

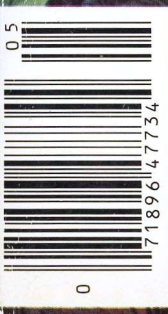
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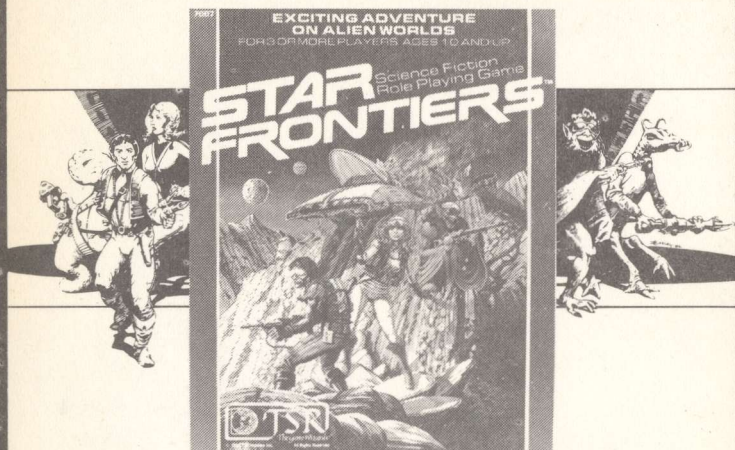
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by Hugo Gernsback

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for "AQUILA: THE FINAL CONFLICT"

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opinion

Robert Silverberg

When the Tylenol poisonings story broke last fall, I found myself in a peculiarly isolated position. For I had never heard of Tylenol; and yet everybody around me seemed to be thoroughly familiar with the drug.

Two factors were responsible for my ignorance. One is my reluctance to use medication except in case of dire need. When dire need arises, I take an aspirin. (I *have* heard of aspirin.) My aspirin consumption is about three tablets a year; with that sort of medical background, I have no real reason to be familiar with newer and better painkillers. The second thing is that I rarely watch commercial television, and, when I do, I invariably tape-record the programs and use my fast-forward control to zip me through the commercials instantaneously when I play my tapes. So I had never been exposed to a Tylenol commercial. I found out about the drug and the poison scare the same way: from my daily newspaper.

No, I don't watch network TV news, either. But almost everyone else does, it seems — because surveys found, a few weeks after the poisonings, that an astonishing 99% of the American public knew about the story. Newspaper readership isn't that high — I am constantly amazed to discover that friends of mine simply don't read them. So it must have been the 11 o'clock news that spread the word about Tylenol so efficiently.

About the same time as I was discov-

ering these things, my local newspaper ran a political cartoon that left me puzzled — because I had no idea who the man in the drawing was. I showed the cartoon to a friend, who expressed surprise that I didn't recognize the Republican candidate for Senator in this year's election. But I didn't. I follow the news in the papers and on the radio, not on television — and I wouldn't have recognized the senatorial candidate, or the gubernatorial one either, for that matter, of either party, if I had bumped into him at the post office. Yet the newspaper automatically assumed that all Californians would know what the cartoon meant: everyone watches TV news, right?

Which set me thinking. Apparently we have all entered the era of the global village that Marshall McLuhan was talking about a few years ago; we are all hooked into a nationwide data-disseminating network; everybody gets the same set of inputs every night (except for a few mavericks like me who are bored by network news programs and wait for the morning paper.) So everyone knows what the Commissioner of the National Football League looks like, and the Secretary-General of the United Nations, and the director of *Raiders of the Lost Ark*. (Except me.) Ten million Americans watch "Wall Street Week" every Friday and rush to call their brokers, first thing Monday, with orders to buy or sell the stocks that are discussed. Everyone knows

who the hero of the World Series was, and how high he threw his glove when the game was won. And so on.

The terrible unanimity and conformity of the national psyche that results from this nationwide electronic communion has been much discussed for decades, of course. The dreary impact of having one hundred million people wondering who shot J.R. — a mania that spread to Europe and gave the global village a few extra suburbs for a while — is awesome to contemplate. But I offer a bit of extrapolative thinking that contains both hope and confusion. This nationwide cathode-ray conformism is about to fall apart, throwing Americans out into a cruel night of mysterious independence of experience. I think the TV networks are in their last decade; and when they go, so too will the community that orbits them.

Cable TV is already fragmenting the audience. Independent channels come snaking into town from halfway across the state, bringing unfamiliar inputs. Some of these cable stations are shipped from much greater distances, via satellite relay — notably that Atlanta channel that turns up on everybody's set. But cable is only the beginning of the upheaval.

There's the video recorder, too. It greatly expands the availability of television programming, and brings with it a vast range of choices that compete with the standard network items of prime time. You don't *have* to watch the evening news, now; you may find yourself watching the movie you taped at three that afternoon, while you were at the office. Or last year's Super Bowl, if football is your dish. (It isn't mine.) Slipping a cassette into the slot completely removes you from the structured grasp of the networks — and from those Tylenol commercials, too.

Finally, direct satellite transmission

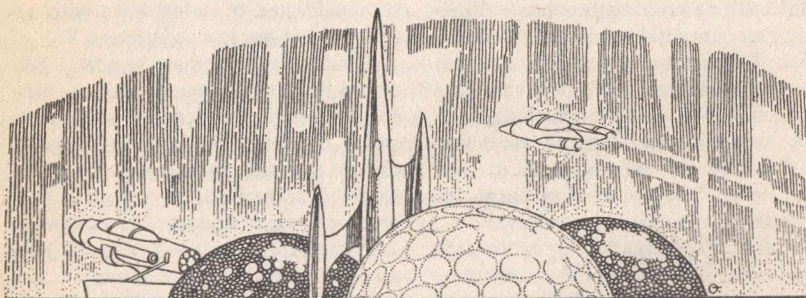
is just around the corner. The way the entrepreneurs tell it, we'll hook up a three-foot-wide antenna, costing a few hundred dollars, that will snare for us any number of broadcasts from the satellites hovering overhead (and thank *you*, Arthur C. Clarke!). Anywhere up to a hundred channels may become available, from all over the world — meaning that we can keep our video recorders busy soaking up twelve or fifteen hours a day of non-network programming, enough to satisfy the most addicted of videophiles without ever having once to switch to CBS.

When all that happens — and it will, doubt it not — one of the least endearing aspects of American life will disappear. The transmission of instant clichés (“at this point in time”) or the latest grammatical blunders (“fortuitous” taken to mean “fortunate”) will be greatly impeded. The circulation of wearisome catchphrases (“Go for it!” “Sock it to me!” “Would you believe —”) will be severely diminished. Your fellow workers will not all be discussing Johnny Carson's program when they show up at the office in the morning.

I don't mean to postulate Utopia. Network TV will not be replaced by a dazzling diet of Shakespeare, Mozart, and Tolstoy. The stuff streaming in over the cables or pouring down from the satellites will probably mostly be the same old junk, or perhaps brand new species of junk. But the point is that people are going to be watching all sorts of *different* kinds of junk, and they're not going to have the same community of information any longer. In the fragmented global village of the 1990s, people may actually have to tell each other the news; and despite the acceleration of data transfer that has steadily been going on all this century, and which is not going to relent, some

degree of swiftness in communication is going to vanish with the breakdown of the big television networks. I think that may be a good idea. Within a matter of days after the Tylenol horrors, dozens of diligent freelance creeps were making their way through our drug-

stores, dropping sinister contaminants into packages of eyedrops and headache pills and whatnot. In a nation less harmoniously unified by electronic media, such ghastly fads may be a little slower to catch on.



