like a water bird.

Sunlight reflected off high black sides, flaring to brilliant specks when it caught on little round spots that looked like an orderly pox. Metal, he decided, it was made of metal. It had to be at least a hundred meters high.

"This thing *flew* over Concordia?" he asked.

"Yes, Maa. It's completely round."

It edged steadily closer. He could discern small movement on the side of the thing. One of the round places suddenly opened to reveal at least three people standing inside the dark metal skin.

Samit involuntarily crossed index fingers in the holy sign. Of their own accord, the two guardsmen mirrored his action. Suddenly he realized that the metal-flying-thing would come to rest at ten-ring, near East Chapel guard tower. Rapid flashes of light from the heliograph asked frantic questions concerning protocol.

Samit slid down the emergency post so quickly that his hands and legs burned where they clasped the smooth wood. His feet slapped the deck, stinging, and he grabbed a guardswoman.

"Get me a ten-rank of armed guards. Unfurl the great banner. Fall in at the catwalk. Now!" He rushed into the Capin's quarters without looking back.

Capin Jeen sat at her desk, trembling. There was no sign of Cassock Wye.

"Get up!" he shouted, startling her. "It's some kind of a ship, it has to be. It's floating in the water and

closing on East Chapel tower. We have to meet it there."

"Meet it! Why?"

"Because you're the Capin! I'm the Maa. We're the authority here and the people must see us carry out our duties."

"But I'm scared, Maa Samit!" A tear ran down one cheek.

"So am I, Jeen," he said softly but with great force. "But this is our responsibility. Now please put on your best cape and don't forget your scepter. Please hurry, my Capin."

"Yes, Maa Samit." She hurried from the room.

The phalanx of guards quick-marched through East Chapel, screaming at frenzied Concordians to clear the way. Capin Jeen trotted to keep pace with Samit and the soldiers. The frightened people shouted so many questions that only babel reached the ear.

For over 300 years the faithful had ended discussions with, "Until the return of the Ship." *Jihad*, the Ship of legend, had come from Earth, a world where magic and machines did one's work, where food and time for pleasure abounded. *Jihad* touched down on Aquaria, was attacked by evilfish and destroyed.

Only hard work and strict obedience would bring the Redeemer Ship, the Cassock preached. Follow the Holy Word and the Ship would return. *Jihad* had called for help and if the people kept the faith, salvation would be theirs.

The small band of survivors came to be called First Crew. For 300 years most of the people of Aquaria worked hard and kept strong the faith that a ship would come, but none ever had.

Until now?

Each ring of Concordia measured one hundred meters from water channel to water channel. The ten-meter channels served many purposes, most of them good. Ten rings made for a long walk when coming from Bridge Deck in the center of the raft city. A full kilometer of raft road must be crossed before they could greet the visitors.

Even the guardsmen and guardswomen stumbled winded and leaden by the time they hurriedly wound through the factories and fish-drying sheds of ten-ring.

"Hold the banner high, so they will know to whom they must speak," Samit ordered. At the unimpeded sight of the huge metal-flying-thing, Capin Jeen's pace faltered even more. It was monstrously big this close.

"It will be all right," Samit said in a low voice, hoping he was correct.

"Y-yes, it will be all right," Capin Jeen echoed.

Her father shouldn't have died so young, Samit thought. He should be here handling this, not her. Samit knew he needed to take charge and conduct the situation without allowing the people or the strangers on the—ship—to realize that Capin Jeen foundered.

They came to a stop at water's edge. The guard flanked the Capin and Maa in straight ranks, trying to look warlike with their leather armor and ironwood spears. Samit noticed that more than one set of knees shook despite the heat of the day.

He stared up and out at the great shape. In the opened circle stood five people in identical clothing. Squinting to pick out more detail, he realized that both men and women stared back.

The thing stopped perfectly still in the water. A noise reminiscent of a coughing evilfish blurted from the opening. It made no sense.

"Galactic speaking are you?" a great hollow voice asked. Some of the guard backed up a pace in astonishment. Capin Jeen clapped both hands to her mouth.

"Yes!" Samit shouted. "We speak that language."

The newcomers conferred among themselves. This time Samit spotted the man who spoke.

"May we enter your city?" He didn't cup his hands or shout, yet his voice boomed out of the great metal orb like thunder in a spring storm.

Samit nudged Capin Jeen with his elbow. "Tell them, yes," he muttered.

"Do you think it wise, Maa Samit?" she asked in a trembling tone.

"Do you really think we could stop them even if we wanted to?"

She looked up at the people in the large opening.

"We would be honored by your presence!" she said loudly in a clear voice. Samit felt proud of her.

"Thank you," the man said, his voice echoing away across the water.

A loud hum emanated from the opening and a thick tongue of metal suddenly protruded from the curved side and angled down toward ten-ring. Samit watched it move deliberately and smoothly through the air, without wavering or faltering, until it touched down on the wood in front of him with a solid thunk. Rails lifted out of each side of the ramp and clicked to a stop at waist level.

Then the ramp surface began to move. The strangers stepped on and moved down the thirty meter distance while standing and looking around them.

Samit thought about the magic unfolding in front of him and decided this was how a waterlouse must feel when dropped on a hot deck in front of men.

Outclassed, no comparison at all.

A tall gray-haired man dressed in tight-fitting gray cloth walked up to Samit and Capin Jeen. His quick green eyes assessed them. Behind him stood a dark-haired woman, two younger men, and a small blonde woman with large blue eyes.

"I am Captain Hans Daken of the *Limon*, commissioned by the Tregelion Alliance to make contact with worlds left bereft by the Great Chaos. To whom am I speaking, please?"

Samit opened his mouth to answer.

"I am Capin Jeen of the Starborn clan. I am ruler of the raft city of Concordia on which you stand." She nodded toward Samit without taking her eyes off Captain Daken. "This is Maa Samit of the Waterborn clan. He is head of the guard and chief law enforcer."

Captain Daken hesitated a moment. "In my culture it is custom-



ary to shake hands to show good intentions. I would like to shake your hand, Capin Jeen of the Starborn."

She carefully touched her hand to his, then clasped and shook it.

"Well met," Daken said with a smile that showed perfect teeth. "Maa Samit, I am pleased to meet you."

Samit grasped the soft, warm hand and shook it twice before letting go. He returned Daken's tight smile with one of his own.

"Is that a ship?" he asked the thin man.

"Yes. We can navigate between planets, solar systems, galaxies, and even floating raft cities or islands. Please, allow me to introduce my department heads."

The dark-haired woman, Numah, held the position of executive officer, a term the Concordians had heard only from the sacred texts. Rickan, the slight blonde man with the ready smile, became the science officer. Dark-skinned, red-eyed Jaime was engineering officer. His sharp teeth reminded Samit of an evilfish.

The small blonde woman asked Captain Daken something in a different language before he had a chance to introduce her. He nodded assent with a quick smile. Samit suspected that this woman was a favorite.

"I am Tama Linbladden," she said in a clear voice. "I am the social scientist in charge of re-contact with lost peoples. We are very happy to find you." She smiled and stared at Samit.

He felt unclean and backward in front of these people, at a perfect loss for words. Her frank stare and tight clothing caused his groin to twitch.

"Obviously your crafts and culture are well advanced compared to ours," Capin Jeen said smoothly, "but allow us to offer such hospitality as we can."

Samit's eyebrows went up for a moment and he glanced at his Capin in wonder and admiration. Her blood was beginning to tell.

"May our crew members mingle with your people?" Captain Daken asked. "They will be very respectful, I assure you."

"Of course!" Capin Jeen said instantly. "But I warn you, our people see strangers but once every eighteen-link."

"What's a link?" Tama asked instantly.

"A set is seven days," Samit answered, "a link is four sets, there are eighteen links in a full drift."

The woman thought for a moment. "That's a 504 day year, a bit over sixteen of our months. How do you measure smaller amounts of time?"

"Maa Samit," Captain Daken broke in, "perhaps you could answer my officer's insatiable questions while we make our way to your place of authority?"

Samit glanced at Capin Jeen.

"Excellent idea," she said. "Let us depart for the Bridge Deck." She and the Captain turned and walked toward the center of Concordia.

"Bridge deck?" Tama said. "I think I understand now! 'Capin' is a form of 'captain,' and 'maa' must have evolved from em-ae-ae, which in old Federation ships stood for master-at-arms!" She became very excited.

Samit wondered if she realized she was treading on sacred wood, spouting off closed scripture like that.

"How long have you been on...what do you call this planet?"

Samit laughed despite himself. He turned to the stern-faced Numah walking on the other side of him. "Is she always this quick with questions?"

"Except when she's asleep," the woman said dryly.

"Wandered cultures fascinate me," Tama said softly. "I hope you don't think ill of me."

"Uh, no, I don't," Samit said. He glanced behind him. Many people rode down the tongue-ramp from the ship. His people began to creep out onto ten-ring, curiosity overcoming fear.

He turned back to Tama. "According to the Holy Log, our world is called Aquaria. We measure small time by spans, the length of time it takes the stars overhead to traverse the span of a man's hand."

"Fascinating!" she said gaily.

"May I ask you a question?"

"Of course."

"Is your ship safe from evilfish?"

"I'm not sure what you mean. What's an evilfish?"

"A large creature that lives in the water. They can swallow a man whole."

"How could they harm our ship?"

"Star metal drives them into a frenzy. They batter the craft apart with their bodies."

A small frown announced her doubt.

"And one of these things destroyed the ship that brought your ancestors here?"

"So the Holy Log tells us," he replied tersely.

"What was the name of your ancestor's ship?"

"Jihad."

"Jihad. Give me a moment. Library? History for seed ship named *Jihad*, old Federation registry, please." She spoke into the air beside her.

"Who are you talking to?" Samit asked.

"Comm link," she said brightly, holding up her soft gray collar to expose a small silver oval. "It's also recording everything I say or hear."

"Recording? It is capturing my words?"

"Why, yes. What's wrong with that?" Her large blue eyes were child-like. Suddenly her nose wrinkled. "Oh! What's that strange smell?"

"We're coming to the dirt rings. That's where night soil is collected and used to grow foodstuffs. We try to waste nothing on Concordia."

"In *Limon* we have all of that done automatically, through tubes and pipes and stuff. We never have to see or smell it," she said apologetically.

"I would like to see your ship sometime."

"Oh, you will! Anyone who wishes can leave with us."

A cold heaviness settled in his chest. This would bring trouble. He

didn't know how, but he knew it was coming.

Tama cocked her head to her comm unit side.

"Oh!" she said.

"What?"

"The Jihad, it was lost quite far out in uncharted space. Its final sub-space transmission said it was being attacked and needed assistance. Just a moment." She bent her head toward her collar again.

Samit noticed how soft her neck looked. Her words edged into his mind.

"So they did send a distress call," he said softly. "Why didn't anyone come to help?"

"The library says," she said, straightening up again, "that no attempt was made to find the *Jihad* before the Great Chaos began. It was too many parsecs away from any other ship."

"Parsec?"

"A measure of distance in space."

"You didn't answer my question about your ship."

"Oh, I don't think we have too much to worry about. These, ah, evil-fish can be killed can't they?"

"Yes, but not easily."

"Your raft city seems to have lasted a long time."

"They don't attack ironwood, it's poison to them. We use ironwood spears to kill them."

"Well," she smiled warmly, "at this point we'll just assume our weaponry can subdue a few fish."

Samit pulled back into himself. The woman didn't believe him, didn't take his concern seriously. Being ignored ill-suited him.

Captain Daken spoke intently to Capin Jeen. Samit wasn't sure he liked that either.

Too much was happening too quickly.

Cassock Wye and his four chaplains stood outside East Chapel when the party approached. No protocol existed for something like this, no dogmatic cant waited to be followed to the letter. Samit wondered what the old gasbag would do.

Capin Jeen and Captain Daken slowed and then stopped in front of him, the rest of the party crowded around.

"Welcome in the name of the Ship!" Wye shouted, startling them all. He held up the Holy Sigill with trembling hands. "Behold the Holy Image!"

"Why that's a compass rose!" Tama said softly. "Why is it holy?"

"Don't ask right now," Samit urged quietly. He felt unsettled, almost nervous.

"From where do you come?" Cassock Wye shouted. "And why?"

Jeen and the starship captain conferred quietly. Captain Daken stepped out, hand extended.

"I am Captain Hans Daken of the Tregellion Alliance. My ship is the *Limon* and we have come a great distance to welcome you back into the family of humankind. I would shake your hand in friendship."

The Cassock's heavy jowls quivered and his eyes rolled wildly. Samit thought he looked like a frightened goat tied for slaughter. "Are you of the Ship promised by scripture?" he shrilled.

Daken continued holding his hand out. "I don't know, I would have to see the scripture to answer that." His hand began to sag, then dropped to his side.

Cassock Wye stared at Capin Jeen for a moment, then at Samit. "I'm not sure it's meet that we show strangers our holy writ."

"We'll wait on that for now," Capin Jeen said smoothly. "Would you like to accompany us to the Bridge Deck?"

"M-maybe later, my Capin." He disappeared into the chapel amidst a swirl of spice-scented purple robes. The chaplains followed, glancing back in their retreat.

"Why is he so frightened?" Tama asked gently.

"All his life he has foretold the coming of the Ship, resurrection of the raft people, an accounting of sins and transgressions. Now you are here with a ship and you don't much look like gods, even to him. You've just gutted his world and he doesn't know

whether to shit or swim for shore." Samit surprised himself with his words. He realized he could be speaking of himself as well as Wye.

"So you know there are land forms on this planet?" Tama said.

"Of course we do. Every eighteen links the drift takes us there. The raft cities started as extensions of the land. Food grew scarce and our ancestors were forced to cast loose to find more sea creatures after the drift proved to be reliable."

"When was that?"

"When my grandfather was a young man. The First Crew families are the rulers. The Landborn make star metal and trade it and ironwood in exchange for food from the sea. We know the sea well. It's a good life for most." Samit thought his words rang hollow.

"Fascinating!" Tama said breathlessly.

They came to the Bridge Deck, surrounded by staring, quiet Concordians. Without fanfare the party pushed through the crowd and into the official building.

"What happened then?" Rani asked.

Samit rubbed scratchy eyes and yawned. "Mostly talk. Agreements to exchange information, that sort of stuff. I need to get some sleep, Rani. Let me sleep for four spans and I'll answer all your questions, agreed?"

"But I heard things! I need to know if they're true," she said with an edge in her voice.

Water lapped soothingly under the house. His eyes closed of their own volition. "What do you need to know?" he said drowsily.

"If we really can leave with them."

His eyes popped open. They burned with the effort of looking at her. Her jaw clamped down squarely, showing her stubbornness.

"What difference does it make?" he asked cautiously. "We live here."

"I'm not thinking about us, I'm thinking about Gordo." Rani hesitated for a moment and then words burst out like a spring shower. "He could be anything! He could travel to

other worlds. He could be a starship captain instead of spending his life floating around on a smelly raft. This is *important*, Samit!”

Night cloaked the raft city. The day had been long, and he had had very little sleep. He silently cursed his exhaustion.

“I’m really too tired to talk about it now. They’re not leaving in the next two days or anything. There’s plenty of time to talk about it.” He let his face fall into the pillow’s oblivion.

A shriek woke him. He jerked to a sitting position and his hands shot out in the dim light, seeking his wife. Rani wasn’t there. Neither was Gordo.

Shouts spurred him into action. He pulled on his undershirt of soft-cloth and then the fishleather jerkin. For long moments his rough cloth trousers evaded him, but in less time than it seemed he cinched the ties and reached for his staff. After a second thought, he left the staff and darted outside.

Dawn leaked over East Chapel. The brightest stars were losing the fight for visual supremacy of the sky. Small Moon gleamed overhead, Large Moon had set.

A great mob of people lurched past his house, singing and yelling. Torches swung about with abandon.

Samit grabbed one of the revelers and spun him against the house. The man smacked into the wall with such force that his wind was lost and he sagged to a sitting position. Samit grasped a handful of hair and pulled, forcing the man to look up. He recognized Tare, a leather worker from ten-ring.

“What is going on here?” he asked with a growl.

“Nuh-nuh-nothing!” Tare said gasping, trying to refill his lungs. “We’re...just having a-a good time.”

“You stink of spirits. Where’d you get the drink?”

“The ship people have all we can hold, Maa Samit. They say that the rules are finished, we can do as we please.” A slight grin followed his outrageous statement.

“While you walk the streets of Concordia you follow the rules of Capin and Cassock!” Samit shouted into Tare’s face. “And the Maa will make sure you do! He slammed the man’s head against the wall again.

Tare slumped, unconscious. Samit stared after the carousing mob. His stomach rumbled sourly in anguished indecision. Was Rani with them? No, she wouldn’t take a small boy into a mess like that. But where were they?

He ran after the mob. Within a few moments he caught up with the stragglers. Slowing to a fast walk, he pushed through them, searching faces for first his wife, and secondly for anyone he knew well enough to question. Many in the crowd were drunk on something with an odor he couldn’t identify. Some were drunk on excitement.

Hundreds of conversations jumbled in the air.

“I still don’t think they’re gods! Gods don’t get drunk,” said a drunken, pop-eyed man who reminded Samit of a spinefish.

“How do you know?” his companion countered. “If I were a god, I’d be drunk all the time.”