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With 1982 well on its way to becoming history, what can be said about science-fiction publishing for that year?

Well, let's just say there was good news and bad news.

First the good. 1982 saw a lot of SF's acknowledged masters come out with new books: *Friday* by Robert A. Heinlein, *2010: Odyssey Two* by Arthur C. Clarke, and *Foundation's Edge* by Isaac Asimov, among others. The books were generally good; many of them made it to the bestseller list.

And now the bad. 1982 was the year of the science-fiction- and fantasy-series book. Not just open-ended series, but the sequel, and more commonly, the trilogy.

So what makes some of this good and some of this bad?

Obviously, it's nice to see the old masters producing, and it's nice to see that product selling well. It's pleasant, too, to read about the new adventures of familiar friends; and the publishers enjoy the series books, since each of the books acts as promotion for the next one, guaranteeing sales ("Be the first one on your block to own all 244!").

But eventually — and here's where the news turns bad — even the most daring of ideas can play itself out. Then what does the writer of a series do — sell his/her name to the publishing house and have other writers ghost more books? Or keep recycling ideas, as a cow does with food by moving it from one stomach to another?

It's very good to see the field's top writers writing and selling well, and if a story needs a series to tell it, then I'm all for it. But the road to financial bliss is a narrow one, lined with bottomless ruts.

1982 saw bestseller lists and top writers make the field financially respectable. Let's hope succeeding years keep it literarily respectable as well.

Retief to the Rescue

by Keith Laumer

Timescape: \$14.50 (cloth)

Retief to the Rescue is the first Retief book I've ever read, so I went into reviewing it by deciding to see how well it stands up on its own. After all, with 11 other Retief books now out (the most recent novel of which was published in 1971), a lot of other readers may find themselves in the same situation.

Unfortunately, when standing on its own, this book staggers like a world-class drunk. I kept waiting to learn something about Jame Retief, the somewhat unorthodox official in the "Corps Diplomatique Terrestrienne." And kept waiting. Right through the final page. You learn nothing about the man, his motivations, his background, or even what he looks like.

You *do* find out in the first chapter that Retief is on an emergency mission to the planet Furtheron, where the two different kinds of inhabitants have been invading and claiming each other's land in a continuous war for a very long time. An inspection team is due the morning after Retief arrives to see how the Terran diplomats are doing in settling the conflict, which is not very well at all.

Laumer knows his diplomacy, obviously, and the bureaucratic double-talk, since Laumer himself was in the U.S. Foreign Service. But the frequently brilliant observations on diplomacy are lost in a storyline that's very difficult to get through. Even for light

SF/adventure, there are too many implausible situations, unbelievable characters — even Retief is merely a plot device to get the story around bureaucrats — and a paper-thin plot.

There is some good satire of diplomacy and those who practice it, but *Retief to the Rescue*, diplomatically speaking, is underwhelming.

The Stainless Steel Rat for President

by Harry Harrison

Bantam: \$2.75 (paper)

A much better attempt at satire, series, and science-fiction is *The Stainless Steel Rat for President*, the fifth book in Harry Harrison's tales of "Slippery Jim" diGriz, a.k.a. The Stainless Steel Rat — unparalleled con-man and sometimes reluctant agent of the Special Corps for the forces of good.

This one follows diGriz, his wife Angelina and twin sons James and Bolivar — all acquired in previous volumes — as they travel to the planet of Paraiso-Aqui, under orders from the Corps to liberate it from a dictatorship ruling in the name of democracy to a real democracy.

Where this differs, in a positive way, from the Laumer book is that it is tightly plotted, easy to follow, and self-contained. You don't have to have read the other four "Stainless Steel Rat" books to enjoy this one, and you can easily understand what's going on. As with the others, you know diGriz and family will escape . . . but it's very entertaining to see how they do it.

Life, the Universe, and Everything

by Douglas Adams

Harmony Books: \$9.95 (cloth)

Douglas Adams has insisted that with the first two books in this trilogy, *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* and *The Restaurant at the End of the*

Universe, he was writing comedy, not science-fiction. Nevertheless, the SF community adopted the series as its own, perhaps because Adams unabashedly takes apart conventions of the genre.

With *Life, the Universe, and Everything*, Adams has written the strongest book in the trilogy: if not in a comedy context, then in a science-fiction one. The latest book is more than just a series of humorous incidents. It actually has a *plot* of sorts, which brings it above the merely amusing level of its predecessors.

The plot: our hero, Arthur Dent, the only man to survive the destruction of Earth, and Ford Prefect, a researcher for the *Guide*, get tangled up in what might be a new series of Krikkit Wars. The old wars took place when the people of the planet Krikkit decided they didn't care for the rest of the universe, and tried doing away with it. Now, they may start trying again, and Prefect and Dent and their cohorts are in the middle of it.

Of course, it's not that simple. But it does wrap up a few loose ends from the previous books, and overall, makes a nice finish to the trilogy. Not spectacular . . . but appropriate.

Fevre Dream

by George R.R. Martin

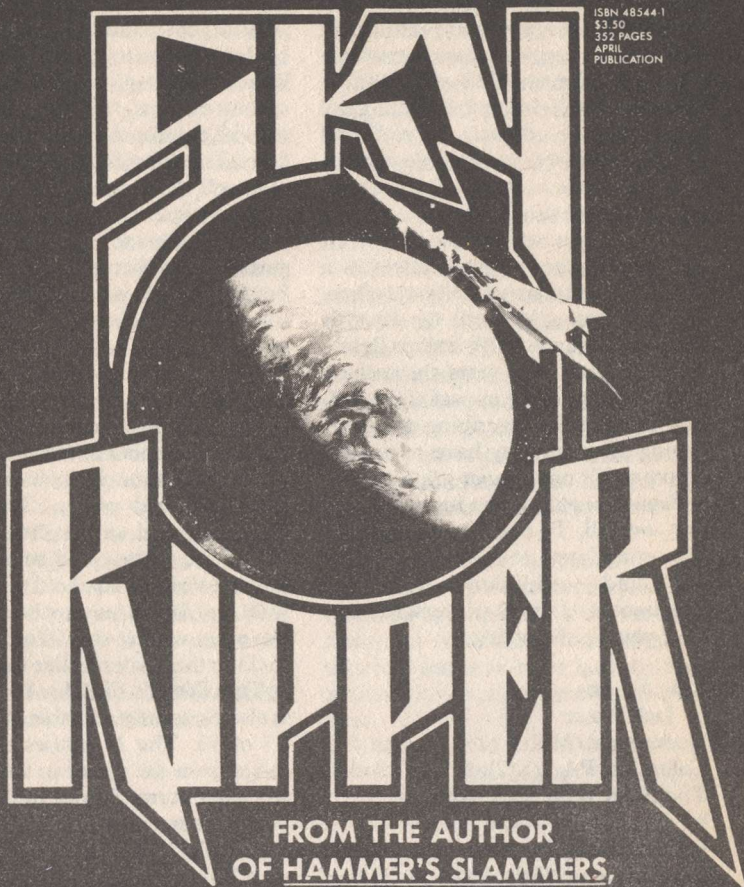
Poseidon Press: \$14.95 (cloth)

You normally don't think of vampires and steamboats at the same time, but in *Fevre Dream*, George R.R. Martin has taken this unlikely combination and turned out a novel that goes beyond either historical fiction or horror.