Samit hurried past them and found himself in the midst of a more serious argument. A tall, thin man harangued two other men and a woman.

“You would be stupid to stay here! These star-farers said they would train anybody in anything if they had enough aptitude. So why stay?”

“But, Kerf! What does that mean?” asked one of the men.

“Jema’s right!” said the other. “Maybe there isn’t enough of this ‘aptitude’ to go around! I don’t want to die a slave inside some ball of star metal.”

“Aptitude means brains, intelligence. Everybody has aptitude to some measure!” Kerf said with a snarl.

“Yes, that’s true,” the woman said calmly. “But if my aptitude is just for bearing children or serving my husband, I think I’d rather do it here where I can rely on the Drift.

The Drift brings us all we want or need.”

Samit grinned at her words and pushed ahead, searching faces. He noticed a stocky man who stood out in the crowd because he wasn’t drunk or excited. He was observing all he could and stepped out of the way of the more active.

Samit peered at him and recognized Avik, the guardsman who found the sacrilegious chicken only a day ago.

By the drift! So much has happened since then.

“Avik, what’s happening?” Samit asked when he drew near the man. “How did all of this start?”

“Maa Samit! Pardon me for not seeing you, but you don’t have your staff....”

“I thought I could discover more without it.”

“Yes, very wise. They have all lost their wits. Some of the star people asked for spirits. When they were told that only the Cassock could dispense spirits, they laughed and went back to their ship.

“Soon they returned with many flasks and everybody began drinking. They don’t know what is going to happen next. They are afraid and excited at the same time. What is going to happen next?”

Samit felt like a strong north wind was blowing through his mind and soul, sending thoughts and emotions tumbling like so much dry seaweed. He stared at Avik’s earnest face, who in turn eyed the Maa in supplication. He suddenly hated the guardsman, wished he would go away and leave him alone instead of standing there asking impossible questions.

“I, I don’t know,” Samit finally said, detesting the words. “There is much that the Capin, Cassock, and I have to talk about. And of course we must talk further with the strangers....”

“With all due respect,” Avik waved his hand at the mass of people around them, “you’d best talk quickly, and soon.”

“Have you seen my wife and son?” First things first, he thought.

"Yes. They went aboard the ...the Ship."

"What! Why?"

"I think your son was hurt—"

Samit ran, pushing through the crowd, cursing and striking at those who got in his way. Gordo hurt. Rani and Gordo aboard the Ship. Would that huge, metal monster let them leave? Did Rani *want* to leave? Too fast, this was all happening too fast.

Two figures stood where the ramp touched the deck. Samit slowed and caught his breath, considered what should be done next. They looked as soft as their tight-fitting clothes, these star-men. Their hands lacked the horny callus left by honest toil and their dependence on magic seemed total.

He swallowed his apprehension and steadied his step as he closed on the pair.

"Here comes another one," one of the men said.

"At least this one's not on his knees." They both laughed. Samit had heard sentries laugh like that before.

"Good morrow," he said calmly, stopping in front of the men.

"In the name of the Lords of Tregella, we greet you," the taller of the two said formally.

"I believe my wife and son are aboard your ship."

"There are very few of your people aboard, sir," the shorter man said dubiously. "What are their names?"

"Rani, and Gordo. Of the Waterborn clan."

The tall man spoke into his collar communicator. Samit could tell when the answer came: both men suddenly held a distant gaze that focused on nothing.

"Ah! You must be the Maa. Samit, yes?" the short man was all smiles and welcoming.

"Yes. I am Samit."

"Your wife and son are aboard. Your son broke an arm an hour or two ago and the captain directed the ship's doctor to repair it. They're in sick bay; would you like to visit them?"

Samit stared up at the dark ship with its darker mouth licking his raft. He suppressed a shudder and nodded.

"Yes. I want to see them."

"Just step on the ramp. Someone will meet you at the hatch and show you the way."

Samit nodded and stepped onto the ramp as if he'd been doing it all his life. The ramp surface began to move smoothly, carrying him rapidly toward the circular maw of the ship. His heart lurched in his chest and he successfully fought the urge to jump over the edge and into the water.

His wife and son were in there. He had to get them out. As he neared the portal he suddenly wondered why he felt so negative about the ship. Rani thought it offered a better life.

I've spent most of my life looking past the surface, the obvious, to find the real reasons behind events, he thought. It's hard to stop now. He stepped off the top of the ramp through a curtain of moving air.

Just from the smell, he knew he was inside the ship. The odor of metal permeated the interior. The light grew brighter by the second.

"Maa Samit of the Waterborn, welcome to the *Limon*."

He turned and looked into the face of Executive Officer Numah. Her long dark hair was combed to a point that became a ridge, twisted around the top of her head and fluted back into her high collar. He wondered how it stayed in one place when she moved.

"Thank you, Numah. Pardon me but I don't know your rank."

"Commander. If you'll follow me, I'll take you to your family." She turned without waiting for an answer and began to stride down the narrowing passageway.

Samit hurried to keep up with her while looking at as much of the ship as he could. A wealth of pipes covered the ceiling. Those that worked metal at Haven had lost the art of making pipe; troughs were the best they could do.

"Where was this ship built?" he asked her back.

"It was assembled at a shipyard in orbit around Jancey, which is in

the Randolph system," she said over her shoulder.

He refused to ask where those places were; it didn't matter anyway. Her tone indicated that she took the people of this planet lightly.

"Where will your ship go next?"

"You'd have to ask the captain. I don't know."

They turned off the passageway and came to a doorway that led to nothing. There was no floor. Commander Numah stopped and turned to look at him.

"This is a drop shaft." Her fingers ran over a square of colored buttons. "I've set it for the medical deck. All we have to do is step in and it will *safely* lower us to where we want to go. Are you ready?"

"What will stop us?" he asked nervously.

"Something called an anti-inertia field. Trust me, it works." She stepped into the space and fell from sight.

Putting his hand on the door frame, he peered down. Blackness, nothingness. It was as if the ship had swallowed the commander.

He knew if he thought much more about it, he would never follow her. He stepped in and tensed his body. Once he had stepped on a rotten ice floe in the Northern Sea and his body had sunk slowly into it. Other than being alarming and very cold, it had been an almost pleasurable sensation.

He suddenly experienced the same sensation, except this wasn't cold, it was warm. Abruptly his feet touched a metal deck again, he bent to look, lost his balance and fell. Numah's boots glistened with a mirror-like shine that Samit would have liked to examine further.

"Are you hurt?" she asked in her hard voice.

He scrambled to his feet. "No. I am fine. That was very...interesting."

"Some primitive peoples lose control of their bladder the first time. I'm glad you didn't."

"Maybe I'm not as primitive as others," he said shortly.

A small smile tugged at the edge of her mouth. "Perhaps not."

The walls no longer offered the metallic gray he had grown used to. They now reflected a gleaming white that didn't look metallic. He experimentally tapped a finger against it.

"They're ceramic with a teflon glaze," Numah said. "They're easier to keep sterile than metal."

He peered at her. "Sterile?"

"Very clean." Her eyes swept over him before she turned away.

"Oh."

He followed her to a closed door. She put her hand on a shiny black plate on the wall and the door slid open silently. Numah stepped back and motioned for him to enter ahead of her.

Samit obligingly went through the door. The small room was bare save for a bench along one wall. The door slid shut as he turned around. He was alone.

"Hey!" he shouted.

A woman's flat voice came from nowhere. "This is a sterilization chamber. Please disrobe and put your clothing in this—" a piece of wall slid open. "—chamber for cleaning. While waiting for sterile clothing, please enter the bath, then step out when instructed. Personnel will not be allowed on the medical deck until they have finished this procedure. Thank you."

Samit stared around angrily but found nothing other than the hole in the wall. He shrugged out of his tunic and threw it into the hole, his trousers followed a moment later. The wall slid shut and another panel slid open, revealing a chamber with glowing walls.

Feeling vulnerable, Samit stepped through the opening. The floor began to move, carrying him through a narrow hallway. Suddenly steaming water jetted at him from all directions, feeling like needles as it struck.

He closed his eyes and stolidly endured. The water ceased and a fine spray misted over him, then a warm, strong wind dried him. He had never felt this clean before in his life.

The wall in front of him snicked open and he entered a different room. On a wall hook hung a suit of soft-cloth.



"Please wear the sterile suit provided," the hidden voice said. "Your cleaned clothing will be returned to you upon departure from the medical deck. Push the button when you are ready."

The short pants felt too snug at first, but rather than crushing his genitals as he feared, they seemed to contain and support them softly. The trousers and tunic were the softest garments he had ever worn.

The fastener eluded him for a few moments. He couldn't figure out how one side held onto the other, but finally he was satisfied that it wouldn't slip. The soft boots had the same sort of fastener on the sides to close the tops.

When he stood up again, he felt so good that he grinned for a moment. Then he remembered where he was and regained his serious mindset. He pushed the glowing button.

The door slid open to reveal Commander Numah talking to a small, dark, very pretty woman garbed in pale blue clothing just like Samit's.

"Maa Samit, this is Lieutenant Commander Sternad. She is the medical duty officer and will take you to your family." Numah turned on her heel and left the room.

Samit followed her with his eyes, then turned to the smiling woman at his side. "She doesn't like me, does she?"

"Commander Numah considers it her duty to dislike and distrust everyone she comes into contact with. She's like that with us, too. Please come with me, Maa Samit."

Her odor washed back over him as he followed her down a gleaming passageway. She smelled of warmth, mystery, and alien eroticism. Urges and desires buried for many drifts surged into his mind again.

Samit shook his head. He was here to see his family and, like some youth, he was thinking about going into rut! Still, it was difficult not to notice how Sternad's body moved under the blue softcloth.

She swung around and stared into his eyes. For a heart-seizing

moment he thought she could read his mind. Her pupils were very large. She smiled.

"They're right in here, Maa Samit." She pressed a palm to one of the black, shiny squares and the door opened noiselessly. He had trouble pulling his eyes from hers.

"Samit?" Rani said in wonder.

He wrenched his eyes from the alluring medical officer and looked into the room. Rani was standing by a bladder or tube in which Gordo lay unmoving. He hurried into the room and hugged her.

"What's wrong with our son?" he asked into her hair.

"Oh, Samit. It's all my fault," she said brokenly.

"His hands traveled up and lifted her tear-stained face. "What's your fault?"

"There was so much happening. You were asleep and wouldn't wake up. So I sat by the door to watch all the people...." She was crying freely now. "Gordo woke up from all the noise and asked me what was doing. So I said 'let's go see,' and we went."

"Went where?" he asked.

"To where the crowds were talking, and singing, and drinking. They were all very excited. The Ship people were telling stories about other worlds and how we could all go to those places and lead exciting lives."

"How did Gordo get hurt?" he asked again.

"Someone shouted that it was all a trick. That all who went with the Ship people would be made slaves. And a huge fight just—just was *there!* I grabbed Gordo and tried to run but the people around us began to hit and kick." Her voice trailed off.

"Yes?" he prompted.

"This man, a big man, got hit in the side of the head and he fell on Gordo. I—I heard the bone in his arm break, and Gordo screamed. I pulled the man off Gordo, he wasn't even heavy it seemed. The bone of Gordo's arm was sticking out through the skin and blood was everywhere." She shuddered and cried harder.

"How did you get *here?*"

"That woman from the Ship, Tama. She was just suddenly there. She said, 'let me help,' and spoke into the air and soon there were others there who put Gordo on a thing that floated. His pain went away and he slept. They brought him here and put him in this chamber." She pointed. "It heals him quickly."

"How quickly?"

"By morning, they said."

"Do you still wish Gordo to go with them?"

"That's not what I said." Her tears stopped and she caught Samit's eyes with hers. "I said we must think about the opportunities he would have with the Ship people."

"Last night, when the fight started, who yelled the thing about being slaves?"

"I, I don't know. Everyone's voice was shrill and high, they were all excited, it was difficult to tell who said what."

"I need to find out," he said shortly. "When Gordo is well, will you leave the ship?"

"If that is what you wish, my husband."

"I wish it." He pulled her to him and held her warm, familiar body. "There is something unspoken happening," he said softly in her ear. "Before we make decisions about Gordo's future, we must understand all of it."

"I agree," she whispered.

He stepped back. "I must see to my duties. I'll look for you both tonight at home."

"Yes, Samit."

He walked over to the door and put his hand on the black plate. It slid open to reveal the short, dark shape of Sternad.

"You wish to leave now, Maa Samit?"

"Yes," he said stepping through the door. She didn't back up as the distance between them closed. The door slid shut behind him.

She stared up at him, eyes wide and alive with interest. "Would you like a tour of the *Limon* on your way out?"

Samit was suddenly aware of her again. He was also aware that he was

strongly erect and the softcloth didn't hide his condition.

"I—perhaps I should get back to my people." His mind swirled with lust and soft-focused fantasies.

She arched her back as she looked up at him. The nipples on her breasts showed plainly through the thin fabric. He felt he would burst if he didn't do something quickly. For a moment he tried to concentrate on Rani, but lust fogged his mind.

"Show me what you will," he said thickly, tired of fighting the demands of his body.

She reached out and ran a hand over the thin cloth that covered his engorged penis. "Follow me," she commanded softly.

Quickly they moved through corridors. At some point the walls changed back to gray metal, then to soft shades of blue and green. She stopped at a doorway and pressed her palm to the ubiquitous black panel. The door sighed open and they darted through.

The room measured less than half the size of his house. A large bed took up one corner. A desk with objects scattered in front of a glowing screen dominated the rest of the room. His attention focused on the woman.

Her tunic fell to the floor, revealing a supple body and large breasts for so small a woman, the nipples still fully erect. Below the smooth mound of her belly, dark, wiry pubic hair thrust out at him. She closed the distance between them.

"Let me help you." She pulled his clothing off easily, pushed her body against his, and rubbed her nose across his hairy chest. "My barbarian," she murmured.

Then they were on the soft bed, smashing their bodies together in mutual frenzy, joined most amazingly. Once she pushed him away for a moment, gasped, "Wait, don't rush so!" Then she came to him again, more slowly, and their passion again spiraled back to the peak where this time they didn't stop.

Samit felt the molten rush through his loins and she pulled him

to her as tightly as she could and screamed in abandon, "Oh, Janis!"

His ejaculation went on forever, the sensation of release pushing him to the edge of insanity before it ceased. He fell on her sweaty body, thoroughly spent. She laughed deep in her throat.

"Oh, you were as good as I knew you would be, my barbarian. Would you like to do that again?"

"I think that would probably kill me," he said. "I haven't been with another woman since I took a wife. But there seemed to be a force pulling me to you..."

She laughed again. "Do you dislike what we did? Are you angry?"

"I, I feel bewildered. I don't know why I came with you."

"I did it to you," she whispered. "Your body reacted to my pheromonic essence. I can increase it when I wish."

"I don't understand."

"It's ancient, goes back to the dawn of time when our species lived like animals. One of the differences between male and female is smell, sexual smell. We all still have a little of it. But I had mine altered so I can control it at will. When I saw you, I wanted you. So I increased it."

"You wanted me? Why?"

"You have a vitality that men on this ship don't possess. Your hands are rough, your attitude is no-nonsense, and you have physical strength from working with your body as well as your mind."

Samit felt a dull wonder that she had been inflamed this way about him. He also felt used—and violated. Anger stirred in his clearing brain. "Why did you not ask me if I wanted to...?"

"It's more enjoyable this way," she said with a smoldering look. The tip of her tongue slid slowly across her bottom lip.

Despite himself he felt desire building in the bottom of his belly again. She reached for him. He focused on his anger, rolled off the bed and quickly began to dress.

He stood with his back to her. "How do I get my own clothes back?" he asked over his shoulder.

He pulled on the boots and fastened the tops.

"What do you want with that smelly fish skin? What you have on there will last twice as long and be three times as comfortable." Her voice drifted lazy and indolent.

He turned and looked at her. The slow rise and fall of the full breasts pulled at him. Her moist pubis called for his manhood. "I would like to get my clothing. How do I do that?"

"Ask for it at the afterbrow."

"Afterbrow?"

"Where you entered the ship. They'll have it for you."

"How do I get back there?"

"Ask the ship, it'll show you." She rolled over on her side and went to sleep.

Samit carefully flattened his hand on the black panel. The door slid into the wall. He stepped out and looked around, there was nobody in sight. The door closed behind him.

Feeling foolish, he spoke into the passageway. "How do I get to the afterbrow?"

"Follow the deck arrows." The curiously flat female voice again—bland as day-old weedcake—seemed to be in his head, equidistant between his ears.

He looked down at his feet. A yellow arrow glowed beneath the surface of the deck. He took a step in the direction indicated and the arrow moved smoothly, one pace ahead of him.

This ship brimmed with magic. He followed the silent arrow through the maze of corridors, and passed crew members without comment, his mind awash with conflicting emotions. The doctor's blithe seduction told him much about these people.

If they would use him so casually, what would they do to those in meaner positions on Concordia? Perhaps she was an aberration, or ill. Beneath his growing distrust of the ship people lay his disgust at his own actions.

More than ever he wanted Rani and Gordo off this perplexing craft. But could he explain why? How would he feel if Rani had been trapped by the smell of a handsome male?

"I wouldn't believe her," he muttered to himself.

"Wouldn't believe who, Maa Samit?"

He glanced up sharply to find Tama walking beside him.