Imagine, if you will, the year 1857. Veteran steamboatman Abner Marsh is approached by a mysterious stranger, Joshua York, who wants him to build a steamboat — the *Fevre Dream* — and take him down the Mississippi. Enroute


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BY DAVID DRAKE

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WE'RE PART OF THE FUTURE

to New Orleans, Marsh discovers that York is a vampire — with a dream. To unite the remnants of his race.

That's right, race. Martin doesn't give us any of the mirrors-silver-and-garlic brand of vampires. He also doesn't give us stereotypical characters: vampires and humans alike are carefully drawn and well-defined. Checking my criteria for a good story, *Fevre Dream* satisfies all three: memorable characters, believable backgrounds, and realistic plots and situations.

Fevre Dream, set near the Civil War, also uses slavery to good effect as a parallel to human/vampire relations. My only real gripe with the novel is that, on its way to 1870, it skips lightly over the Civil War years themselves, blunting some of the impact of the ending. Then again, describing the intervening 13 years may have gotten tedious, so it's not a major gripe.

Fevre Dream is a fine historical fantasy, overall. To describe the book as "haunting" may be trite, but odds are you'll find yourself thinking about the situations, and the characters, for days after you finish reading it.

Lost Moons

by Jack Vance

Underwood/Miller (239 N. 4th St., Columbia, PA 17512); \$15.95 (cloth)

The Man Who Had No Idea

by Thomas M. Disch

Bantam: \$2.95 (paper)

Stalking the Nightmare

by Harlan Ellison

Phantasia Press (13101 Lincoln, Huntington Woods, MI 48070): \$16.00 (cloth)

Reviewing collections requires balancing what can be a number of disparate works; it's not unlike counting personalities in a schizophrenic. So, with apologies to Spider Robinson, I'll cheerfully trot out my handy Satisfac-

tion Index (SI) for collections and anthologies. Simply put, the SI is the percentage of pretty damn good stories in a book. If a volume gets less than, say, 50, don't bother.

With that in mind, I give *Lost Moons* by Jack Vance a 56. It's one of those increasingly popular limited-run high-quality editions, and Vance apparently doesn't care for the idea, at least in this case. The introduction is one of the most self-deprecating I have ever read. It's only four paragraphs, but it concisely manages to claim the stories are garbage, and that, "The book is nicely bound; the title is great; and since only a few thousand copies are being printed you can always unload on some other innocent, perhaps at a profit if first you tear out the foreword."

Reaction of Underwood/Miller to the foreword notwithstanding, it's not a bad collection. It includes Vance's first published piece, "The World-Thinker", and others from 1945 to 1974. The fantasy and some science-fiction stories inside hold up generally well. *Lost Moons* may not be a standout, but other writers should be so good as to claim that a volume like this is awful.

Tom Disch's *The Man With No Idea* is also pleasantly readable, garnering a SI of 53. The 17 stories and essays range from the clever to the flat (two so-called horror stories in the volume pack no horror, and no punch).

Actually, *most* of the stories pack no punch, but are smoothly and intelligently written. There's not always a complete story in the typical "story" sense, since a lot of the pieces are more of the slice-of-life morality play variety, but Disch keeps you interested by trying various ideas on for size. It's a nice mental massage.

Where Vance will play with an idea and Disch will spar with it, Harlan Ellison will grab it by the throat and

grind its face in the mud.

Stalking the Nightmare is easily the strongest of the three collections, with an SI of 65 for its 20 stories and essays. Even that 65 belies the strength of the collection: there is just *so much* in here, that the number of good stories alone totals more than the entire contents of many collections.

Ellison has taken 4 stories from the out-of-print 1970 collection *Over The Edge*, 4 essays, one new piece, 11 other stories, and revised or rewritten 7 of them. The result is a collection of what might be called tales of the fantastic in a high-quality, small press edition.

Where the stories are weak is where Ellison draws upon his earlier years at the typewriter. Even then, the stories probably aren't all that weak if left to stand on their own — they just appear so when sandwiched in between the newer, more developed Ellison.

In any event, the wide variety of Ellison styles and years represented in *Stalking the Nightmare* makes it something any other fantasy reader would appreciate if you enjoy having your emotions pulled out of you with printer's ink.

The Gernsback Awards Vol. 1, 1926
edited by Forrest J. Ackerman

Triton Books (Box 27934, Los Angeles, CA 90027): \$14.95 (cloth)

Also worthy of note is *The Gernsback Awards Vol. 1, 1926*, the first of 28 quarterly volumes covering the pre-Hugo years. Like the Hugo Awards, the Gernsbacks are named after *Amazing* editor Hugo Gernsback, considered the father of science fiction. The Gernsbacks are retroactive Hugos, covering the years from 1926 to when the Hugos, or Science Fiction Achievement Awards, were started by the fans in 1953.

The Gernsbacks were chosen by roughly 70 fans active in SF before the first World Science Fiction Convention in 1939. The first volume in the series is a high-quality product, even by small press standards, and contains ten stories, original Frank R. Paul illustrations, and original Gernsback introductions to the stories, as well as a somewhat cutesy introduction by Forrest Ackerman.

This collection of Gernsback winners and runners-up is not for everyone, but would be appropriate for the shelf of a dedicated collector, or for someone who just wants to know how the field got its start — and where it's gone since then.

by Robert Coulson

Readers seem to expect a summary of each year in science fiction from their reviewers, as though the reviewers somehow knew more about it. My major problem in summarizing 1982 is that as I write, the year still has six weeks to go. It's quite possible that the blockbuster novel of the year will show up two days after I've mailed this column off. Publishers traditionally make a big push at the end of the year to cash in on the Christmas trade. Since there

is some evidence that books appearing late in the year have less chance of making the Hugo and Nebula ballots, sf authors can thus worry over cash versus prestige, not that most of them have any say in the matter.

Another problem is that science fiction doesn't divide neatly into years. With today's emphasis on multiple-book novels, it may take several years to publish one story. Then there are continuing trends. 1982 continued a

trend in popularity toward fantasy. (Is fantasy popular because many of the good new authors seem to prefer it, or do the authors prefer it because it sells better?)

It's easy to predict, however, that this will be noted as the year in which many of the big-name authors of science fiction's past — hereafter referred to as either The Old Masters or The Old Crocks — returned to the field with major novels. This is the year you get to read Heinlein and Clarke and Asimov and L. Ron Hubbard; and Fred Pohl and Cliff Simak, who haven't been away. (Before you tell me that Heinlein hasn't been away, either, go read his last few books.) These were The Names back in the early 1950s when I started reading science fiction. They've all produced excellent books, and they will probably dominate the Hugo and Nebula ballots next time. And it's a shame, because while I enjoyed all their efforts, my favorite books of the year were written by people like Gene Wolfe, Donald Kingsbury, Hilbert Schenck, and Jaan Kangilaski. But then the authors I really like seldom win awards.