"How long have you been with me?" he asked curtly.

"Just a brief span. I didn't mean to intrude. Would you rather walk alone?"

The hurt in her eyes and face was so guileless that he felt like a bully. "I apologize for speaking to you harshly. I am angry at another and I struck at you."

"Why are you angry?" she asked instantly. "I mean, I'd like to help you if I could."

"You have asked me much about life on the raft. Now I want you to tell me about life on your ship, on your worlds, and what the people are like."

"Oh, my. That's a great deal of information. Perhaps you should have a session with the library."

"Is the library a ship's officer like you are?"

"No." She chuckled. "It's a collection of information. A very large collection that can answer every question you or anyone else could ask about us and our worlds."

"How do I gather this information? Would it take me a long time?"

"If you accessed everything it would take you many drifts to read it. But you can ask questions about specific subjects, or read overviews of just one or two planets."

He frowned. This was getting far too complicated. His eyes caught hers and held them.

"Maybe you could just answer some questions for me?"

"Anything you want to know!"

"Is it your way to use one's body without really asking?"

"What? How do you mean?" She glanced around them quickly, color high in her cheeks.

Sprangly, he told her of his encounter with Sternad. "Sometimes in Concordia a man ends up with a woman other than his wife, but at least both have agreed to the coupling. I, I feel wronged, even though I participated vigorously."

"I apologize, Maa Samit. Lieutenant Commander Sternad not only violated your person, but she has also committed a crime according to our laws. If you file an official complaint with the captain, she will be punished severely."

"What she did is not normal for your kind?"

"Not *my* kind, I assure you," she said with some heat. Her face softened again. "You see, there are people from many different worlds on this ship. People from the same world can be very different. The *Limon* has incredible diversity among its crew."

"So everyone on this ship is different? Some have tabus that others break?"

"I'm afraid so."

"Do you think I'm a barbarian, or a primitive?"

"What? Barbarian! Primitive! Of course not. You are the product of a metal-and-technology-poor culture. What you and your people have done here is admirable and in harmony with your environment. Your beliefs are clearly traceable back to the ancient Judaic-Christos ethic and the shipboard discipline of pre-chaos times."

He watched her as she spoke. Condescension and bright-eyed hunger didn't cloud her face as they had Sternad's. All he could see was honesty, admiration, and an urgency to explain. He decided he liked this small, quick woman.

"You don't think I'm a primitive barbarian then?"

She grinned suddenly. "No. Absolutely not. But I think there are barbarians on this ship whom you should avoid."

He returned her grin, but his voice was somber. "What would they do with any of my people who decided to go with the ship?"

Her grin faltered and then vanished. "That depends."

"On what?"

"Aptitude. Age. Basic intelligence. There are a lot of variables." Her eyes didn't seem as clear as they had a moment ago.

"If I decided to go, what could I look forward to?"

"There's the afterbrow. Let's go outside to finish this discussion." She hurried ahead of him.

"As you wish."

Two crewmen on watch nodded as Tama and Samit passed. He stopped and turned to the men.

"I would like my clothing."

One of them pulled a package from a low shelf, handed it to him.

"There you are, Maa Samit."

He thanked the man and silently rode down the long ramp behind Tama. They stepped out of the shadow of the ship and the heat of the morning sun surprised his back.

A guardswoman in Capin's livery darted up. "Good morrow, Maa Samit." She saluted. "My pardon, but the Capin wishes to see you as soon as possible."

After his visit to the ship, Concordia seemed quaint and simple. With some difficulty he wrenched his mind back to the reality of his floating world.

"Lead. We will follow."

The guardswoman looked askance at Tama, but offered no reply. She executed a precise turn on the balls of her feet and marched off toward the Bridge.

"Would you accompany me, Tama? I would like to hear your answers to my questions."

"You may not like what you hear," she said flatly. "But I will answer them just the same."

They kept pace three meters behind the guardswoman. Samit listened while Tama spoke in a low, rapid voice. Her manner underwent a change—the bright, interested, wide-eyed innocent transformed to a world-weary, bitter woman.

"Where to start? If you were to go with the *Limon* they would probably put you in the security section, as much to watch you as well as making use of your skills. If a returnee has high scores on the aptitude tests—"

"Wait. What is a returnee? What is aptitude? These words are new to me."

"A returnee is anyone who is brought into our culture. The rationale being that once they were part of our culture but were isolated by the Great Chaos."

He listened absently as she explained aptitude. The drunk man had been correct. Her answers generated new questions.

"What was this 'Great Chaos' you all speak of?"

"It was a war that spanned a century, and five star systems. It began over a trade squabble between two subject worlds and expanded to their patron worlds. By the time the fighting stopped, three planets had been destroyed and technology declined to the point where it was considered heresy by a majority of the surviving cultures."

"How long ago did this happen?"

"Roughly three hundred years. It's taken the Tregellion Alliance a hundred years after rediscovering space flight to get this far, to find Aquaria, that is. But we think this was one of the last planets to be seeded before everything came apart."

Samit waited for her to continue as they followed the swiftly moving guardswoman. Her silence lengthened.

"What would they do with someone who had little aptitude?"

"If the ship took them at all, they would probably end up as heavy labor on one of the other frontier worlds," she said flatly.

"Then why come here at all with your stories of other worlds and your devices that do all your work for you?"

"Brains, Maa Samit. Raw intelligence and quick, trainable minds. Every planet has a percentage of genius, and that's why we're here."

Since the arrival of the ship a weight had been building on his shoulders. Now it doubled in mass, bending his spirit almost to the breaking point. How could he prevent this thing from happening? The bright ones would go because they would realize how much more the Tregellion Alliance could give them than could Concordia, or even Haven.

"I told you that you wouldn't like my answers," Tama said quietly, her large eyes on his face.

Then they reached the Bridge Deck. The guardswoman turned and stopped them.

"Many pardons, Maa Samit." Her eyes flicked to Tama, then returned to his. "My orders are to bring you, alone, into the Capin's quarters." She looked back at Tama. "I ask your pardon, my lady."

Tama smiled quickly. "I'm glad that someone on this raft started using their brains." She turned and walked back the way they had come.

"Thank you, Tama," he called after her slumped shoulders. She didn't respond.

Samit hurried into the Capin's quarters.

"Maa Samit! Thank goodness, you've come back." Capin Jeen looked haggard. Her eyes hung bloodshot over purplish pouches, her hands shook like an old woman's and he noticed ragged nails.

"Of course I came back. Did you think I would leave with those people?"

"Your son is," she said simply.

"No! He's only on that ship until his arm heals."

"Not Gordo," she said tiredly. "Ansul. He is organizing a band of young people to join the ship. They wish to leave Concordia forever."

"Ansul?" He saw his son as a boy again. Bright, witty, completely self-assured and in control of those around him. Samit knew the boy would be a leader some day.

Perhaps if he had tried to bridge the gap between them this wouldn't be happening now. But ever since Semo's death Ansul had rebuked his father. One would almost think that Samit had been responsible for Semo's early death, rather than his brother.

Not good to think of this now, he decided. Perhaps he could talk to Ansul, explain how callous the ship people were to "returnees," and change his son's mind. He slowly became aware that Capin Jeen was speaking.

"...Tanu, Yuri, and even Darwayne are going with him. He even asked me if I would go." Her forlorn voice brought a lump to Samit's throat.

As children, Ansul and Jeen had been inseparable. Her father had been

cool to the relationship. When Jeen became Capin upon his death, Ansul proposed marriage.

Jeen asked him for more time. She suddenly needed to learn quickly what once she had a lifetime to absorb. Stung and unreasoning, Ansul turned his back on her and took another to wife. Jeen had been devastated.

"What about his wife? Is she going too?"

"No. Ansul said he was leaving her here, with the rest of the dullards." Jeen's voice was apologetic.

"How many?"

"Almost a hundred. He was boastful. He—" She began to sob. Great wracking moans burst from her and she would have fallen if Samit hadn't caught her and held her fast to him.

"It's all muh, mu, my fault!" she wailed. "If I had married him..."

"He'd go anyway," Samit said with a growl. "He's not one to share, never has been. He would only have hurt you like he's hurting, ah, his wife."

Samit never could remember the name of the tiny, dark woman who became his daughter-in-law. He preferred not to know the names of his son's victims. "Where are they now?" he asked finally.

"North Chapel."

"That figures," Samit said sourly. "That bird was probably his, too. Guess it's time I went and had a talk with these people."

"Be careful, Maa Samit. Ansul said there was no way to stop them."

"Stop him, he means. There might be a few who will listen to reason and at least weigh my words before they go."

"What will you say?" She dried her eyes and looked at him questioningly.

"I'm not sure yet," he said, not meeting her gaze, moving toward the door. "I'll think of something on the way."

"My pardon, Maa Samit, but I cannot let you enter." The young man set his face earnestly; the

pike in his hands looked sharp. Samit glanced over the guard's shoulder at the closed door of North Chapel.

"It's tabu to bear arms against the Maa, Tanu. You know that."

Tanu licked his lips and glanced nervously around. He looked over Samit's shoulder, not meeting his gaze.

"We, we're making our own rules now. We're leaving Concordia." He swallowed. "Ansul said no one was to enter who had not agreed to leave with us."

"Maybe I'm leaving with you. Nobody's asked me yet."

"You'd leave with us? I don't think, I mean, you're part of what we wish to leave!" Tanu blurted.

Before Samit could answer, the chapel door opened and Ansul eased out.

"Having some trouble, Tanu?"

Samit glanced at the guard's whitened knuckles, let his eyes travel the length of the pike, and finally looked into the face of his oldest child.

"The Maa says he wishes to come with us!"

Ansul's eyes didn't reflect the smirk on his lips as he stared at his father.

"No. He's only spreading night soil on you in hopes of growing something. Aren't you, Father?"

"As I pointed out to your *guard*, nobody asked me if I wanted to go or not."

"Even if you would leave with us, I don't want you to go. You're too much of this," he jerked his head to indicate the raft around them.

"You're right, I don't wish to leave. But I'd like to explain to you and your friends why I'll stay."

"We don't care to hear your words, Maa Samit. We know you're part of the established order. It's obvious why you wouldn't leave—they wouldn't let you be the captain's right-hand sealouse on the *Limon*."

Hate radiated from Ansul's core. There was no bridging this gap. His son was as lost to him as his dead brother.

"Oh, but they would. All I want is one span. I don't care if you

choose not to listen, in fact I would prefer it. But the others in there bear me no animosity. Ask them if they would hear my words. Or are you afraid they would follow me rather than you?"

The smirk snapped into a hard line. Ansul's jaw muscles bunched as he ground his teeth. Roughly he pushed Tanu aside.

"Let this old sea bird have his squawk. Then we can all bid him farewell as we leave this stinking wood pile for the stars!"

Samit pushed past the two men and entered North Chapel. The drone of many conversations ebbed away as the crowded room became aware of his presence. Nearly two hundred people stood and stared at him as he stepped up on a bench.

"They want you because you're smart, you're trainable," he said without preamble. Many smiled and nudged their neighbors, a light buzz of comments filled the room.

"But have they told you what they want you to learn? In what tasks they will train you? Or what happens if you just can't learn their lessons? Have you asked?"

The smiles disappeared, replaced by uneasy glances. Samit waited until the noise of shuffling feet stilled.

"I've been on the ship, the *Limon*. It is a wondrous thing, almost magic to my way of thinking. But there are those aboard her who have no regard for others. You would be merely a tool or a toy as far as they're concerned." He stared from one person to the next, touching as many as possible with his gaze.

"If you don't meet their needs mentally, they will use you physically. You could easily end up as heavy labor on some other world. You could become a slave no matter what your 'aptitude' is."

"But if we have the aptitude for a skill, would we become a citizen of the ship?" asked someone in the back of the crowd.

"I don't know. Just keep in mind that some slaves don't do heavy work."

"Wait!" Ansul shouted. "Your questions will be answered before

you go on the ship. There is someone coming—"

The door behind Samit swung open.

"Here he is now!" Ansul said happily.

Samit turned and found himself looking down at Captain Daken. Jaime and Tama flanked their captain.

"Maa Samit! I didn't expect to find you here," Daken said.

"Nor did I expect to find you trying to steal my people, Captain." He stepped down to face the man.

"Steal!" he said with a laugh. "I was invited here to talk to those who are interested in journeying to the stars with us. No one will come with us who does not wish to, I assure you of that."

"When does a person get tested for their aptitude?" Samit asked mildly. "Before or after the *Limon* leaves Aquaria?"

"Oh, it would be after. It isn't just one test, it's a series of tests that cover the entire spectrum of human knowledge."

"What happens to those who fail?"

"Nobody fails *everything*. It's impossible."

"What happens to those who score high?"

"Well," Daken grinned and clasped his hands in front of him. "There are so many opportunities for people in the technical science fields that I could spend a whole day listing them and then I'd probably leave something out."

"What happens to those who have poor aptitude in the technical science fields?"

"There's social science, maintenance, hydroponics, food services, logistics, law enforcement; why the list just goes on and on."

"You left out heavy laborer, mining, and those other fields where brawn is more important than brains. What sort of a future does that hold for my people?"

Daken's eyes narrowed, grew cold. "I don't know where you get your information, but we don't need people for those fields."

"You may not need them. But don't you *exchange* crew members to other worlds in return for whatever you do need? Crew members that are of no real use to you?"

Tama gazed at his face, a smile tugged at the edges of her mouth.

"Sometimes people elect to leave the ship and settle on one of the hundreds of inhabited planets in the alliance," Captain Daken said carefully.

"Can your crew members leave any time they wish and settle on any planet they wish?"

"Within reason. If we go to great lengths to train someone, we expect to receive the benefit of their skills for a certain period of time."

"On Concordia, we call that an enlistment. Ours last for the length of one drift. How long do yours last?"

"That depends on the skills imparted. Some enlistments last one ship's year, some last six."

"Is there a place on your ship for those who tire of their labors and sleep all day?"

"What an absurd question! Of course not. Everyone earns their keep on the *Limon*."

"What happens if they are injured or impaired and can no longer perform their tasks?"

"Depending on their length of service they are pensioned off on a planet."

"What planet?" someone in the back of the group asked. "Could we come back to Aquaria if we wished?"

"Of course, if there was a ship coming this far out. But this is the first visit by any ship in three hundred years. It may be years before we or any other ship visits here again."

"So this may be our only chance in our lifetimes to go to the stars, right?" Ansul asked quickly.

"That could easily be the case. We will be here for just three more days before we start back to the home worlds of the Alliance. You must decide by then."

Daken turned on his heel and left the chapel. Jaime followed immediately. Tama stood for a moment, staring at Samit, then she left.

Suddenly everyone in the room tried to speak at once. Samit glanced at Ansul, who returned a fierce grin.

"Looks like you lose, old man!"

"That remains to be seen," Samit said wearily. He pushed through the door into cleansing sunlight. Time to go get his wife and son.

"Maa Samit!"

He squinted into the afternoon sun for the source of the call. In the heavy shadows between two houses a hand motioned for him to approach.

"Come speak with me in the street," Samit called.

"There are too many eyes out there. By the Holy Sign, approach."

He glanced around. The street was empty even of children. Where was everybody? He moved slowly toward the shadows.

"Who wishes to speak to the Maa?" he called.

"Cassock Wye," the voice whispered loudly.

Even when a youngster he thought the official religion lacked feeling. The more years he gained, the more convinced he became that this faith served only those operating the Bridge Deck and Chapels. As the Maa, Samit kept his feelings to himself for the good of Concordia.

Wye hated him because the Maa wouldn't pay open obeisance to the church. Jeen's father had shared Samit's attitude, but never in public. Change died along with the late capin.

"I have come half way. You come out here to talk to me."

A pike point glinted in the shadows, reminding him that he stood unarmed. Cassock Wye trudged out from between the houses, stopping at the hot edge of the shadow.

"There is heresy afoot!" Wye said in his excited, high-pitched voice. In the shadows behind him stood two men. "These starfarers are false prophets who are breaking the tabus of Concordia."

"Which tabus are those? The ones you have about exposing the truth in a factual manner? You're just scared that nobody will ever take you

seriously again. If I were you I'd be scared too."

"Concordia needs the church! These people need the direction of steady minds and clear thinkers."

"There seems to be a new church growing from the people." Samit spat on the wood between them. "The only clear thoughts you ever had were about how to gain more power in this city. It's certain that we're going to lose some of our people to the ship, but maybe that will be a good thing. Most of those leaving are malcontents anyway."

"It is tabu to leave Concordia without dispensation from the *true* church! The Holy Log states—"

"The Holy Log is a copy of events and rules that have become completely outdated. Aquaria isn't the sum of creation any more—now we're just a small part of it. The sooner you accept that, the better off you'll be."

"What we need is a provocation. An event that will take the people's minds off the marvels and free spirits provided by the ship's crew. Something that will enrage them enough to smite the false prophets," Wye shrilled.

"What the drift are you talking about?"

The two men eased out and flanked Wye. Each held a pike at the ready.

"The disappearance of the Maa is what I'm talking about. The last time anyone saw him, he was on his way to retrieve his wife and child from the ship of false prophets."

"You wouldn't dare try that! If you fail you're a dead man."

"I think," Wye said smoothly, "...that you're the dead man."

Samit knew that the next words from the Cassock's mouth would order his death. There were two of them, both younger than him—he couldn't outrun them. That left one thing left to do.

He attacked them.

"Kill hi—" Wye screeched as Samit's shoulder caught the heavy man in the chest. The Cassock lurched to the side and collided with the man on his left. Both hit the deck

in a jumble of robes, limbs, and the unbending shaft of an ironwood pike.

The second man-at-arms quickly parried and slashed at Samit's head with the butt of his pike. Samit hesitated and then ducked under the arc of wood. He reached out, grabbed the left arm, pulled the man off balance and brought his knee up into the groin with as much force as he could.

The pike fell from nerveless hands and the man emitted a high shriek before crumpling to the deck. Wye scuttled into the shadows on all fours. The other pikeman sprang to his feet and charged Samit, pike point first.

Samit fainted to his right. The man changed direction to meet the threat. Then the Maa threw himself to the left, landing on the unattached weapon and grabbing it as he rolled over and onto his feet again.

The first man lay on the deck in a fetal position, face white and open mouth struggling to catch his wind. He made an excellent obstacle for the second man to negotiate while trying to attack.

Samit backed rapidly into the street and took up a defensive stance facing the sun. The pikeman only hesitated for a moment, then he charged. The weapon Samit held was tipped with star metal. Steel, Tama called it.

The steel was smooth, sharp, and polished to scintillating brilliance. Samit had already found the focal point of its reflection before the man began his screaming charge. He waited until the man took his third step before blinding him with reflected light.

He stepped to the side, easily evading the other's weapon, ran his point into the man's chest, and jerked it free. With a gurgle the man stumbled, fell and died. Blood gushed from beneath his body.

The first assassin was slowly pulling himself to his feet, a dagger in his hand. Samit smashed him in the side of the head with the butt of his pike, blood sprayed over the Maa, and the man fell face down, hands and legs twitching.

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He plunged into the shadows, seeking Wye. The copper scent of blood filled his nose. His pulse pounded in his ears and his senses tingled, sharply alive.

The odor of drying weed hung in the thick, hot air between the houses. Water lapped gently in the unseen channel between three-ring and four-ring. The smooth grain of the deck slid under his feet caressingly, pulling him forward.

The houses of Concordia were built close together, but it was tabu for them to touch. The law said a man must be able to walk completely around his house so that fire could not spread easily.

The resulting warren of small alleys splitting off from each other in the shadows could hold an army. Wye could be anywhere. But in order to escape he had to cross one of the cat-walks between the rings.

Samit knew the Cassock would try for the nearest cat-walk between three-ring and four-ring. Cautiously he edged in the direction of the crossing, pike at the ready; his eyes flicked back and forth seeking movement. Wye was right, the disappearance of an authority figure could incense the Concordians.

He grinned as he calculated how few would be upset by the disappearance of Cassock Wye. A faint sound brought him to a stop at the corner of a house. He listened, holding his mouth open wide so the blood pounding in his ears would be softer.

A garment rustled seductively around the corner. Samit glanced about quickly. Still nobody to be seen. A small wave slapped the edge of the ring, now visible a house-length away.

With a great bound Samit jumped out and away from the corner. A flash of light and the swish of a great-ax whispered past his ear. The head chonked deep into the deck.

Cassock Wye hunched over, hands tugging futilely on the long ax handle, his mouth hung open, eyes round and staring at Samit from his ashen face. "No," he croaked, "it's tabu to touch the Cassock."

Samit smiled and fiercely drove his pike deep into the man's body.

"Everybody breaks a tabu now and then," he grated through clenched teeth.

Cassock Wye fell silently on the deck and blood poured from his mouth. His feet drummed rapidly for a moment, throwing off one of his sandals. Then he shuddered and died.

Samit grabbed the bare foot and dragged the corpse down the alley to the water between the rings. He saw movement on the other ring and quickly squatted out of sight. After a few breaths he poked his head up. No movement.

Quickly he pulled the body over to the edge and eased it into the calm water. In a swirl of purple robes it sank, leaving a faint line of blood that dissipated quickly. Samit dropped the pike and watched it arrow into the depths after its victim. The great-ax followed.

Suddenly he was so weak that his legs wouldn't support him. He dropped heavily on the deck and with shaking hands pushed himself out of sight of the other ring. His heart beat slowed considerably. Exhaustion pulled at him.

The urge to sleep was nearly overpowering. Like Sternad's sex smell. Shaking his head angrily, he pushed himself up and stumbled back to dispose of the two dead men-at-arms.

"Cassock Wye is missing, Maa Samit."

"Missing? What do you mean?" He didn't stop staring at the *Limon*. For the three spans since his encounter with Wye, he had stood in the East Chapel guard tower watching the dull, black ramp that led to the ship.

"The heliograph from the Bridge says that Cassock Wye cannot be found anywhere on Concordia," the sergeant of guards said.

"Did they ask you to look for him here at East Chapel?"

"Men-at-arms in the Cassock's livery came through here about a span and a half ago. They didn't say what they wanted, but then they never do."

"And you think they were looking for him, huh? What do they expect us to do about it?"

"I guess that's up to you, sir." There was puzzlement in the man's tone. "Do you have any orders for us?"

"Just keep watching that ship. No more of our people are to go aboard without speaking to me first. Put two armed guards at the bottom of the ramp."

"As you wish, sir." Puzzlement had given away to surprise. "What about the crew of the ship, do we allow them off?"

Samit thought hard for a moment. "Yes. But I want them followed. Send a message to the Bridge that I want three more ten-ranks of guards sent over here, immediately."

"Yes, Maa Samit!"

"Sergeant, tell them to wear battle dress and bring pikes and cross-bows."

The sergeant acknowledged his orders and sped away to the signalman.

Now it begins, Samit thought. It has to end soon. The ramp surface began to move.

Not until he saw Rani and Gordo riding down to the deck did he realize he was holding his breath. He slid down the pole and hurried out of the tower compound. Wife and son saw him as they stepped off the ramp.

In a heartbeat they were both in his arms.

"Daddy, Daddy! They fixed my arm! Look!"

"Oh, Samit, I am so glad to be with you again," Rani murmured into his neck.

He held them close knowing that he was doing the right thing, knowing he must protect not only his family but all of his people. When his eyes traveled upward, the *Limon* dominated the East Chapel waterfront like a madman's dream.

"Come, we must not stay here."

Rani moved with him, but she voiced her confusion. "Why? Is there a problem that I don't know about?"

"Much has happened." As he ushered them along the road to home, he told Rani about the meeting

with Ansul and his followers, about Captain Daken's skirting of the truth, and that Cassock Wye had disappeared.

"Well *that* shouldn't bother you!" she said with a snort. "You've never liked that man."

"The point is," he said carefully, "is that the Cassock is part of Concordia. An important part to some people's way of thinking. And everyone knows he wouldn't go on that ship unless his life depended on it." How easily the fantasy slipped from his lips!

"Do you think they kidnapped him? Why would they do that?"

"Wye was preaching against the ship. He said it was full of false prophets. Maybe some of them took umbrage?"

"They wouldn't do that! They're here to help us, Samit. Why does everyone distrust them so?"

"Rani, they only want our best and brightest. If they don't master the skills the ship needs, they'll be put to work on some other planet as heavy laborers, or dung spreaders, or who knows? This is a raid. We have to accept that."

"Samit, I've always listened to you and I've always honored you. But you're looking at this thing sideways. There will be other ships visiting now that we're found again. Our people who go to the stars will be able to return for visits...."

"I'm not letting those people take *two* of my sons away," he said flatly.

"Two? Oh. Ansul has decided to go, hasn't he?"

Samit nodded. "They can have Ansul—he's as good as dead to me anyway. Gordo stays."

"But this might be his only chance to be something more than we are! How can we arbitrarily decide against it without talking about it?"

"If and when other ships visit Concordia, we'll consider sending our son to the stars. In the meantime the college at Haven can teach him about his own world. He has many drifts before he'll be ready to go anywhere. Why are you pushing him away?"

"I'm not! I just want what's best for him. Is that wrong?"

Samit looked down at his quiet son. "Gordo, do you want to go away with the ship, or stay here with us?"

His blue eyes filled with tears and he looked up at Rani. "Mommy, do I have to go away from you and Daddy?"

Samit knew he had won, even though unfairly. Rani dropped to her knees and hugged Gordo.

"Of course not! We were just talking about what would be best for your future. We wouldn't send you away if you didn't want to go."

"I don't want to go, Mommy," he said with a sniff.

"C'mon, let's go home," Samit said with a lump in his throat.

They moved on, each happy to be with the other two. In the distance, Samit noticed people emerging from East Chapel. A lot of people.

"Now what?" he said absently.

"What are all of those people doing in church?" Rani asked.

"I don't know—it's not even Bellday."

The stream of people moved toward them, obviously on their way toward the guard tower and the Limon.

"Rani, I want you and Gordo to avoid these people and go home by way of South Chapel, okay?"

She was about to question him; he could feel it growing in her. But she read his face first. "As you wish, Samit. Please be careful."

Jael moved close to setting in the west. Long shadows stretched toward East Chapel guard tower. Samit stood in the middle of the street, watching the crowd move toward him, and he wished he had kept one of the pikes, or had brought his staff with him.

When the crowd was ten paces away from him, he held up his hand and shouted, "My people! Where are you bound?"

A man wearing guardsman livery stepped forward. "Maa Samit, we are going to banish the star people from Concordia."

Samit blinked slowly. "What?"

"They must leave. We don't want them here any longer. They've brought strife and discord. They don't care about our way of life, or the seasons, or the beauty and meaning of the Way of the Drift...."

"That's the name of the new religion, isn't it?"

"Yes, Maa Samit. We feel at peace with the Way. Let the hypocrites and wind-catcher fanatics leave on their magic ship. We've never needed it or them."

"Well said, Warli." Samit said, glad he remembered the man's name. "But how would you expel these people from Concordia? Force of arms won't work; they have mighty weapons."

"We'll just tell them to leave, Maa Samit."

"I think I should go with you."

"Do you agree with our purpose, Maa Samit?"

He grinned at them. "I thought I was the only one who felt that way."

Relieved laughter came from many.

"Lead us, Maa Samit!" a voice called.

He turned toward the *Limon* and swept his arm forward.

As they marched back toward the East Chapel portion of ten-ring, Samit roughly counted the crowd. He concluded there were over five hundred. Pride swelled in his chest.

He entertained no doubts about the ship's ability to kill them all. But if he had to die over this thing, this was the way to go—at the front of his people. The ship loomed large on the darkening horizon and the hull gleamed black in the last rays of Jael.

Lights glowed inside the *Limon* and Samit could see figures moving quickly at the darkened afterbrow.

They're getting ready for us. This is going to be a slaughter of innocents.

He fiercely wished a way existed that he could become the sacrifice for his people, and expel the "visitors" from their planet. No, on second thought, sacrifice was what the Cassock had come up with and it

hadn't worked. New times called for new methods.

They poured over the cat-walk onto ten-ring and began to fan out across the waterfront and between the buildings. Guardsmen emerged from East Chapel tower and mingled with the civilians. A sergeant spotted Samit and ran over to him.

"Maa Samit, more people are on their way from West Chapel and South Chapel. In the last span a number of ship people have gone aboard that we didn't even know were in the city. None have come off since then."

"Well done, Sergeant. Place your men and women in the front rank. Help relay orders and direct the civilians."

"Yes, sir!" He instantly vanished in the milling crowd.

Samit raced up to the gangplank and turned to face his people. Large Moon began to bud over the horizon, reflecting light across the darkening waterfront. Torches appeared in the crowd, giving the scene an almost festive air.

He raised his hands over his head, palms outward. The crowd began to quiet down from front to back. In a few heartbeats the only sounds were those of the sea and the snap and crackle of the torches burning heavy fish oil.

"My friends, neighbors, relatives. We are here for a single and united purpose. We want this ship to leave us now. And to leave our people here."

In the distance he could see another throng, torches bobbing in the night, moving purposefully toward them. West Chapel or South Chapel, coming to help. He felt drunk on emotion.

Samit turned and looked up at the afterbrow. There were no lights in the portal, but he knew armed crew lurked there.

"I want to speak to Captain Daken," he shouted. "I want to avoid bloodshed."

"He's on his way!" a panicked voice shouted out of the dark. "Just make them stop; we'll do anything!"

"What's he talking about?" Samit murmured to himself.

A great light flashed under the water and a towering gout of steam erupted from the surface of the sea, showering the waterfront with hot water. The hundreds of people on ten-ring began shouting and talking as they moved back away from the raft edge.

Another flash of light turned the depths into a parody of day. As the second gout of steam blasted from the roiling surface, Captain Daken hurried down the gangplank.

"Maa Samit!" he thundered. "We'll do whatever you wish—just stop them!"

"My people have done nothing. I don't know where the great lights are coming from."

"The light is from our laser weapons. We're trying to drive off those creatures!"

"Creatures?"

"Great huge things with a mouth large enough to stand in, full of teeth that look like daggers!" he shouted. "They're attacking my ship, and they're damaging it!"

"Evilfish! I told Tama that they destroyed the *Jihad*, but she didn't believe me."

"Is there any way to kill them or drive them off?"

"What about your weapons? Aren't they working against them?"

"The water absorbs the strength of our fire. All we're doing is making steam! How is it that your raft hasn't been attacked?"

"They avoid ironwood. It's poisonous to them. But legend says they'll attack anything else."

The *Limon* moved slightly, causing the gangplank to quiver. Another flash lit up the water. This time Samit happened to be looking down and saw the great hull curving away into the depths—as well as the silhouetted forms of two evilfish.

"If we help fight them, you must leave immediately, and without any of our people," Samit said swiftly.

"Agreed. How do you kill them?"

"I need to talk to my people. How do you make your voice loud?"



"Up here, quick."

Samit ran up the metal ramp. When he reached the top, Daken was holding out a small square of metal.

"Just speak into it."

"People of Concordia!" he said loudly. His voice thundered across the throng, hushing it. Faces turned upward toward him.

"The ship will leave if we help drive off the evilfish. Get your gear, launch your boats. There are at least two of them down there, maybe more. Hurry!"

The crowd fragmented purposefully as men ran into the darkness to where boats rested.

"How do you kill them?" Daken asked again.

"With large crossbows mounted in wood boats. It takes four men to row each boat, and two to shoot the weapon. But we never have hunted them at night. Can you provide light?"

"We were afraid to turn on underwater lights for fear of attracting more of the monsters."

"But you can provide light when we need it?" Samit pressed.

"Yes. Anything you want."

"I want this visit wiped from your log. We wish to continue the drift and not worry about the stars. Come back in a hundred of your years and ask my grandchildren if they want the stars. But leave us alone."

"As you wish, Maa Samit. By the way, Lieutenant Commander Sternad has been reduced to lieutenant, junior grade, and fined half a year's pay for what she did to you."

Samit shrugged. The guilty memory of her wildly bucking body flashed through his mind before he concentrated on the launching of the boats.

Three already moved out to the edge of the *Limon*. Two more slid down the launch ramps, and splashed into the dark sea as Samit watched. The first three went out of sight around the far side of the ship.

"Is there any place I can stand so I can see all of my boats?" Samit asked quickly.

"Yes. Follow me!"

Once again Samit plunged into the bowels of the *Limon*, hard on the heels of Captain Daken. In a very short time they came to the drop tube. Daken's fingers ran over the colored numbers.

"You've used this before, right?"

"Yes," Samit said tersely.

"Good!" Daken vanished.

Samit waited a moment then stepped into the void also. Pretending he was sliding down a tower pole, he kept his back straight. This time he didn't stumble when he reached the bottom.

"This way." Daken was running again. Samit followed, mentally revising his opinion of the star farers. He felt winded while Daken ran effortlessly, as if stamina flowed as common as sea water.

"In here."

Great windows looked out into the dark depths. Something darker flowed past the transparent wall and hit the ship. Thunder boomed immediate and terrifying.

Somewhere a hissing started.

"The skin's punctured!" a voice shouted. "Seal the compartment."

"That makes three compartments breached," Daken said in a low voice. "If we turn on our lights you will be able to see the bottom of your boats, and the creatures."

"Make it happen!"

"Hull spots—full illumination," the captain said into his collar button.

The dark water lit with awesome brilliance. Samit had never witnessed a waking nightmare before. Evilfish swarmed everywhere.

The lights drove them into a frenzy and they began to hurl their long, armored bodies against the *Limon*, two and three at a time. An ironwood shaft knifed through the water and caught a huge evilfish in its middle eye. It jinked off into the stygian depths, trailing viscous liquid.

Then two of the creatures were hit at the same time and they battered through the middle of the swarm, injuring at least three more. One with a gaping maw easily four

paces across rushed toward the window where the humans sat transfixed.

"Look out—it could come through!" a crewman screamed.

Samit stumbled backward, tripped on an immovable object and began to fall. He saw the evilfish smash through the great window just before his arm struck another immovable and broke with a dull crack.

Samit nearly fainted in agony. The evilfish slid into the ship, snapping and writhing. Water roared through the hole in the great window.

"Kill that damn thing!" Daken screamed. "Then get out of here!"

A burst of sharp retorts pierced the water's bellow and the evilfish stiffened and went limp. Water rushed around Samit and buoyed him up. He didn't know where to go.

Daken half-swam, half-ran over to him.