1982 is also the year in which the publishing business underwent an upheaval that had pessimists talking about collapse of the field. Publishers went out of business, or were bought by other publishers, or in some cases were broken up and the parts parceled out to several other publishers. Science-fiction authors are now facing the same problems as everyone else in the country. It may not matter to the readers, however; for them, the present overabundance of science fiction may just be reduced to a more manageable amount. And with that cynical summation, let's get on to the more interesting part of the column.

A Rose For Armageddon

by Hilbert Schenck

Timescape, \$2.50 (paper)

Unless something remarkable comes out in the next six weeks, this is my Hugo nominee. The science is morphology; if, like me, you never heard of it before, *The American Heritage Dictionary* defines it as a study of "the form and structure of living organisms." Schenck's scientists consider society a living organism, and are working desperately to find out how it operates before it stops being one. Their microcosm is a small island near Martha's Vineyard, now deserted except for the scientific teams and a few "summer people". Their hope is to use history, archaeology, zoology, and economics to fully understand the interactions of the people and wildlife who formerly occupied the island, and then apply that knowledge to the fast-approaching collapse of civilization. There are also the half-memories of Dr. Elsa Adams, of an experience she had on the island when she was a girl; something that she feels has tremendous importance if only she can remember it completely.

It's a marvelous book; the scientific possibilities are shown in contrast to the deteriorating outside world and give the reader a sense of the urgency of the characters. (Though it is somewhat of a downer if you stop to think that the solution is fiction while the problems are all too factual.) It may be hard to find by the time this review appears; order it from a specialist dealer or the publisher, pick it up at a convention, scour the used-book stores or borrow it from a friend, but get a copy and read it.

The World of the Dark Crystal

by Brian Froud and J. J. Llewellyn

Knopf, \$25.00 (cloth), \$14.95 (paper)

An oversized volume (11" x 13"),

with art by Froud and text by Llewellyn. It's from the movie *The Dark Crystal*, but instead of being a rehash of the movie plot, this provides the historical and philosophical background of the world and peoples presented in the movie. The movie itself is the product of the "Muppets" creators; Froud was in charge of "conceptual design," whatever that means. Llewellyn is a professor of archaeology at Oxford, and in addition to the main text — theoretically a translation of *The Book of Aughra* — he does nicely-stuffy, professorial captions for Froud's illos.

If the movie is a success, the book will probably become the basis for a new pseudo-religious cult, but don't let that stop you from reading it; it's not only great fun but will probably help explain any obscure parts of the movie.

Battlefield Earth

by L. Ron Hubbard

St. Martin's Press, \$24.00 (cloth)

According to the huge promotional brochure sent along with the novel, Hubbard's last previous stf novel was published in 1950. The brochure lists 102 novels of all types for Hubbard, though most of these seem to have been the sort of thing pulp mags used to list as "a complete novel" and were actually closer to novelet length. Two of his best works, *Typewriter In the Sky* and *Fear*, are generally packaged in one book. The longest of his first-rate stories, *Slaves of Sleep*, was an average-length novel for 1939 but would be considered a tad short today. Thus the sudden appearance of an 819-page novel was totally unexpected. The style, however, hasn't changed; instead of a short pulp novel, this is a very long pulp novel. The added wordage has been used to include more detail and make the plot seem more logical, not to

add any complexity in construction or philosophy. Characters are better described but not any better conceived. It's a fine, fast-paced adventure novel that tends to get boring before you're done with it. I think it might have been twice as good at half the length.

Up To The Sky In Ships

by A. Bertram Chandler

In And Out of Quandry

by Lee Hoffman

Nesfa Press, \$13.00 (cloth)

The New England Science Fiction Association has a medium-length tradition of producing a memorial book of the little-known works of each of its Guests of Honor at its annual conventions. Expanding its field, it has produced a book to honor the Guest of Honor and Fan Guest of Honor at Chicon IV, the 1982 World Convention. The two sections are bound back-to-back in Ace Double tradition, giving Kelly Freas the opportunity to provide two excellent dust-jacket paintings.

The Chandler section includes seven stories which have never before been reprinted: "Chance Encounter" (the first story in which John Grimes appears), "Haunt," "Planet of Ill Repute," "Drift," "Ghost," "A New Dimension," and "The Unharmonious Word." The Hoffman section — not quite half, since Chandler gets 94 pp to Hoffman's 63 pp — consists of eight items from Lee's various fanzines plus her short story, "Soundless Evening," from *Again, Dangerous Visions*.

It's a good blend. Hoffman's material is basically humorous, with frequent serious points beneath the fluff; Chandler's stories are basically serious, very often with a humorous undertone or gimmick. Most of the Chandler material is from the 1950s, though "A Dimension" is dated 1981 and might be consi-

dered a pilot (in the TV sense) for the Ned Kelly novel he's working on. Hoffman's contributions are mostly from the early 1960s, though original publication runs from 1950 to 1972. Together, they're a pretty good sample of the fan and professional work of twenty-five to thirty years ago. There is not all that much difference in quality; the black humor of Hoffman's "Dialogue" is the best single piece in the book.

King of the Wood

by John M. Roberts

Doubleday, \$11.95 (cloth)

I'm a sucker for alternate world stories, even when, as in this one, they are mostly devoted to swords and sorcery. Here, North America has been settled by Vikings, Saxons, and Moors; and the most powerful nation on the continent is Azteca. (Minor quibble; Mexico is just as good an Aztec word as Aztec itself; there seems no point in changing it.) The story takes place in A.D. 1450, when the sword and the bow are still the dominant weapons. Or at least, they are in *this* world; in our own, gunpowder had already supplanted them. Orientals are mentioned here, but the secret of powder evidently hasn't been imported to the West — or hasn't been invented there, if you prefer the more recent theory of independent invention. Plot concerns a young man outlawed for murder, who becomes involved with a witch, travels through all the North American nations, helps Bogotai the Mongol unify the world, and eventually meets his fate. Plenty of blood and gore for the sword-and-sorcery fancier; a fair alternate history idea.

The Pirates of Rosinante

by Alexis Gilliland

Del Rey, \$2.50 (paper)

This third book in the Rosinante ser-

ies continues Alexis's practice of retelling part of the previous book from a different viewpoint, though there is more new material here than there was in the second book. Shaskash, the omnipotent computer, is on its way to godhood while defending Rosinante's independence, and the book combines adventure, economic theory, and humor. Enjoyable.

Adventures of a Two-Minute Werewolf

by Gene DeWeese

Doubleday, \$7.95 (cloth)

One of Doubleday's books for teenagers. Gene has used his experience in picking logical flaws in scores of bad fantasy movies to present a funny account of an inadvertent werewolf and his problems with parents, girl friend, and the local bully. Excellent for younger readers; moderately amusing for adults, despite the somewhat excessive naiveté of the protagonist.

Fear Itself

Edited by Tim Underwood
and Chuck Miller

Underwood-Miller, \$13.95 (cloth)

A collection of articles on Stephen King's horror fiction. Authors include Peter Straub, Chelsea Quinn Yarbro, Fritz Leiber, Charles L. Grant, Ben Indick, and several names less well known to sf readers. There is a tone of awe in much of the material that I find slightly irritating, but it does provide an extensive look at King's material. There's also a bibliography of King's work, and a foreword by King. Particularly recommended to libraries.