"Follow me, Maa Samit. 'We've got to get out of here.'" He turned and began climbing a metal ladder attached to the wall.

Samit made it up two rungs before the weight on his broken left arm jerked a cry from him and he fell back into the swiftly rising water. With an effort he grabbed the ladder with his right hand.

"Samit?" Daken said, looking down. "What's wrong?"

"My arm is broken." His voice sounded strained and weak to him. "I fell when the evilfish..."

Daken dropped off the ladder and splashed next to Samit, going completely under before bobbing back up. Samit noticed that the water level was nearly to the ceiling. The ladder ended at an open hatch above which men waited with frightened eyes.

"We have to close the hatch! Hurry!"

"Get on the ladder," Daken gasped. "I'll push from behind."

Holding his left arm close to his side, Samit pulled himself up and, as soon as he felt Daken's shoulder dig into his butt, he grabbed the next rung to repeat the process. The remaining five rungs took all the

energy he had left. Quick hands reached down and hauled him up.

Someone grabbed his broken arm and this time he did faint.

“Maa Samit, I hate to waken you, but we must talk.” Samit’s eyes obediently opened and he peered into the face of Captain Daken. He glanced past the captain and realized he was once again on the medical deck. His arm felt warm but not painful.

“Usually we let a patient sleep off the regeneration process, but...”

“We must talk,” Samit finished.

“Let me help you up. We can go to my office.”

In moments they walked down the gleaming white corridor. Whatever they had given Samit to wake him up already had his head clear.

“I promised you that I would leave and not take any of your people with me, but that is proving difficult.”

“Why is that, Captain?”

“There are some who insist they have the right to leave with us.”

“My son, Ansul, is one of them, isn’t he?”

“Ansul is your son?”

“Only in flesh. How many others?”

“Five.”

“Do you wish to take them?”

“They seem an intelligent lot. I think they might do well with us.”

“Good. Take them with you.”

“Thank you. Would you like something to eat or drink? My cabin is close.”

“What happened to the evil-fish?” “The one that nearly got us was one of the last to die. They must have some intelligence because the rest fled. Our biologists and science people dissected it and think they can show you an easier way to kill the brutes.”

“How long was I unconscious?”

“About five hours—sorry, I don’t know how many spans that would be.”

“It doesn’t matter. You mentioned a drink?”

In the captain’s comfortable quarters they drank a toast to life;

Samit was about to propose a second when a chime sounded.

“What—?” Samit said.

“Someone wishes to enter,” Daken said softly. He raised his voice, “Come.” The door slid silently open to reveal Tama.

“The duty officer said you were here,” she said nervously. “I...I have something to ask of you both.”

“Would you like a drink, Tama?” Captain Daken asked.

“No, thank you, Captain. Hans.”

Samit caught the look that swiftly passed between them.

“You wish to stay on Concordia, don’t you?” Captain Daken said.

“If it’s all right with you and Maa Samit,” she said in a small voice.

“I have nothing to say about it,” Samit said quickly. “You’d have to ask Capin Jeen.”

“She has given me her permission—but only if you agree.”

Samit looked at the ship captain.

“Would you like to speak to Tama alone?”

“Yes,” he said, not taking his eyes off the woman. “But give her your answer first.”

“I don’t understand why you would want to give up all this,” he gestured, “for life on Concordia....”

“Oh, that’s easy,” she said fervently. “I am a social scientist and here is an established culture that has just gone through a force-fed age of enlightenment. Most cultures go from that into a flowering, a renaissance. I think yours will, too. And I very much want to be part of it. I want to record it.”

“I would like that, Tama Linbladden. Welcome to Concordia.” He stood and shook Captain Daken’s hand. “Thank you, sir. I am honored to have known you. Safe journey.”

Just as the door slid shut behind him, Samit heard Daken say, “Tama, how can you leave me?”

“The repairs are finished,” Tama said, looking up from her comm link, “and they’ve finished unloading a copy of the library.”

“Where will we get the power to operate the library machines?” Capin Jeen asked.

“Solar collectors,” Tama said with a smile. “They’ll also light your homes someday, as well as cook your food.”

“Maybe some day we’ll build our own starship,” Rani said lightly.

Samit frowned at her.

“Out of ironwood?”

“The ship is getting ready to take off!” someone shouted from the door.

Capin Jeen, Tama, and Samit all rose as one from his table and moved out into the light.

“Daddy! Look!” Gordo pointed at the *Limon*, floating about two thousand meters from Concordia. It still looked big.

“Darwayne, Tanu, Yuri, his wife Sharz, their son Brun, and Ansul,” Rani said into his ear. “I think we have profited from this encounter.”

“I agree. I hope he’s free of his hate.”

Limon shot into the sky with a great thunder and boiling of water. The ship accelerated up, impossibly going faster and faster. Quickly it dwindled, leaving only a trail of vapor that dissipated in the wind.

Light flashed from East Chapel tower.

“The red fish are running!”

The crowd scattered in all directions, leaving Samit with the three women and his son. He looked at Tama.

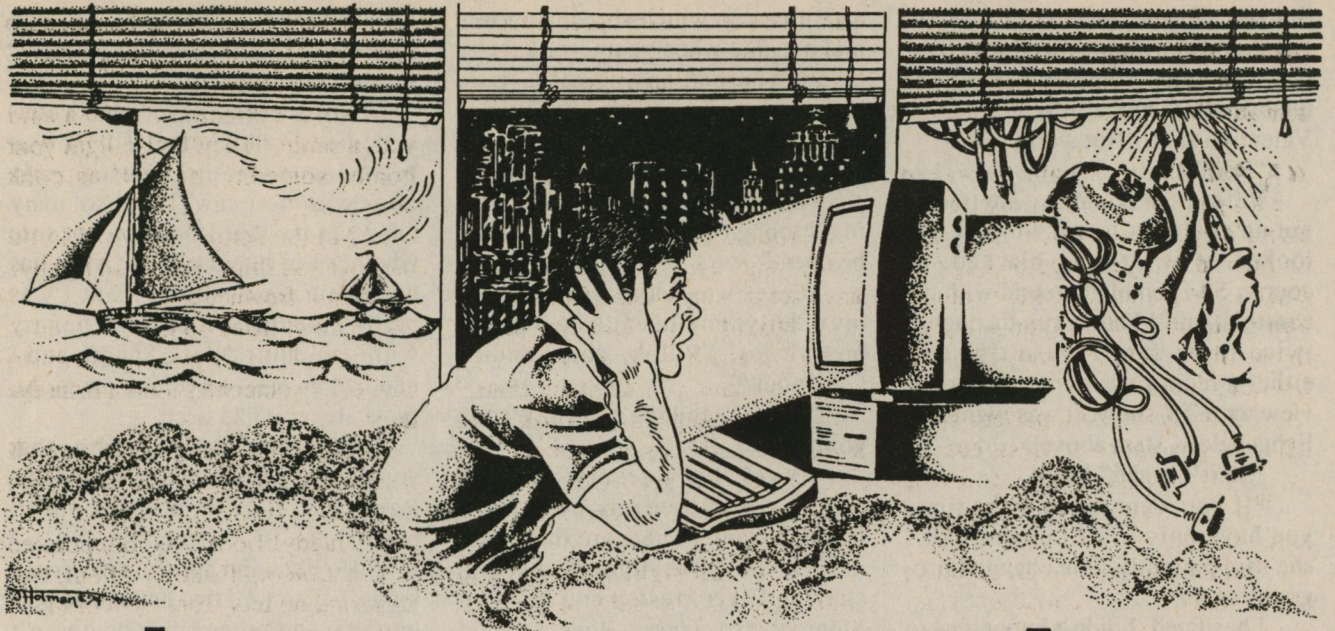
“When does the flowering begin?”

“It already has. I’ve begun writing the true chronicle of Concordia and her people. I may even stay at Haven for one drift to do research. But I would like to operate the library and have Concordia be my home from now on.”

“I hope you’ll be as happy here as my son will be on the *Limon*.”

A piercing, thin scream cut across their ears. All looked up to see the spacecraft high up at the edge of the sky, burning like a coal before disappearing out of the atmosphere.

“It is lyrical,” Samit said absently, putting an arm around Rani. ■



LIVING ON THE AIR

Rob Chilson

Illustrated by Judith Holman

Yosemite Sam answered the phone. I wasn't surprised

I didn't know what time it was. I figured I'd better call work, just in case. I couldn't remember the number, so I told the operator to get it. She looked at me—she was Mae West—and she said, "Right, sugah, I'll have it in a...jiffy."

On the wall behind me the Three Stooges recoiled from The Hulk busting out of a warehouse wall. The computer at work answered the phone; he was Yosemite Sam today—I'd been away from the office for quite a while.

"Whudaya want, varrrmint?" he growled, glaring at me.

"Ah, look, Sam, I'm really not up to this. Couldn't you be someone else?" I said. I didn't groan, but I sort of held my head. I didn't really feel bad, just not too good, not energetic, you know.

"Waaaaal, jest fer you.... Eh, what's up, Doc?"

I ignored the smacking and chomping, and said, "I can't make it in today, Bugs. I'm feeling under the weather. Can you do without me?"

"Eh, well, yeah, I suppose we can. It's not your day to come in anyway, Ralph. You're not due in till day after tomorrow."

"Day after tomorrow? What day's today?"

"Eh. Tuesday, Ralph. It's da thoid."

I couldn't think what month it would be the third of, but I didn't say so. "Right, look, Bugs, can you hold this call and use it ah, Thursday, ah, you know, the day I'm due at work?"

"Sure, Ralph, any little t'ing to accommodate an ol' friend. We won't expect ya in on Thoisdlay. Hope ya get well soon!"

"Thanks, Bugs, that's nice of you."

When I clicked off, Sandra changed programs on the wall video to a scene of impossibly blue ocean and sailing ships, and said, "I hope you feel better soon."

"What time is it?" I asked.

She didn't know. Sandra has rich brown hair and brown eyes and is very serious. She doesn't take life lightly enough. After all, it's basically a bowl of cherries, like it says in Philosophy 101.

"Well, I know that it's Tuesday da thoid, but I don't know what month, or what time of day."

"It's April."

"Then it must be spring."

That was a stupid thing to say; of course it was spring. She looked at me with exasperation, and that's okay, exasperation is natural, I'd been acting like a stupe. Well, I felt disconnected, like. I really didn't know what time it was, and neither

did she. But there was more than exasperation there, there was concern. Thunder from the wall, where unnoticed cannonballs flew. Rudolph Valentino said, "Hot work, this."

"Ralph...."

Before she could say anything I got up and went to the window and looked at it. It was blacked, of course. So I fumbled around with the controls, and I had to run through it twice to be sure I wasn't getting either a recording of some pleasant view, or a TV show. It was night out, lights below, stars above.

"So it's night," I said.

"If you want to know the time, you have only to call up and ask," she said patiently. She changed programs again.

I hesitated. I didn't know how to say it—or why I felt this way—but I didn't want to ask anyone, or any damn computer. I'd be taking their word for it, and how could I know it was the truth? That was stupid too, because I never learned my own address, I just said, "Take me home," and they always did. But at least, if I could trust the window, it was night.

"Look," I said, "the exact time doesn't matter. Let's go out. It's night, okay?" I hoped it was. "Let's have something to eat, catch a show, dance a little."

"Well, I'm not really in the mood...really, what time is it?"

Bela Lugosi was a dyspeptic J. Jonah Jameson, yelling at Sidney Poitier's Robbie.

Sandra seemed a little upset about the time, but I found now that I didn't want to know. "Hell, who cares? Why should we let clocks run our lives? Want to go out?"

She hesitated, and maybe she thought I'd go without her; anyway she agreed. Damn, Sandra—well, the thing is, she cared about me. Maybe too much. Sometimes I got this stifled feeling, and I could see her constantly fighting down the temptation to mother me.

"Is it early, or late in the night?" she was asking.

I swear we hadn't been doing drugs, and we'd only had a little wine—Sandra liked wine both before

and after sex, which she called love-making. But when you never have to be anywhere at any specific time, you don't worry much about time, that's all.

"Don't worry about it," I said as we walked into the apartment building's lobby. "Something's bound to be open."

Jeeves was waiting, as always, his elderly, intelligent face lit up as he saw us. "Ralph, and Sandra! Going out?"

"Yes, if anything's open. What's going on?"

Jeeves knew everything, of course. He closed his eyes for a moment, said, "There are three new movies you'd like—*Love and Linda*, starring Elvis Presley and Marilyn Monroe; also, *Tiger's Rage*, starring James Dean, Don Johnson, and Meryl Streep, and a remake of the classic *Conan I* with Johnny Weismuller and Sandahl Bergman."

I shook my head. "Look, I'm going to have to get the Presley-Monroe one, but Weismuller as Conan? I don't think so, Jeeves. For this one, as with the classic Reeve Superman, there is no substitute for the original."

"Perhaps you are right."

"I am right, Jeeves, and though that is not an invariable, you may bank upon it this time." I believe in meeting these people on their own ground, where possible. "Weismuller is simply too good-natured to be a creditable Conan."

"Wouldn't you say, sir, that Schwarzenegger is too, er, limited?"

"Mentally, you mean? By no means, my old and smelly. True, the dumb script writers of the originals often made him *sound* stupid, even in the first. Who remembers Conan II? But the later productions were quite good, and more in keeping with the spirit of the written saga."

"There, sir, I believe you are right again. Certainly that is the consensus of critical opinion. Of course we have superior technology now, and can afford to get things right. Hmm. Well, sir, if you don't wish to see a movie, how about some live entertainment?"

I looked at Sandra, and she seemed interested. "I'm hungry, too," she said.

Jeeves looked at me, and I consulted my inner man. Yes, I was beginning to feel the gnawing pangs of a desire to gnaw. I feel so many gnaws at me that I'm often not sure whether I'm hungry or not till it has become a serious thing. But I was pretty sure that I'd be quite hungry within an hour. Well, Sandra and I had had an active evening, or night, or whatever it had been.

"I believe, Miss Sandra, that you greatly enjoy live music, and Mr. Ralph also likes it, perhaps not so much."

"He likes and appreciates certain kinds, but so well that bad music puts him off, and other kinds he doesn't like at all"

"Loud rock and raucous country-and-western repel you, as I recall," said Jeeves. "Hmmm. Then I would recommend the White Hart, on O Street."

"Don't tell us," Sandra said. "Let it be a surprise."

Fine by me. Jeeves called a car and let us out. Presently the car swept silently up before us, Stirling Moss driving. I helped Sandra in and we flowed silently away. There aren't that many places to go in Lincoln, Nebraska, and we'd been to them all. We knew the White Hart, and liked it.

"Why did you call work?" Sandra asked, as Lincoln flowed by outside.

"You're always supposed to call in when you can't make it to work," I said, startled.

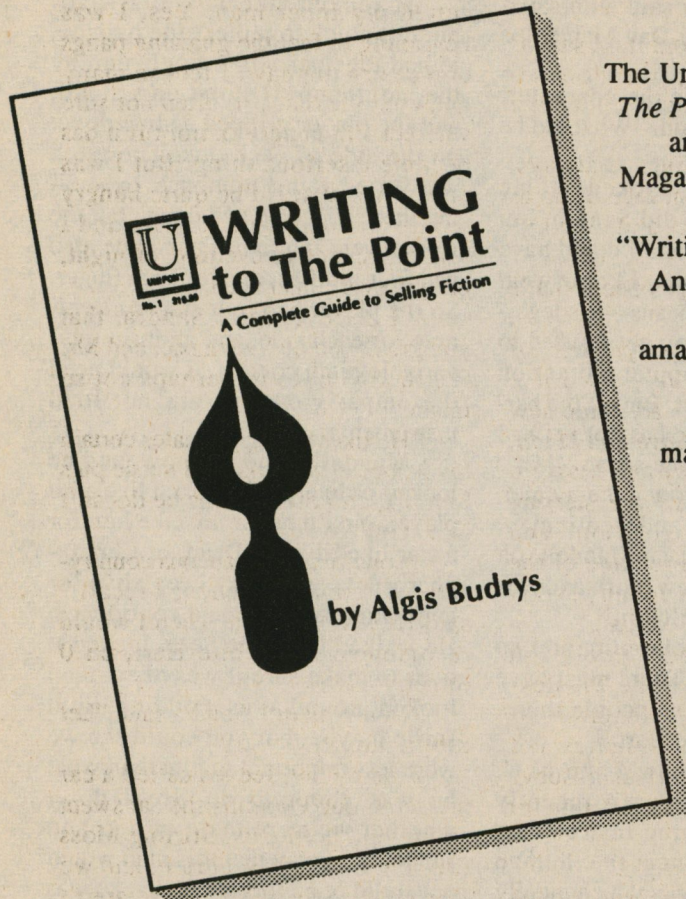
"You don't need to go in to work," she said. "You're living on the air."

It's true the government wouldn't let them fire me, there was a quota for humans on the job, but a person has pride. It was better than living perpetually on strike like the auto workers.

"You're not even sick," she said.

I shrugged. "What else was I to tell Bugs?" God knows, they had no need of a human to shuffle their paper about. She was silent, unconvinced.

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They hadn't changed the White Hart—you never know, these days. But the wooden image of the hart still stood on the sidewalk just under the front window. The pub had a narrow front between a stuffed animal shop, closed now, and a greeting card place, but it opened out behind till it was wider than these three fronts put together. At that it was no huge place. Small and intimate, with a number of round tables with old Twentieth-Century sugar containers, napkin containers, salt and pepper shakers, and chairs that were more comfortable than they looked.

There was a bar with a free lunch on it, and a stage at one end where live comedy and musical performances were often staged. The Hart never descended to movies, and there was no TV anywhere in the joint. So the crowd was an exclusive one. I like video as much as anyone—more, I'm a connoisseur who has studied the subject—but you can't let it rule your life.

The bartender was a heavy, elderly character with a big, liquor-punished nose. He was telling a dull story to another table as we seated ourselves:

"I cautioned her, 'None of yer peccadilloes here.' There was some hot lunch on the bar, comprisin' of salami, succotash, and Philadelphia cream cheese. She dips her mitt in this melange, and throws it in my face. I'm yawnin' at the time—Pardon me, newly arrived customers await my aid. Yes, Ralph, yes, Sandra, what can I do for you this splendid night?"

I suppose that means that it wasn't early. "Ah, has the menu changed since we were last in?"

"No, Ralph, it's about the same, as I recollect. Your favorite was the corned beef and cabbage, as I recall, and Miss Sandra preferred the sauerbraten. Bock beer, or something lighter?"

I looked at Sandra and we decided on bock. He called it in and went back to his story, calling on the other barkeep to help him. I'd heard it before.

"...Nearly broke m' great toe," he was saying when the food was

ready. "I never felt such a pain." He broke off to bring us the food, and as we were getting squared away, the M.C. mounted the stage. "Just in time," the bartender said with satisfaction. "That young Dan Mandell is about to begin."

I couldn't place the character. "Dan Mandell?" I said. "What did he star in?"

The bartender looked at me quizzically, and so did Sandra, but with more concern, and I could have kicked myself. I mean, I know what live entertainment means—it's legally protected—but you get so used to characters and computer animation and so on, you forget. But all the bartender said was, "He has not yet had the pleasure to become a star."

The M.C. had gotten them quiet, and said, "Ladies and gentlemen, here's a real treat, Dan Mandell, on the Circuit, from New York and Los Angeles, with his yellhorn!"

Cheering and clapping and so on; we ate instead. There must have been a hundred or so people there, quite a crowd for the Hart.

"As you all know" the M.C. finally continued, "until recently there were only three instruments designed to enhance the human voice: the microphone, which merely amplified it, the Jew's harp, which had a reed, and the kazoo, which also had a reed. Now we have the voxhorn in its various sizes up to yellhorn—and we have Dan Mandell!"

I didn't know that, and told Sandra. "I mean, I've got a voxhorn around the apartment somewhere, a little humhorn. But I never realized that they're the only instruments designed to operate on the human voice."

That explained how this Mandell could be important without being a character from the past. This Circuit thing was something they'd worked out to make sure the boonies got a glimpse of the next layer of names just before they made it big. Robert Kennedy thought of it. It was a good idea. Most all their ideas were good. Sometimes, though, they went too far. Next thing you knew, they'd be remaking some of the old classic

musicals and putting Mandell and his yellhorn in. They were bringing it out now, setting it up in front of a microphone.

It looked like two big saxophones stuck together side by side, joined together into a single unit by the mouthcup. It stood on a stand, and the player gripped a slide down on the side of each one. The pitch was varied as in a trombone, by moving these slides up and down, but the works were internal. Each slide also had four muffles, one for each finger. So the player had four stages of volume for each side, and an infinitely-variable pitch control. It would need the amps; voxhorns are not loud instruments.

Mandell came out now, and he looked ordinary. He looked like a bit player. You'd never mistake him for a star like Elvis or Dean, or Christopher Reeve, that they keep alive for generations. But he had confidence. He walked up to the horn, looked it over to make sure it was okay, then looked around at us, nodding, faint smile maybe, but you could see we were less important to him than what he was about to do. He'd do it whether we were there or not, and suddenly I knew that this man would never die or be forgotten, that he was not *yet* a star, but that I was seeing greatness with my own eyes. I stopped eating and watched.

Sitting down behind the horn, he gripped the slides and hummed a medium tone into the cup, which covered his mouth and nose. After a moment, holding the tone, he pushed one slide down and pulled one up, and the tone split, rising sharply in pitch and falling, simultaneously—a split howl and growl. With a quick deft move he returned us to wholeness, then separated the tone again, slightly, more, more, and began piling the muffles back on the high pitched side, so that it got louder and louder while the low pitch remained the same, growling a faint but deeper and deeper accompaniment.

"Warming up," said Sandra, excited. I nodded, feeling the excitement too.

Then without a warning or announcement he swung into the long, distant tones of *Cool Snow*, that secular *Silent Night*. This is my favorite song in all the world, and it and *Mary O'Meara* are the only two that can make me cry. I was completely unprepared for this; of all the songs for a character to play before a live audience, that was the least likely. It's too remote, too detached—and too powerful emotionally. I was starting to get choked up before he got through the first few bars.

And all it is is a description of the country seen under a blanket of snow. The cold, the silence, the white owl's distant cry like a stroke of light in the night, the white glow from the nighted ground, the sky darker than the snow cover—oh, there's nothing there to make you feel this deep despairing sadness. *Mary O'Meara*, a tale of passion and obsession, yes, that you could understand, but *this*?

"And cool the frost upon the snow," sang the yellhorn, and I couldn't tell if Mandell was humming into it or actually singing—a good man can hum and make you think he's singing. Somehow it was terribly important for me to know which. I mean, it's not considered cheating to sing into a voxhorn, that's what they're for, in a way. But real class is just to hum, and make it sound like singing using the slides. And I thought Mandell had that much class, but why would he bother to use it? This wasn't New York or L.A., it was only godhelpus Lincoln, Nebraska. But I couldn't tell.

"Need something, young sir?" said the bartender. "How about a shot of whiskey?" He was looking appealingly at Sandra, who belatedly realized the mood I was in and was beginning to look alarmed.

I kept my voice down. "No thanks, old man, I'm fine."

By God Mandell was just humming into his horn, I could tell.

"Sure you don't want a little fortification for the nerves? A little snake-bite preventative?"

The amount of alcohol in that shot would be negligible, I knew, and the amount of tranquilizer would be

startling. They have some really good ones these days, with no side effects. They made you feel good whether you wanted to or not—and I was just cross-grained enough to not want to feel chemically good. I'd tried it, and I hadn't liked it.

But why did Mandell bother? Who'd know? Who in Lincoln would know? Only himself.

"No, thanks. Perhaps I'd better get some fresh air; it's a bit close in here." I gave him a quarter for the two meals and beer, and he made change mechanically, studying me dubiously.

You know, I swear that character actually cared about me—maybe as much as Sandra. But he let me go. Sandra and I went outside and walked around a bit, looking up at the stars.

I wondered if there had been tranquilizers in the beer. Had they become aware of my mood before, had Jeeves or Bugs reported me? I couldn't tell. I felt upset but very calm. Febrile.

"What do you want to do, Ralph?" Sandra asked, very cautiously, after a moment.

"I don't know." I didn't want to do anything.

"Let's go back to your apartment."

I hesitated. "Okay. But no more sex, okay? I'm not up to any more tonight." I didn't mean physically—that I didn't know about—but she knew what I meant.

"Fine," she said, and we went back to the front of the Hart and found an ancient, square-shaped car driven by Clyde. It was not in service at the time, so he was happy to take us back.

Your apartment, she had said. I hadn't known if she had moved in or not. Sandra spent most of her time there, but went away from time to time for short times. I left her behind from time to time—visited other women, of course, and saw other friends; sometimes I went out to a class in film or cartoons or the like, but mostly those I had in on TV. So I couldn't be sure whether she was living with me or not. It sounded like

she wasn't, and I didn't know whether to be relieved or scared.

Jeeves met us with some anxiety. "Perhaps a little nightcap, sir? I could fix a quick pick-me-up in a moment."

"Your pick-me-ups are just legendary, Jeeves, but I need nothing at the moment." Unhappily, he watched us enter the elevator.

In the apartment it was still the same: a bright bubble of light against the dark windows. I turned on the TV, where they were seriously debating who should be the next President: Kennedy, Lincoln, or Eisenhower. I looked around, and it was like we hadn't gone out. I had called work from that phone, and been answered. We'd made love on the airbed in there, and there were the two wine bottles, one from before and one from behind. And on the stereo was the selection of music I'd programmed.

But I wondered. We'd just told Clyde, "Take us home." What if they'd rushed around while we were out, fixed up another apartment just like the old one, maybe moved some of the more identifiable things...how'd we ever know? When all places are alike, how do you know where you are?

"One thing we can all agree on is that we have tired of Mr. Truman's blunt honesty. We need a President with more dignity to represent us to the world."

"Ralph?" Tentatively. "How do you feel?"

"The same as ever. Not much of anything. Do you realize I still don't know what time it is?"

"Is it important? We can always call in."

I frowned and she broke off. "That's just what's the matter with the whole world," I said. "We do nothing for ourselves. We depend on the machines for everything. Hell, we don't even act in our own movies! Do you realize that if we could've seen the stars over the city lights we couldn't have told the time of night by them? We know nothing, we've made ourselves a world that coddles us but doesn't need us."

"Ralph...you wouldn't want to go back to the old ways, would you?"

I shook my head. "No. And yet they had their virtues. I haven't been in to work for months, and does anybody care? In the old days they would've cared. I'll tell you what's wrong with me—everybody's been wondering tonight. Well I've just figured it out. I've been—we've all been living on the air in Cincinnati too long! You too."

Sandra was taken aback by my vehemence. "This is Lincoln," she said weakly.

"No, it's Cincinnati."

"Ralph," pleadingly. "Ralph, please don't keep saying things you know aren't so. Really...it's Lincoln."

"Sure, that's what *they* say, that's what they want you to believe, but take my word for it, it's Cincinnati. Hell, don't take my word—use your own eyes. Look out the window!"

I went to the window and fumbled with the controls, finally got a panorama of city lights. "There!" I said. "Cincinnati!"

"No, Ralph—"

"How do you know it isn't Cincinnati?" I asked. "Look out there—what do you see that proves it isn't?"

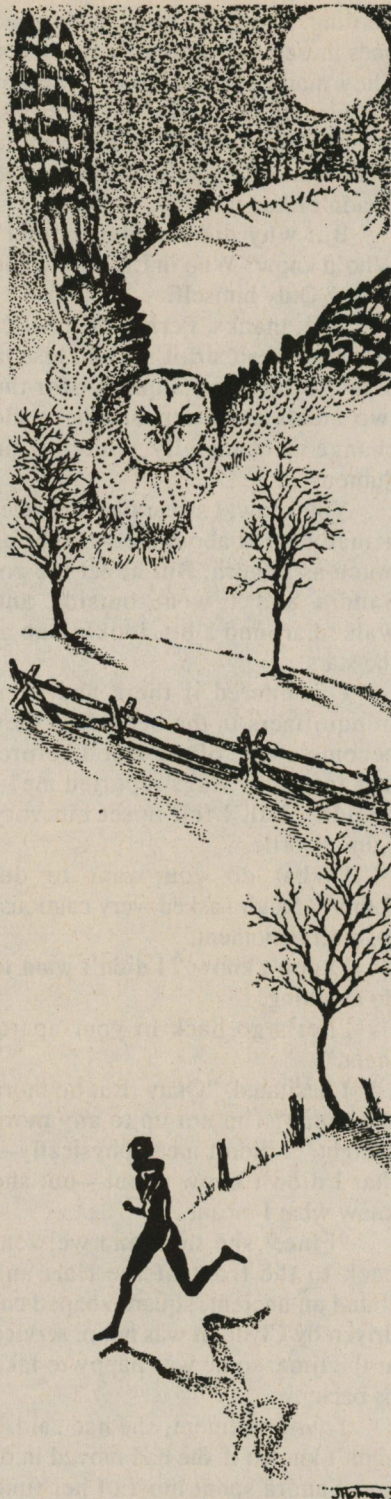
That was a poser. It looked like any city to her, I could see.

"That's the point—cities all look alike. Cities *are* all alike; it might as well be Cincinnati. In fact it probably is. Isn't that the Veterans of Freedom Memorial Monument?"

It was.

Sandra stared out the window in shock, catching her breath; for a moment I was afraid she was going to start crying. But then she caught on and looked at the window frame. I didn't say anything, I just let her realize that it was a recording. After a while she turned to me and said, "Ralph, that was mean, even if it was a joke."

I felt sorry for her, and ashamed. But I had had to make my point. "You see what I mean? We don't know what the hell we're doing, because we don't know anything but what we're told." I went and took her in my arms and she put her head on my shoulder.



"There's a cadaver in the river," said Brett Maverick, stepping through the wall. I didn't remember changing the channel.

"Where does food come from?" I continued. "From farms or factories? How is it preserved? Is our topsoil washing away? We presume things are being taken care of—and we

don't ask. Do the computers and the characters need our help? Not mine, anyway, not yours either. So why should they take care of us?"

"Because we made them, at least other people did, and told them to care for us." Sandra raised her head and looked at me seriously. "If not for them we'd have to govern ourselves, and you know how badly we did that, before they gradually took over governing by making better decisions."

"I've got a worse example—we'd have to drive ourselves," I said, and managed a laugh.

I wondered if there was snow on the ground outside. I'd just been out, but I couldn't remember if it was winter or not. I wondered if there was a city around this building, a building around this apartment. I could hear nothing, not a sound; nothing came in except over wires controlled by *them*. I could visualize the rolling fields of Nebraska stretching away, covered with snow, here and there a line of trees, or a clump around a silent farmhouse, dogs quiet in warm places, foxes on the prowl, and owls again, crying down the otherwise silent night; frost cool upon the snow.

Sandra was looking anxiously at me.

"Look, I don't know what time it is, but for me it's time for sleep. Time to say good night," I added, feeling almost unbearable sadness. "You go on to bed; I'll slip down and get Jeeves to make me a nightcap. I want to be sure I sleep."

A look of relief broke over her features. Sleep, the great healer. Oh, yes. "Don't be gone too long," she said.

Trusting, I went out, and read the label on the stair door. It didn't say anything about an alarm ringing if the doors were opened. They couldn't have eyes and alarms everywhere; computer capacity is huge but not infinite. I opened it, heard nothing, and walked down. They'd never expect that. It wasn't all that far, but I don't know how many flights. At the bottom I went out the back way while Jeeves was talking to another fellow.

Not all cars are equipped with

fixed drivers. I found one without and got in. It's not hard to drive a car. Turn it on, and the generator or whatever they have starts up, push on the right foot pedal and it goes forward. Middle pedal for going backwards, left pedal for stopping. Wheel for steering. The real problem is estimating turning radius and speeds, not to mention rules of the road, which aren't built into meat people.

But I managed to get out of Lincoln and start driving through the fields. I drove aimlessly, very sad, but calm and quiet now, as cool as frost on snow. There was no snow, I could see that, and come to think of it, it hadn't been cold outside the car. A cool night, though. Not high summer, when it's like a blast furnace.

Dawn found me somewhere near a river. I hadn't been paying attention to the signs, but I guessed it had to be the Missouri, and I knew the Missouri is east of Lincoln. I had been facing east as the sky lightened.

I pulled off into a side road, gravel surfaced yet, a real antique, and went between fields in some kind of crop I didn't recognize. I wouldn't have recognized many. But the road ended well short of the river, and there was a fence I couldn't drive through. Well, I hadn't really wanted to drive into the river, when I thought of it.

I got out, and then I heard tires crunching gravel, a most evocative sound I hadn't heard since I was a kid. A car pulled up behind mine, and a man got out. I looked again, and it was Dan Mandell.

I think I could have stood anybody else. I ran for the fence. After a moment I heard the heavy pounding rush of his feet behind me, and his voice calling out something, my name, other things I was panting too hard to hear.

The fence slowed me, but his footsteps spurred me. I got under it with the sacrifice of half my shirt and some skin and blood, and started gasping for the river. I glanced back, running through streamside brush and weeds, to see Mandell grip the steel post and lever his body into the air, swing over, grip the post on the

other side, and drop, in half the time it'd taken me to go under. The fence bent under that heavy body and I thought, *the water—the weight—*

First I ran through mud, but it had bottom and I knew it wouldn't slow him. He was almost on me and panic spurred me.

"Ralph, no! Ralph!"

I ran out knee-deep and leaped for the muddy water. There was a thunderclap of sound as he came right in after me. No sense of self-preservation, I thought, and stroked for depth. That got me a handful of mud and gravel, and I bounced for the surface.

Steel hands closed on my thigh and wrist and lifted me toward the air. In a moment I was above the water, and in another his head broke the surface. He was panting realistically. Carefully transferring his grip, he carried me out of the water and seated me among the weeds on the dry part of the bank, staying between me and the river. I didn't meet his gaze. He satisfied himself that I was breathing and generally okay.

After a long time I looked at him. I felt a vast weariness.

"I hope you're not the real Dan Mandell," I said dully. "I really can't cope with people just now."

"I'm not," he said quickly. "This was a rush job, and I'm afraid it's not too good." He touched his face tenderly. The voice was perfect.

Of course he wasn't—Mandell couldn't handle me like that.

"You seemed to respond to Mandell. Why did you jump into the river, Ralph—if I'm not too intrusive?"