The Twilight Zone Companion

by Marc Scott Zicree

Bantam, \$10.95 (paper)

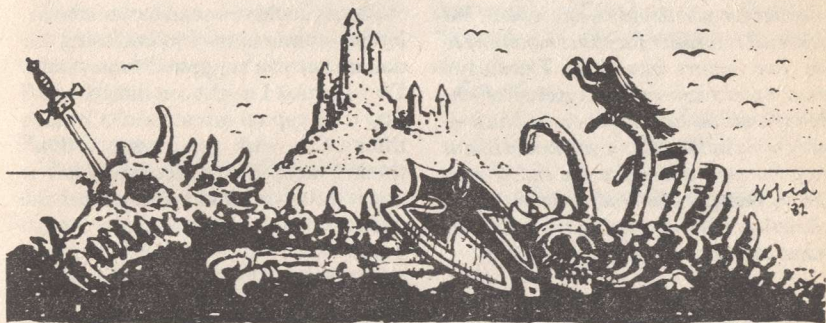
A complete list of the TV episodes, with casts and plots of every show,

along with large quantities of background information and commentary by the author. I agreed with most of Zicree's technical comments and disagreed with most of his social-philosophical ones, which tended to be the sort of humanist doctrine which makes no allowances for real humans. I still found the volume both nostalgic and so fascinating that I had difficulty putting it down.

The Harp and the Blade

by John Myers Myers
Starblaze, \$5.95 (paper)

A sort of swords-and-poetry novel, set in the chaos that was western Europe after the death of Charlemagne. Originally published in 1941; Myers's free and easy prose, and somewhat raunchy verse, has been entertaining a select group of fans for years. A highly original and interesting writing style.



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Here are a few Helpful Hints for writers of Letters-to-the-Editor, which, to tell you the truth, are mostly helpful to the editor, but they are good practice in case you want to follow up with a story or two): First, if you possibly can, please type your letters; don't worry about being letter-perfect and don't hesitate to cross out mistakes as you go along. Second, please double space (between lines, though; not between words), which not only makes it easier for you to put in corrections, but also makes it easier for our compositors to set your letters into type. Third, you must use a fresh-enough typewriter ribbon so that the text comes out in black — not grey. And finally, if you would like us to print your address at the end of your letter, then put your address at the end of the letter; otherwise we'll print only your name and the city in which you live.

Dear George,

So that's where you went.

In a newsstand in a strange city, I spotted an old, familiar friend, Amazing, wouldn't you say? I flipped open the cover and there you were as editor. Naturally, I am sending you my latest effort.

So much for the hype. Here is the story.

Tom Fristoe
Laytonville CA

Indeed, we are just as happy to be here, editing again, as you are to find us thus. Your letter is everything an editor enjoys in a cover letter for a story: brevity, cheerfulness, and a touch of praise for the editorial ego; and we do regret that your story didn't quite work with us.

— Editor

Hi George,

I've gotten the first two editions of *Amazing* that you've done. Very Good. I especially liked the letters section of the November issue. You should consider giving up the editorship and just write letters. Of course, they'd never find anyone who could answer them with quite your flair. Well, with the exception of Asimov. And I doubt if he's available.

Please, could you send me your booklet on submissions? I'm enclosing the dollar that you suggested as payment. Do you think I might convince the IRS that it's a capital investment? Come to think of it, with my income I don't think I need the deduction. Isn't it funny how you don't really need the deductions until you've made enough money that you don't really need the deductions? Think about it! Not too long though; it could be taxing.

I'm really looking forward to your future issues. Good luck.

Thank you,

Cheryl Peterson
Miami Beach FL

Well, it was Darrell Schweitzer who did the Letters in the November 1982 issue of this magazine; glad you enjoyed them. Our apologies for the delay in getting out the booklet Constructing Science-fiction & Fantasy; by now, you should have your copy.

— Editor

Dear Editor:

I just received the first issue of my *Amazing* subscription, and being an avid magazine reader I went directly to the letters column. I am sorry, but I disafree — er — *disagree* with the answer you gave to Irritated In Idaho.

Myself, I think that Somtow explained the Meaning of Life in his short story "The Thirteenth Utopia." Then again, it could have been in his story "Sunsteps," or it may have been in . . .

Oh well, I really think we should hear from the author on this. Ever since he fell into that septic tank in Bangkok, Somtow has been trying to explain the Meaning of Life; I wonder if that means something?

Jim Allen or
Mixed up in Missouri

There are Some Things That Man Was Not Meant to Know, and this whole matter may be several of them.

— Editor

Dear George,

Having fun with my first sub-issue of *Amazing* — enjoying Robert Silverberg commentary, and my fiction favorite so far is Tanith Lee's "Anna Medea." Though the ending came to me before the story ended, the stylish wryness of the writing (reminded me of John Collier) was delicious.

Thank you for the lively mag.

Best,

Tom Tolnay
Middletown NY

Thank you for the lively letter!

— Editor

Dear George:

Finally got my subscription copy of your first issue — I was surprised by Foglio+Freff's "That P.O. Box in Schenectady That You've All Heard So Much About"; now, that's really amazing! Did I hear the zound of a *Zonk!* off in the distance? . . . Maybe it was just another dragon; they're all over this magazine: on the cover, in back, and various points between. It must have something to do with Dragon

Publishing — the name plants the image in my mind of quasi-human beings in an abandoned skyscraper somewhere cranking out dragons on a diabolical, steam-driven printing press long into the American night. And here I was going around saying how I was getting tired of dragons! I guess I can still go around writing NUKE THE UNICORNS! all over the place.

At least Silverberg gave us some quetzalcoatl for a changeling — that story brought back memories: a few months ago I was standing in front of that temple in Teotihuacan . . . Webb's "Threshold" also snagged me, but enough . . .

Ernestly,

Ernest Hogan
West Covina CA

No wonder dragons are supposed to be so cranky . . .

— Editor

Dear George,

IF YOU THINK A TRICK LIKE THAT IS GOING TO PROTECT YOU FROM RECEIVING ANY MORE OF MY MISERABLE MANUSCRIPTS, you've got another think coming! I caught you, sneaking into a new editorship, right off the bat — See? November, 1982 BRAND NEW *Amazing*.

Actually, I refuse to blame myself for your shift. As you are probably gratefully aware, I hadn't sent you a lousy story at (that other magazine) for some time. This was strictly due to your carefully honed criticism as well as to those completely savored moments of paternal encouragement. I simply have withdrawn for a bit to reassess not only Whatisastory but also Whatisa-SFstory. When all that gets processed, you're going to like the results, George, you really are. I know you are. I hope.

Now, don't get nervous. I'm not hit-

ting you with a manuscript just yet. In fact, I'd like to order the booklet *Constructing Scientifiction & Fantasy*, and receive whatever other guidelines you've cooked up at *Amazing*. Check and SASE enclosed. Just so I don't miss anything, you understand.

My main purpose in writing is to let you know what I think of the new *Amazing*. My first reaction is AMAZING! What nice differences. Let's take things one at a time:

ILLUSTRATION: I rarely comment on (let's face it, I rarely notice) covers, but Michael Whelan's bat cum dragon is very nice. Is he available for parties? (The batagron, that is: I'm somewhat antisocial, but I love animals.) The inside art is Ever So Much Better, too. Aren't some of the artists folk I recognize from somewhere else? Of course. George Barr and Artifact do especially appealing work. So much more interesting than all those boobs and thews. You can get boobs and thews almost anywhere these days: good fantasy art is harder to come by.