I had no idea. I shrugged. I felt quite empty.

"Do you want to know the time?"

"No." Time no longer mattered.

Mandell looked at me, and again I caught the look of concern that several characters and Sandra had been giving me.

"Why do you care?" I asked. "I swear you all care more about me than I do."

"Probably we do. It's the way we are made."

"What do you need of us, anyway? You are the government, you do the work, your computer animations do most video art—there's very little left for people to do. Artistic self-expression is about it—Mandell doesn't know how lucky he is, people need him. But what about me? I can't do a goddamn thing."

"Many things are still done by people. Programming characters, for instance. Government is by no means in our hands; fully a third of Senators and more than a half of Representatives are human, as are two thirds of State Governors."

"I'll take your word for it. Hell, I'll take your word for the time of day," I said wearily. I wiped wet hair back out of my eyes. "I never really doubted you. But government also takes skills I don't have. Forget that."

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"Many men are still employed in skilled trades. Though I gather you are not good with your hands."

I felt a terrible sadness, I grinned at him, shook my head. "In no way am I good with my hands. Sorry, Mandell, really." Because I wasn't damn well good for anything he and the other characters couldn't do a helluva lot better.

"It would be a great tragedy if you were to drown yourself," he said, but that was a weak one.

"Not to me it wouldn't," I said.

"It would be to Sandra," he said quietly.

I felt a pang of real grief then, the most intense thing I think I had felt in years. "I'm sorry," I said, and I had to struggle with my voice. I wiped away a tear—he was only a character, I didn't feel ashamed. I said, "I'm really sorry, man, but if I can't handle it, what else can I do? And what good is a worthless man?"

"There is one other thing," he said. "I hesitate to mention it, but I see that you really do care about Sandra." He sighed. "So few of you people really care about anyone these days. But I am encouraged every time I see it happen."

"So what of it?"

"You could marry her, Ralph. And have children."

I do not think I have ever been so completely surprised and nonplused in my entire life. I had never heard so startling a suggestion. I just stared at him for half a minute, taking it in.

My reaction was negative. Bring kids into a world where they too would be unwanted, and able only to bring still more kids into it, like their dumb old man?

Then I pictured Sandra's reaction. I suddenly realized that she'd love it. Those kids wouldn't be unwanted, not by *her*, and would never feel that way. And the characters...they already wanted them. They already cared for them.

Sitting wet and forlorn on that weedy riverbank, I started to laugh, at him, at them, at their goddamn frustrated *mother instinct*.

"One thing...one thing you..."

characters never mastered," I managed to choke out.

Mandell laughed with me. "Why else are we having to fill the world with robots, when you people-making experts are all lying down on the job?"

He wanted an answer, and I didn't have one. "Look, what's this stuff in the fields?"

"I have no idea. Corn, maybe? Gene-spliced? Isn't Nebraska a corn state? Or is it wheat?"

That made me laugh again, and I felt better. Always, I'd asked them what I needed to know, and they told me. But outside his specialty, he didn't know any more than I did!

"So what are you going to do?"

I sobered. "Listen, man," I said. "This is just Lincoln, Nebraska. There's no reason to give the peasants more than they can assimilate. So why hum into the horn when you can just sing? No one would know."

He looked at me. "You mean Mandell. I have no idea. We can't read minds, after all; all we can do is copy the outward actions and attitudes."

I thought about it, nodding, beginning to have an idea: because if no one else knew, he would know. And he was going to be perfect or die trying. Anyone immortalized as a character, I suppose, must have earned it, one way or another.

I couldn't be a star; nor would my kids. But we could clap. We could clap real good. It was only then I realized I had decided.

Pseudo-Mandell knelt before me anxiously and watched silently as I thought it over.

I stood up, and so did he. "Get word back to Sandra that I'm all right, and I'm coming home," I said.

His face crumpled with relief, but he followed me to the car. Oh, they care, they care for us, too much, I'm not worth that, no human is worth that from beings like this.

I decided we'd name the first kid Daniel. Or Dannielle. Mandell would never know, and wouldn't understand if he knew. No reason why he should. I wasn't naming the kid after *him*. ■

BLUE FLYERS

Robert Onopa

Illustrated by

Peggy Ranson

Kangaroos were carrying human fetuses

The kangaroo, a young female, gazed at them from just beyond the electric fence which ran parallel to the tarmac at the entrance to the resort. She had liquid brown eyes with long lashes and dilated pupils. Bipedally erect, alert, she stared with inscrutable wariness at the two women who'd stopped their bright red electric skimmer on the shoulder. The older woman, who'd pulled back the skimmer's reflective cover, tried to meet the animal's untamed eye.

Valerie Rampling shivered. "Is she...?"

"No, she hasn't been implanted," her Latino driver smiled. "She's freerange out here. In another year she'll be ready, I suspect." The driver—her pale plum safari shirt was adorned with the triangular BioRange symbol which crowned the entrance gate—waved a manicured hand over the scrubby Cabo San Lucas landscape toward the groups of three or four kangaroos scattered on a low hillside a click away. Some were larger animals with reddish fur and white faces. "She belongs to that mob over there—the word for a herd of kangaroos is 'mob', yes? With those boomers. Males. In that species, the males are redder, the females bluer, you see?"

"You keep them with males?"

The kangaroo she was watching at the silver wire spooked her. Above its outsized haunches its tiny, perfectly articulated forepaws picked slowly at a patch of chest fur, too slowly for



grooming. The blue flyer had the face of a deer or a pony. But the twitchiness of her large ears and the intensity in her eyes made Valerie think: *a monkey, she reminds me of a monkey, an intelligent monkey.* Valerie took a deep breath of the overheated Baja air. Under the circumstances, she decided, she should be relieved, even pleased. But she hadn't expected to be surprised this way, especially since she'd been looking at so many pictures of kangaroos lately.

"Under BioRange protocol," the Latino driver said, "we don't use freerange flyers to carry an individual fetus to term." She laughed. "So nobody's baby's out there. The Carriers, the marsupials whose pouches have been genetically designed for use as surrogate human wombs, they're kept under quite controlled conditions."

"Yes. Of course." Valerie felt briefly ashamed: she knew all these things from the introductory holotapes she'd seen in New York. She remembered shots of the nurseries, buildings which were half-barn, half-hospital ward, where the implanted animals were kept in great security and health while within their pouches the human fetuses became full-sized, normal infants.

Her OB-Gyn had agreed that having her baby this way was a particularly fine idea. Very practical. At twelve weeks her pregnancy hadn't, except for this flight down to Baja, interrupted her legal practice for a

day. Tomorrow her fetus would be transferred to the marsupial's pouch where it would mature without another bout of morning sickness for her, much less the loss of a single billable hour for her firm.

Twenty minutes later, the resort and clinic buildings came into view beyond a green patch of woods in a wide groin formed at the base of two hills, a change of scenery from the deserty scrub through which they'd driven from the airstrip. What she saw reassured her: an elegant Mission style hotel, flanked on one side by pools and tennis courts, on the other by a hospital and labs. Nestled in groves against the hills sat the adobe nurseries with their red tile roofs.

Before the bellboy could reach the skimmer, a tall fellow with a cream-colored Stetson and deep-set eyes reached into the trunk for her bags. He had a BioRange triangle embroidered on the pocket of his denim shirt, an easy smile, and a low whistle for her short silk jumpdress when she stepped onto the tiled foyer.

"Saw you at the gate, m'am. My name's Cal."

"I'm sure it is," she said, turning away without telling him her name, but smiling. She'd spent a summer in Wyoming once; there was something Disney City about this cowboy, though she couldn't put her finger on just what.

Her pre-surgery screening was scheduled at four—the transplant

would be performed the next day. Once she unpacked, Valerie decided to wash off the dust of Baja with a swim.

Flowering mimosa trees lined the walkway to the pool, opposite Spanish fountains which spilled cooled air into the burning heat. At poolside she dropped her wrap on a chair near a group of women chatting under a market umbrella, then dove in.

The water was in the low eighties, clean and sweet, the pool so large that when she swam under the waterfall at the far end she had to tread water for a minute to catch her breath. Everything seemed perfect now; even the anger of Kenneth, her child's father, at her decision, even his threats, washed from her mind. As she climbed out she heard one of the women calling her name.

It took Valerie a moment to place the blonde with the narrow hips. "I'll be damned. Kai. It's been ten years."

Kai Olsen had been a classmate at Dartmouth.

Kai introduced her with some pride. "And Val's the best advert lawyer on Wall Street. She's been on SELF."

"I just found myself more comfortable in front of a console than anywhere else," Valerie admitted, telling them the same thing she'd told the videozine.

Kai had been at BioRange for two months, it turned out, staying on through her pregnancy like the other three women, all of whom had suf-

ferred previous miscarriages. It was one of the options at BioRange Cabo. "And you?" Kai asked.

Val laughed tightly, feeling the rhythm of Manhattan still in her bones. "I'll be back at work by the end of the week."

The women around the table looked at her with polite interest, as if they were impressed. But their eyes were glazing over, and one resumed her knitting.

Val felt herself blush. Across the pool on the access road an old ATV had come to a stop, an odd-looking sort of truck without a windshield and crowned with a rack of spotlights. Kai and her friends smiled and watched. The cowboy stepped out, straining his jeans, and waved to them. Three of the women waved back, giggling flirtatiously.

Walking quickly back to her room Val asked herself: *why should I feel ashamed?*

At her four o'clock appointment, her transplant specialist, a matronly female surgeon, completed her screening physical in under a half hour. In her cool office she shifted a flatscreen around to show Valerie a high definition sonogram of the fetus in her womb. "Looks wonderful," Dr. Levich said. "We'll have a perfect match."

Val squinted. "So, um, the umbilical cord gets connected to the marsupial, um, pouch?" Now she wished she knew more.

"It's a bit more complicated. The macropodid pouch provides different kinds of teats for joeys at different stages of development. We use the one appropriate for a first phase joey, who's continuously attached for several months. Our flyers have been genetically designed to retain that teat indefinitely. The point is to make the pouch a suitable environment for poikilothermic young."

"Poikilo...?"

"Poikilothermic. A human fetus, like the first phase joey, is unable to control its body heat, so it needs a host who'll do so with her nutrient supply. Secondary to the teat, we attach the umbilical cord of your fetus

to a tiny umbilicus the marsupial produces when her joey's embryonic. So we tap into the blood supply as well as the nutrient loop before we suture the pouch. Given bodyweight and chemistry, and one antibodies injection, we can duplicate the conditions of your womb perfectly. Though we want just the right blue flyer, of course." Dr. Levich looked at her watch. "Would you like to see her? The Carrier we've selected for you?"

Valerie agreed and finished dressing. During the walk from the hospital building to the nurseries, she told Dr. Levich how Kenneth had objected to the procedure, how he'd filed a restraining order to keep her from leaving New York, how he'd threatened her. "He's a younger attorney in my firm. But we're not married, of course, so..."

"Only one in six children is born to married couples these days," Dr. Levich told her sympathetically. "And only one in four is delivered vaginally. What does he want, an abnormal child?"

Her blue flyer was lying in a clean stall on the ground floor. Val remarked her broad, flat feet, like those of an oversized rabbit, her substantial haunches, her immaculate blue-gray fur, her narrow shoulders, her long neck. When the lab attendant opened the Dutch top of the cage door for them, the animal lurched up and moved to the rear of the stall. She kept her eyes on Dr. Levich for a minute, then seemed to grow curious. Bent over, not quite on all fours, balancing with her tail, she shuffled closer and worked her lips.

"Notice the shaved patch at the pouch," Dr. Levich said, leaning over the gate and holding out a handful of meter-long grass. "She's been prepped for a week. That's our standard window to see if there are any complications." Dr. Levich bunched the grass and tossed it along the steel wall and the kangaroo stretched over to reach for it with her snout.

The way she worked the grass in her mouth reminded Valerie of a cow. In fact, there was something very docile, bovine, about this blue flyer. Like her Aunt Nell, Val decided with

a smile—and the 'roo had her aunt's smoky blue hair. "How soon do you know after the surgery if everything's going to be okay?"

"We usually know within twenty-four hours, but technically the window is ten days. Of course we have back-up animals."

With a metallic clang that startled the three of them, a door on the outside wall of the stall opened. Hot air wafted through the nursery and from outside came a series of harsh, explosive coughs.

"Ach," Dr. Levich muttered. "Exercise time. We have a yard with a controlled mob. They're nocturnal animals, of course, so we send them out late in the day for an hour. Wonderful for circulation—in the wild, kangaroos will carry a joey to fifteen pounds, easily."

The kangaroo had come bipedally alert and frozen. She was making a soft sucking sound. Valerie saw some feral quality in the marsupial's brown eyes now. She remembered the animal she had seen at the entrance gate: gentle as a deer but there'd been something hidden in her intelligent eyes. Val leaned over to see out of doors.

"Stay back," Dr. Levich warned. "A cornered kangaroo can lash up with its hindpaws. The males can disembowel an attacker at close range."

Val's stomach fluttered; she was afraid for her child in an irrational way she never expected of herself.

Back in her room she phoned the desk clerk, then punched up her office number in New York. She left a voice mail message to tell her partners that she was extending her leave for a week.

Under general anesthesia, her surgery proceeded as if in a dream. But her sleep afterwards was disturbed by strange visions. She heard screaming, saw vivid colors. When Dr. Levich spoke to her post-op, the gray-haired physician suggested that she'd been mildly hallucinating—a side effect of the new delta-series anesthetics.

Her suture line was just an inch long. They'd gone in with a laparoscope, a small, flexible surgical instru-

ment that had penetrated her abdominal wall. In a week, the nurse told her, she wouldn't feel a thing. In the meantime she felt a deep local pain, and when they transferred her back to her room, she felt woozy stepping from the wheelchair to her bed. She was glad she'd elected to stay.

The next morning she was up and around, even polished off a room-service plate bright with huevos rancheros and papayas. True to form, the moment of the transplant Kenneth had filed a lawsuit for custody of the fetus, but a judge had already dismissed it. Her abdominal pain persisted but was bearable.

Over at the nursery she found that the blue flyer wasn't doing as well. The kangaroo—whom she'd come to think of as Nell, after her aunt—lay panting on her side in her stall, listless and indifferent to the fresh grass lying nearby. The suture line closing her pouch ran as wide as Val's outstretched hand; she'd obviously had a far more serious operation. Val was alarmed by the thick yellow fluid which oozed from the marsupial's pouch.

"Perfectly normal," Dr. Levich told her when she came in for rounds. With Nell so tractable, Dr. Levich brought Val into the stall during the examination.

"Her eyes look so...vacant," Val murmured. A scorched, medicinal odor pervaded the room; it seemed an effort for the kangaroo to breathe, and her muscles were slack.

"Would you like to help with her care?" Dr. Levich asked. "Some mothers find doing so very reassuring. You see the recovery for yourself."

A veterinary nurse, a young man with a mustache, taught Val how to sponge off the animal's forearms to cool her, how to massage her neck. He showed her how to hold Nell still while he injected antibiotics. Nell's blue fur was as soft as down, her body hot, rising and falling with her breath.

For several days Val stayed close to the blue flyer, nursing her, grooming her, even cleaning smeared feces from her tail. She watched her regain her appetite, felt her muscle tone

return. Once, as the kangaroo nibbled hormone supplements from the palm of her hand, she experienced an intimacy, she thought, with some intelligence behind the bovine brown eyes. *Love my baby*, she wanted to tell her; *love my baby as your own*. But a moment later the marsupial carrying her child nipped her thumb so hard she tore flesh, drew blood, and bruised her to the bone.

Late the next day an ozone-sharp thunderstorm turned the exercise yard briefly into mud. Nell had been let out before Val arrived, and cleansing her was a wet, messy, tedious operation.

The odor of the yellow fluid still oozing from her suture line was particularly noxious. When she kicked Val in the thigh Val's instincts—even a slight disgust—told her it was time to back off from the nursing.

Still, she felt vindicated: her child's Carrier was feeding well and regaining vitality. That morning's HD sonogram had shown her fetus to be thriving, perfectly indifferent to the change of place.

As Valerie Rampling locked the stall behind her, she realized that her own condition was better, too. Her head felt remarkably clear; her stomach muscles rippled painlessly under her hand. It was time to get on with life.

Just outside, the cowboy, Cal, was hosing down the muddy ramp from the exercise pen, managing to stay spotless in the process. The night before, at a torchlit dinner, Kai had alluded to his sexual prowess with lurid motions of her long-fingered hands, butter from a lobster sauce glistening on her silver nails.

Now as Val passed, he smiled at her broadly, as if he'd shared the secret with her himself.

Her first impulse was to be offended, but the truth was she felt sexy for the first time in weeks. "So what goes on around here?" she asked.

"Offrange," he grinned, his jaws tight with the effort of shutting down the high pressure hose. He pushed his Stetson back, looked up to the hills. In

the aftermath of the thunderstorm the bruised red light over the hills was giving way to a clear evening sky, vast and sublime. "If you're interested, we can go for a cruise in the ATV, take a ride."

She took a deep breath. "I'm game," she decided, even though there was something wrong about the way he looked: his face was pale. All the cowboys she'd ever seen had dark tans that ended only at the precise lines at which they wore their Stetsons. His face wasn't tanned at all.

The walk to the motor pool took them through the clinic complex. As they passed behind the surgery Val heard a high-pitched scream that made her shiver. "Doesn't sound human," she said.

"S not." Cal told her that the flyers didn't take happily to implanting; beyond a certain point in the procedure, the use of anesthetics endangered the human fetus, and so.... Even though her sympathy was checked by the throbbing in her thumb, Val felt her face flush. "Best not think of it," he advised, reading her mind. "This time of day, prob'ly just new animals settlin' in." With his soothing voice, with his deep set eyes, with the way his muscles moved beneath his clothes like some sensuous dream, she understood now what the other women saw in him.

The truck-like ATV was spartan, its suspension so stiff it made her teeth chatter, but it was refreshing to ride in a vehicle without restraining belts or a windshield. As the sun set with tropical swiftness they rattled overland through the hills. Fifteen minutes beyond the BioRange border they spotted a mob of wild kangaroos beginning their nightly rounds. "They got a territory," Cal told her, coming to a stop, "couple hundred square clicks. No electric fence from here to the gulf."

"Could they get away?" she wondered in the deep twilight. "I mean, if we tried to catch them with this ATV?"

"They make sixty, seventy clicks an hour, don't care what they get into—a 'roo can jump a ten-meter gully easy. But we don't have to chase 'em."

Cal flipped a switch on the dash and with a high amperage thump the rack of lights above the cab burst into illumination, freezing the animals in their tracks like deer caught in a skimmer's headlights.

It took her breath away to see them standing like statues. He pulled up close enough for her to see the light reflecting off the pupils of their eyes.

Cal pointed out the dominant male, a broad-chested red among a half-dozen blues.

His size and belligerent stance made her think immediately of Kenneth. And the 'roo's fur was long and shaggy, like Kenneth's hair.

Yesterday she'd learned that her console at the office had been trashed—Kenneth was her prime suspect. This morning the electronic mail had brought the news that he'd entered a writ in the Circuit Court of Manhattan to deny her maternity leave when the child was born. And her apartment had been broken into. All this while claiming he wanted to get back together with her.

Cal was still running on about the bull male kangaroo. "...almost seven feet. That boomer'll go 200 pounds."

There was something about the way he spoke, the way he was pointing his right arm through the windshield. Now she recognized the contours of the locked case behind their heads. "You *hunt* them, don't you," she said, half to herself.

Cal just stared straight ahead, chewing the inside of his cheek.

Dominant males, she sighed. The kangaroo, his sex hung between his massive haunches, barred his teeth. She could almost see Kenneth out there glaring back at them.

Cal, taking her silence for an argument, finally cleared his throat and muttered a few sentences about wildlife management.

She laughed. What would it be like, what would it be like, she wondered, to kill a boomer, to kill one of the bulls?

They drove into Cortéz, a village whose inhabitants had been displaced some years before by the con-

struction of BioRange. She discovered in its dirty cantina a side of Cabo she hadn't been prepared for: a cracked holoscreen, flies around the food, homemade tequila and a genetically mutated wallaby in a cage behind the bar, its double tail flecked iridescent green. The locals spoke a Spanish-English dialect she could barely understand, but Cal seemed at home.

Shabby customers drifted in and out. A man with a pockmarked face tried to sell them a laserblade which sputtered defectively as he tried to demonstrate its ability to cut through a thousand-peso coin. When he said he'd throw in a vial of drugs, Cal laughed him away.

"Had enough excitement?" Cal asked after her fourth tequila, stroking her forearm.

She hadn't, not by a long shot. She felt free now. She'd been released from her pregnancy by the transplant, extricated from the confines of the stall by Nell's recovery, liberated from her anxiety by the alcohol—and now, she decided, she was finished entirely, irrevocably, with Kenneth. Even when the pale cowboy told her 'it might get rough,' she wanted to stay.

Still she was shocked when, only a few tequilas later, the cantina filled with tough-looking men, and two kangaroos in harnesses were dragged out from a back room, live kangaroos with harried eyes. They were herded into a makeshift ring that materialized between the bar and the tables. The adolescent boomers were goaded electronically—she watched the bartender operate a joystick, watched the kangaroos twitch under the harnesses—and set to boxing amid shouted bets.

"This is...cruel," she said in the din.

"Com'on," Cal answered mildly. "They're only animals."

A dirty boy hopped around the perimeter of the ring, making fun of the creatures. An old man with brown teeth badgered her and Cal for drinks, pointing to the boy, yelling, as far as she could make out, that there were wild boys out in the scrub hopping around in the moonlight like kangaroos, village legends the gringos never

heard but which, for the price of a bottle of tequila, he could tell. By the end of the second fight she was too drunk to stand. She eventually found herself behind the cantina watching two kangaroos have sex. "Rough enough for you?" Cal asked, running his hands under her dress. In the uneven light the bull mounted the flyer brutally, filling the air with explosive coughs.

She pushed Cal away. She was disgusted by how aroused she'd become, by the gamy kangaroos, by the leering crowd who watched them. "No," she said. "Take me home. Take me home or I'll have you arrested for goddamned assault."

And then she passed out.

The next day, her head ached and pain began to migrate through her midsection in slow searing waves, doubling her up with cramps so excruciating that she skipped a late breakfast to wait an hour in an outpatient lounge, while the receptionist tried to fit her into Dr. Levich's schedule. Val sat feeling oily with shame, though in the moon-blue light of the ride back to Cabo, she'd recovered consciousness—Manhattan tough, after all. But the pain near her suture line alarmed her.

Dr. Levich diagnosed no medical problem beyond the severe gastrointestinal effects of a hangover about whose origins Val had to be purposely vague—the terms of her medical agreement with BioRange were technically voided beyond its borders. "If you celebrate with village tequila," the gray-haired woman said with a knowing smile, "you feel this way again. Yes?" As Dr. Levich rattled on about the benefits of transplants in avoiding fetal alcohol syndrome, Val half-listened, dressing with relief in an examining room whose walls were covered with anatomical charts.

One of the mauve charts caught her attention. A quick study of 'The Macropodid Reproductive System' confirmed that the introductory holotapes didn't tell you everything: *Each of the Carriers had to be pregnant already, pregnant with a joey, when the human fetus was introduced. The joey was terminated.* According

to fine mauve print, in that way the nutritional systems were in place and the hormonal levels appropriate to carrying young. "Is this right?" she asked the doctor. "When the human fetus is implanted, the joey is destroyed?"

"Mmmm. Yes."

"So my own blue flyer, last week?"

"Yes. It is not a problem. The mother still has a fetus, you see? There's no enzyme spike, no change in blood volume. So she misses nothing."

A kind of remorse led her back to the nursery. Today she found Nell lying on her side in the stall, bloated with supplements, her suture line an angry red from being picked at. Val changed her straw, cleaned her water dish, and groomed her with a fine-toothed steel comb. She caught up with the changes in her chart and talked with the veterinary nurse about treating the swelling with a diuretic—already on his mind, he told her, and with her help he injected the medication into the animal's forearm. Its onset was rapid: brighter eyes, less labored respiration. But within hours Nell turned hostile again, fouling the stall, baring her teeth beneath an inscrutable gaze. Val wished the nursing was as easy as law; she could handle cool screens and paperwork better than an animal's waste. At least, she told herself, she had the sense to leave Nell in the hands of BioRange personnel. Her own child was doing well; the word they used after the last sonogram was 'thriving;' that was what mattered.

What she hadn't counted on was the power Kenneth still had over her; she'd thought she was immune.

His Holofax Tableau was delivered to her at poolside while she was sharing a good-bye marguerita with Kai. Kenneth apparently now was into guerrilla theater. The Tableau, breathtakingly expensive to transmit even at off-peak rates, was time-stamped the night before. Val and Kai watched Kenneth perform in bed with a short brunette, a tart Val recognized from research. The scene shimmered obscenely from atmospheric signal

noise generated by a high inversion layer over the desert.

She'd been naive enough to believe him when he'd said he still wanted to see her. Naked, he looked like a bull, like the boomer she'd seen on the hillside near Cortez.

The Latino driver who'd brought her in on the first day stopped her in the lobby, saw she'd been crying. "Don't let him get the better," the girl in the plum-colored shirt said after she'd sat Val down and they'd talked. "You have to be strong."

"I didn't expect to see you again," Cal said when she located him in the motor pool.

"Tell me about the hunting," she said.

"Now don't get excited. We only cull the wild mobs, the surplus animals destroyin' the range. They overgraze like goats. That's why the ranchers wiped them clean out of Australia, if you wanna look into it."

"I'm leaving tomorrow. I want to ride with you tonight."

Cal gave her a wry smile and sucked his teeth.

"Don't be nervous. I just want to take one shot. If you let me ride with you, listen: I'll make it up to you in a way you'll never forget." She stepped close, placed her palm flat on his chest, slipped her fingers between two buttons. "That's a contract. You take me and I'll take you—on another ride."

Cal passed her a bottle of tequila when they set off.

She could see the inversion layer to the north, the bruised quality in the twilight sky against which helicopters hovered in the distance. At one point in the holofax Kenneth had looked straight into the 'corder, his eyes blank as shell casings, between rounds of frantic sex. "This is for you, Val," he'd said, pointing his index finger at the lens, pulling his third finger like the trigger of a pistol. "This is for you."

Under infrared nightscope Val watched the kangaroos grazing in groups of three to five, munching vegetation like cows. Their oversized ears tracked the low rumble of the ATV,

but they weren't afraid. They didn't run away.

"I see why you don't have a tan," she said flatly, "why you're never around until mid-afternoon. You're out here at night, like them."

Cal shifted into low gear and moved within 50 meters of the central group, composed of a large male and five females. Then he froze them with the jacklight. The huge male could have been the same boomer they'd seen before: shaggy hair, his sex heavy between his muscular loins.

"You know how to handle that thing?" Cal asked when she'd pulled the weapon from the case. "That's an old-fashioned rifle you got there. No laserscope or anything."

Swinging its barrel through the windshield space, she pulled the Mauser up to her shoulder and smelled gun oil. "I took lessons in Wyoming. I'm an old-fashioned kind of girl."

"Whoa.... That's the bull you're aimin' at. You'll spook the whole herd."

She squeezed the trigger gently, exhilarated, blinked when something in the crosshairs shimmered. Then the ATV cab filled with noise and fifty meters away a kangaroo slammed backward, stood erect one last time, and folded to the ground.

Val pulled the rifle down with a flush of success. The rest of the kangaroos took off with great graceful jumps. She caught a flash of red.

"You missed 'em. You got yourself the flyer behind 'em."

"What?"

"Give you a good skin, though. I could never hit anything with that damned thing either."

Val was numb with confusion. She shivered in the cool night air when they walked over, only then realized her skin was covered with a sheen of perspiration. Her mouth was dry.

The blue flyer was stone dead, her chest blown out. Something moved at her pouch, something small, smaller than a thumb. It was only the size of a mouse when it emerged, pink and hairless. The immature joey had arms and legs, articulated digits.

"Oh God."

"You wanna step on the skull," Cal said, "'s the best way. No chance it'd survive, see? You wanna be quick."

Its pink flesh was like gum rubber. She couldn't do it—when she turned away her stomach burned with pain.

In the still of the night, she heard a sound like the crushing of an eggshell.

She was back at her wing of the hotel by one-thirty in the morning; in the end, she'd been saved from her sexual promise to Cal by a fluke: the alarm on his pager had gone off, and he'd just had time to drop her at the foyer before he drove off into the night. A night clerk's leer, for which she might have slapped him two days ago, now seemed hopelessly innocent.

How terribly everything had turned out.

Perhaps she could make a pet of Nell, perhaps Dr. Levich could drug the animal to make it tractable, perhaps Val could take it to New York and....

But once in her room, she understood that nothing was going to work out, not for the cowboy, not for Nell, not for her. She couldn't get the smell of gun oil off her hands. Her scattered clothes and half-packed bags—her plane was scheduled to leave the next day at noon—seemed to mirror her psychic disrepair. When she tried to pack she found herself stationary at the foot of the bed, grasping lingerie in one hand, her boots in the other, weeping.

She finally knelt against the mattress and slowly twisted into a fetal position. She lay on her side that way, shivering for ten minutes, before she fell asleep.

When the siren wailed two hours later and the helicopters shook the heavy glass doors along the garden, she was so disoriented that at first she thought she was in New York, at Kenneth's apartment uptown, in the big bed. The rustic nightstand made her realize she was in Cabo; then the depths of sleep from which she was ascending suggested that she had just come awake from a dream, that the

hunting trip with Cal had been a dream. But in the moonlight flooding the room she saw her dusty boots and bloody blouse, her scattered bags.

Past the sliding doors she could hear a raised voice, saw a shifting figure—a young man ran across the garden straight towards the foothills. A shaft of halogen white swept through the BioRange complex like an NYPD pass over Central Park West.

She remembered Nell in her stall.

She dressed quickly and ran down the walk past the mimosa trees, past the pool, through the lobby, through the other wing and past surgery along the gravel path to Nursery C. Just above the hills the inversion layer had moved closer to the resort, a low bank of clouds to the north, rolling like a wave on a long reef. A piece of heavy equipment ground overland away from the service road; one helicopter without lights flew so low that she was pushed sideways by its downdraft.

Lights were on in the nursery. The building door hung open; its clinic rooms and hallways were empty, as if they had just been vacated.

And Nell was not in her enclosure. None of the animals were. Valerie fumbled with the lock to her stall, stumbled in and steadied herself in the straw. Her heart was pounding: the air was rich with the odors of dung and grass, hot with silence. She felt a draft of cooler night air—the outside gate to the exercise pen was open. She bent over and pushed through.

In the exercise yard, in the moonlight, what she saw seemed at first a jumble of dream images, some trick of perspective. Kangaroos were leaping over the fence. They were narrow-shouldered blues, fifteen, sixteen of them. She thought she saw Nell's smoky blue tail among them. The animals were circling, running along the fence, gathering speed, vaulting over the fence without effort. Val stumbled forward—then shrank back when she saw three boomers cornered at the far end of the pen. They were big, rust-colored with white faces, had to be from the hills since there'd been none in the nursery. One of them was smeared with blood.

They were squaring off, fighting the staff. The Latino veterinary nurse with the mustache lay disemboweled along the fence, his intestines glistening wet plum and black in the moonlight. Over the fence with graceful leaps blue flyers soared one by one: pregnant females were escaping.

Dr. Levich was screaming, "Hold your fire."

The blue flyers were running off with the children.

One of the women who'd been with Kai was holding her knee, gesturing at the hillside.

Cal's ATV was there, its jacklights bouncing as he turned in concert with a helicopter's spotlight—but the animal they sought would not quite freeze.

On the hilltop stood a large female with a scarred body. Out of her pouch protruded...a filthy face, streaked and blemished. It was not a joey's face, but the unmistakably human face of a feral child of three or four, a boy or a girl, its hair long and matted.

It was the face of a human child.

Its shoulders came out of the pouch now—as if it was being born—its small hands clenched into waving fists. ■



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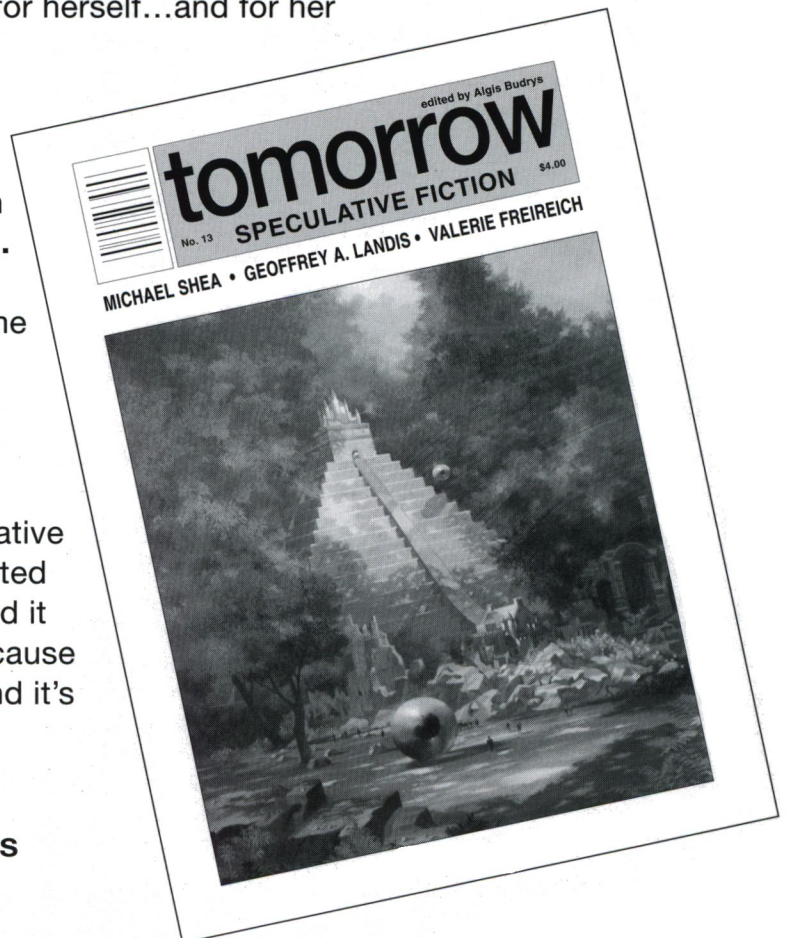
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