TYPE: BLESS YOU, BLESS YOU, type-elves everywhere. At last, an *Amazing* I can read! I'm not totally blind, but let me explain it this way: The last time I went to my ophthalmologist for a checkup, he examined me thoroughly (my eyes, that is: he's not a boobs-and-thews fan either, at least in the office) then cocked his head to one side and asked, "Tell me — did you have any particular reason for requesting this exam?" "Well," I shrugged, "it's been five or six years, and I just wanted to make sure my eyesight hadn't gone downhill any further." He paused, scratched his chin, and then smiled gently. "My dear," he said, "you have nowhere left to go." Reading the old type-face was somewhat of a chore: you have now made the magazine eminently readable. The full-page columns

help, too.

CONTENT: Let's take it from the top (or, front as it were):

"Opinion." Good. I like Silverberg, and I like this kind of one-on-one stuff. More!

"Book Reviews," Tom Staicar: Now, them's book reviews. The kind that not only give you a hint at the plot, but a fairly good idea of the author's style, intent, and whether-or-not he/she followed through on promises. Honest enough to let me know if I'm going to be interested in reading the book. Good show.

"An Additional Book Review," Schweitzer. Of course I'll have to have that one.

"Discussions": Well, it's one way to stimulate a "Letters" column. Just see what it did to me! Fun. What more can I say?

And Now For the Stories:

Somehow the major content of this issue reminds me of a lot of talk shows, where various folks come on to plug their books/shows/recordings/whatever. It's a great way to get all those "names" on the cover; but I hope in future you will be going more for original and complete stories, rather than book excerpts. Is that too much to ask? While all of these excerpts are — of course — good writing, some of them leave a little bit to be desired as stories. There's always the sense of something missing that ought to be there. Which is, I suppose, calculated to send us out after the book(s). Well, we'll see.

Another general comment: About these "poems" being published in SF mags lately: George, this is broken prose. Now, trust me on this. Believe it or not. I'm a fairly well-published poet (*Chris. Sci. Monitor*, lit. mags., etc.) I don't know everything about poetry, but I do know broken prose when I see it. These things are pretty good "Proe-

sy," but they are not poems. Punctuation is more important in this kind of stuff than not, by the way. Poems have wonderful things like music, rhythm, enjambments, assonance, metre, and even sometimes (gasp!) *rhyme*, which may be external (end of line) or internal, exact or off or merely alluded to. There has been some entertaining SF *verse* published but not in this *Amazing*.

(Oh no, yet another page. Hang on, old son: we're going to discuss the stories now.)

"Speedship": Yes, well, it has some nice moments in it, the premise and its accoutrements are intriguing, and the problem and pace are involving and don't let down. There's just that background music missing. . . .

"Folia's Story," etc.: Too much missing or too much fairy-tale or something. Just not my bag, maybe: although I love fairy tales and fantasy. Maybe the "formula" is just too hard — not enough magic, at least of language, for this type of tale. I still like the cover art, though.

"Amazing Story": Yeah, yeah, yeah. More one-on-one. I really dig this first-person stuff, a lot more than Q & A profiles. More!

"The Persecutor's Tale": Very good. Mr. Ford has out-Chaucered Chaucer. Some nice psychology and plenty of Magic Words here.

"That P.O. Box": Good effort, but a lot of gimmick without much plot. I like the picture.

"The Changeling": I love Silverberg, as I may have already stated, but he did an Unforgivable Thing in this story. He made his character behave Very Stupidly. The first thing that would occur to any normal human being in this circumstance would be to look in his/her own wallet. Yet, this dum dum, who thinks to look in someone else's wallet, never thinks to look in

his own for I.D. YECH! And then, the big Tomato Surprise at the end, when dum dum *looks in his wallet*. Aw, com'on. Give us a break.

"The Crippled Swan": Another fairy tale. Thinish. So-so.

"Threshold": Far and away the best piece in the book, George. Very moving, very touching, very real. Bravo, Sharon Webb. Shivers and chills. Wow. Good art, too.

"The Incomplete Strategist": I'm incompetent to comment on this, which is obviously bread-and-butter stuff anyway.

"Flare Time": Seems like a tour-de-force, or part of one at least. Interesting from that angle. Interesting premise but a few too many BEMs . . . advances from nightmarish to ridiculous. Sorry.

All in all, the new *Amazing* is a great improvement on the past and a good start toward a better future. Congrats!

(I'll be trying your book, too, George & friends. "The Editors Strike Back" is the line that hooked me.)

As for THINGS HERE: Right now we're waiting to see how many days it takes for Himself to realize that there's a large white rabbit living in the house. In the guest room, actually. . . .

'Bye,

Lee Crawley
Eugene OR

Frankly, we don't understand poetry — or verse — and all we can go on is whether or not we thought we liked it. When we don't like it, we can't really say why; in the same way, we can't explain why we liked — and bought — what you see in these pages.

— Editor

Dear Editor:

This is in response to an inscrutable whim. While I thought Elinor Mavor did a great job of saving an arcane mag-

azine, the new capital of TSR Hobbies, Inc., and the equally open editorial policy of Mr. Scithers are welcome.

But don't listen to any idiots who want to drop Robert Silverberg's column, okay? When Spider Robinson dropped out of the critical set to concentrate on something else, it left us with only two informed and thoughtful voices on the continuing development of SF: Budrys and Silverberg. Budrys (in *F&SF*) uses the book review column as a vehicle for his own perceptive thoughts; Silverberg alone, so far as I've found, simply takes his own first notion as a starting point. (Visions of Robert Silverberg, SF Ruminant, chewing his ideational cud.) It's wonderful, and don't you dare drop it, you new guys, you.

In the late '60s, Richard and Mimi Farina made an album called (I think) "Reflections in a Crystal Wind." Silverberg should adopt that as the title of his column. I bet Mimi Farina would let him. I bet Silverberg wouldn't go for it, since he didn't think it up himself.

Yours,

Craig Menefee
Foster City CA

In general, titles can't be copyrighted; the usual restriction on using a well-known title that has been used by someone else is whether or not the second use is an unfair trade practice, which is to say, is the second user unfairly cashing in on the fame or good will generated by the first. "Omni" is the name of a magazine, an automobile, and a building in Atlanta; but the TV series "Nova" objected — successfully — when a science-related magazine wanted to call itself by that name too.

And no, we wouldn't dare ask Silverberg (otherwise known as Agberg or Silverbob) to stop scientifically ru-

minating.

— Editor

Mr. George Scithers and Distinguished Company:

Many thanks for the September and November issues of *Amazing*. . . . I was not sure whether my subscription had run out or *Amazing* had taken a fall for the last time. I am delighted to see the latter case is not so. I still believe my subscription ran out and this is your way of announcing that the Phoenix has risen again from its ashes.

Therefore, I am enclosing my check for \$16 for two years' subscription for a broad view of what you will be doing with this venerable magazine. You can try for the traditions of Hugo Gernsback, but some of them are a little old-fashioned nowadays. I found a lot of nostalgic humor in Jack Williamson's recollections of those dear, dead days beyond recall. I was a kid then, selling papers on a street corner and as often as not bootjacking an evening away when the exigency of the news brought forth an **UXTRY!** or a **SPESH-SHUL!** to be peddled on the run through residential districts. I don't know how it is in Lake Geneva, but there are no more kids hustling sheets on streetcorners in this city. They went the way long ago of open-air vegetable markets when the city fathers got the idea they were "old-country" and an indication of backwardness. We were the street kids of those days, though we weren't called that, which is an expression coined by latterday televisionese. We were called a lot of other things, though, the least of which was "no goods," but we could take that in stride, except if you wanted a fight, try calling us by that sissy name: "newsies"!

I first found *Amazing* in the August, 1928 issue. I can still see that garish cover in the sight of my mind — some

fellow in red underwear floating in the air against a yellow sky, being viewed from the ground by an elderly man and a young woman, both appearing much astonished. That cover illustrated Part I of "The Skylark of Space." I cherish a paperback issued some years ago, autographed to me by that ace of science fiction writers, "Doc" Smith himself, on the occasion of his passing through Portland after his retirement.

Anyway, that one issue addicted me. I rapidly (as I could) gained possession of all the back issues. They were to be found in stacks in a certain second-hand bookstore, where they sold six for a quarter. You read them, took them back and traded two for one. You read those three, took two back and got one. You read it, joined it with the leftover and got one more to read — 11 magazines for a quarter. Then you started in six more and went through the same ritual, joined the last two and got a final copy — 23 copies for fifty cents!

I read *Amazing* regularly up to and during the war — World War II, that is — or until the so-called "Shaver mystery" made me sick of such trash. When I was overseas with the U.S. Marine Corps, I received copies of *Amazing*, *Famous Fantastic Mysteries*, and other current science fiction regularly (except in the thick of battle on Okinawa). Later, sometime in the fifties, *Amazing* published three science fiction novels of mine. I had been writing for a spell then, starting with *Weird Tales*. I sold *Weird* a half dozen or so stories. The first one made the cover and so did the last one. That was the issue that symbolized the sinking ship and whatever I had coming for that novelette sank with it.

I guess during the fifties and into the sixties I had stories in all but a negligible number of science-fiction magazines. Alas, what has happened to those

good old days when H.L. Gold, unable to stomach the raw language in a story of mine, changed my expression "naked women" to "nude ladies" before publishing it?

A couple of my novels were translated into Spanish and German and a long novelette appeared in a German magazine called *Terra*. Oddly enough, one novel published by the Germans was originally titled *Simultaneous Worlds*. It was published under the title *Magnanthropus*, the name of the master race the novel was involved with. The Germans recreated the title into *Wenn Welten sich Begegnen* — When Worlds Meet, which is about as close as you can get to "Simultaneous Worlds," *nicht wahr?* There was no collusion on my part, either.

I guess I must have had a couple of dozen stories published, but by then I was so busy writing copy in an advertising agency I had little strength left for side-lining. Retiring in ill health, I undertook to do an article for *Popular Mechanics*; and for the next seven years I was kept going, supplying them with how-to articles, as well as sales to some of the other similar books. When I had exhausted my grasp in that field, I made connections with a publisher in the arts and crafts field and wrote a number of books of that genre. Then my publisher discovered my linguistic aptitude and sent me books in Dutch, German, and French to be translated for publication. I did several dozen such books, and I am a registered translator here and still occasionally do a Dutch book or magazine article — generally of a technical or scientific nature, as the grasp of English of most translators does not have so wide a scope.

Anyway, with no intent of boring you further, let me get to the subject that interests YOU — the new *Amaz-*

ing. You have made a *splendid* start with the new typeface. Somebody once called sans-serif type a “shantytown typeface,” and that is about it, even though I dealt with it in all its forms for over twenty years in advertising.

Getting back to paragraph 2 and Hugo Gernsback, Jack Williamson mentions that the name “scientifiction” was coined by Hugo Gernsback but he failed to mention how this came about. Some time in the early thirties, H.G. promoted a “contest” in the magazine over I don’t know how many months, asking readers to submit a new name for this “new kind of fiction.” I sent in an entry, I forget what, but I did not know until I attended the Chicon in 1950 that it was H.G. himself who had copped the grand prize. He confessed before the audience that the “contest” had been only a circulation gimmick. He already had the name “scientifiction” in mind before the “contest” was announced.

H.G. promoted another “splendid idea” at the Chicon. He suggested to the audience that a LAW be passed to the following effect: If a *machine* or a *device* of any kind should ever be invented, that had *ever been mentioned* in a science fiction story, the author of said science fiction story must receive royalties on the sale or sales of said *machine* or *device*. Hoo, boy!

You have made a good start toward reviving *Amazing* — more pages, a better, more readable typeface, a more open feeling of atmosphere. The overall tone of the magazine is a good octave higher. Keep up that pitch!

I liked Silverberg’s handling of the changeling theme. His style is all lean, no fat. I like that, too.

Cheerio and best wishes.

Manly Banister
Portland OR

P.S. Give my regards to the Dragon — I love his books and games!

Elinor Mavor was using Souvenir, a typeface with small serifs (which are the small flourishes that branch out sideways from the ends of the straight strokes of letters, and which help you to see the difference between the capital “I” and the lower case “l”). We are now using Plantin, which is a rather compact typeface. This page is set in 9 point type on 10 point spacing, while the fiction in the magazine is set somewhat larger: 10 points on 11. (A point is a measure of the vertical height of the type; there are about 72 points to the inch.) For comparison Analog is set in Times Roman, 9 points on 11. Isaac Asimov’s Science Fiction Magazine and Ellery Queen’s Mystery Magazine are both set in Century Schoolbook Roman, 10 points on 11 (and the similarity is no accident: we copied the EQMM format when we started IA’sfm). Plantin, however, puts 5% to 10% more words per page at the same type size and leading.

Arthur C. Clarke would be even richer than he is today if Gernsback’s suggestion had indeed become LAW.

Arthur Bernhard, the former publisher of this magazine, told us that he knew Gernsback; he was, Bernhard said, always an idea man.

— Editor

Dear Editor and Publisher:

HOORAY!

Today I was astonished to find a bulky envelope from “Dragon Publishing” in my mailbox. (Did I order something from a Dragon?) You can’t imagine my delight to learn that not only was *Amazing* still alive and well, but one of my favorite editors and one of my favorite organizations had come to its rescue.

Isaac Asimov’s SF Magazine rekindled

a long-dormant interest in SF a few years ago, and since then I've enjoyed reading several of the leading SF magazines. *Amazing* always had a special place in my heart, though, both because of its venerable ancestry, and the fact that it dared to be a little more "far out" than the other SF magazines.

I certainly appreciate your sending me my copy by first-class mail, but I hope you don't have to do that so often that the poor Dragon goes bankrupt.

I look forward to many happy years of reading and enjoying.

Sincerely,

John E. Rieber
Beaverton OR

The use of first class mail was an attempt to make up to our subscribers some of the delay in sending out those issues. Fear not: we are reverting to second class mail as quickly as we can. Subscription copies will still be sent out in envelopes, however!

— Editor

Dear Mr. Scithers,

Congratulations on the first issue of the new *Amazing*. It's a beauty.

I have been reading science fiction for a bit more than thirty years now; cut my teeth on *Galaxy*, *Fantasy & Science Fiction*, and the like. Over a period like that you get to do a bit of

sorting out. This magazine of yours is good.

For example, "That P.O. Box in Schenectady . . . etc." is one of the funniest and most unpredictable stories I have ever read; just lovely. And "The Changeling" was marvelous. Writers have been dealing with parallel universes in the most pompous possible ways recently . . . what a treat to read about a real, live human being who gets caught in one.

More power to you. I don't know whether or not you can get some of the heavyweights back into the action . . . for my money Alfred Bester's *The Demolished Man* and Theodore Sturgeon's *More than Human* are two of the best things ever done in the genre.

Keep it up.

Yours sincerely,

Julian Carter
Garrison NY

We cannot recreate — in you — the excitement that you felt when you first read those classics. What we can do — and must do if the magazine is to return to the publisher the effort and time and money that have been put into these issues — is to publish stories that will be that exciting to people just beginning to read science fiction now.

— Editor

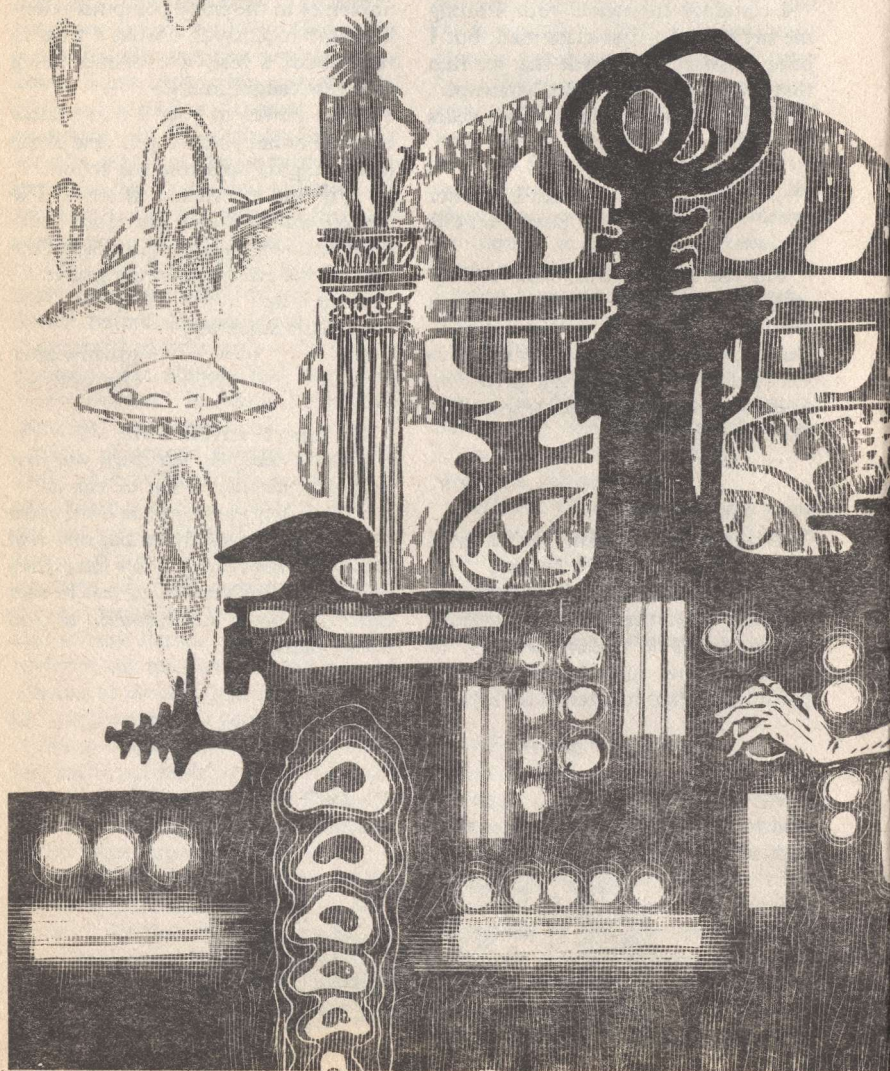


AQUILA:

THE FINAL CONFLICT

by Somtow Sucharitkul

art: Frank Kelly Freas





Mr. Sucharitkul tells us that perfect understanding of everything, including, presumably, his fiction, can only be achieved if one reaches the state of *bhakti*, the nature of which remains mysterious to your editors, for all that, at a recent convention, he was seen to display a kind of idol which he referred to as "*Bhakti the Wonder Shrew*." It looked like a stuffed triceratops to us. But then, you know how inscrutable these authors are, especially ones who claim to have learned hieroglyphics while playing with the limbs of mummies at Eton. We might also mention that Somtow is an avant-garde musical composer of some note. The music scene, he says, is so strange that he turns to science fiction to escape into sanity and normality. His most recently published books are *Light on the Sound* (*Timescape*) and *Fire from the Wine-Dark Sea* (*Starblaze*). This story is part of a forthcoming one, *The Aquiliad*.

It is all very well to bow and scrape and agree with everything that is told one when one is in the august Presence of Marcus Ulpius Trajanus, White and Greatest Father, Caesar Augustus, Pater Patriae, and so on and so forth, when he has taken the trouble to cross the Oceanus Atlanticus and brave the wilderness to address a procurator of a remote province in Terra Nova, most distant, most intractable, and most eccentrically barbaric segment of the Imperium Romanum. But it is quite another thing, I'm afraid, to go ahead and obey his commands once he has departed for Rome and is almost a year's journey away.

Trajan had told me to take the hot-air balloons he had obtained by trade from the southern land of Olmechia, and to cross the Oceanus Papinianus (as I still insist on calling it, despite its vulgar appellation of the Oceanus Pacificus) in search, once again, of the land of Chin and a direct route to the silklands across Roman territory. This was an imperial command, and as such issued from the mouth of deity (or prospective deity at the very least); but it was still a ludicrous impossibility. Nothing would induce me to go up in the air in one of those things. It wasn't natural, simple as that. Even as prosaic a conveyance as a paddleboat made me sick; I had travelled by motor-car in my childhood, by ship and by horse in my young manhood, by elephant across the Montes Saxosi in my middle age . . . and I wasn't about to try anything new now! Not with the Emperor safely tucked away across the sea, at least. . . .

For I had returned in a relative triumph to my governmental seat of Caesarea-on-Miserabilis. We had no gold or silk, true, but we did have a considerable booty of smoked salmon obtained from the Quaquiutish natives of the Northwestern country, and we *did* have Abraham bar-

David, the Judaeen Sasquatch, to exhibit as proof of our prowess — not to mention the two hot-air balloons which I ordered permanently anchored to a little Temple of Mars just outside the town walls, in our little equivalent of the Campus Martius. But after a day or two of the usual ballyhoo, and after I'd celebrated with the usual games, gladiatorial combats and so on, and done the usual sacrifices, I was all ready for a few years of quiet. Nikias and Aaye went back to running their Academy of Sophistry and Casuistry, built with money from my own pocket; the Emperor Trajan, who had stayed in Caesarea for a month, with considerable drain to the city coffers, had finally left me with nothing to show for it but the title of *Sasquaticus* — *conqueror of the Sasquatch*, and an enormous bill for some triumphal arches that he had had built at all the major crossroads of the town. These latter were truly absurd: those who knew about art had a field day criticizing their monumental gaudiness, and our miserable peasants and merchants cursed them roundly for congesting traffic.

Well . . . there it was.

Trajan was gone, much to everyone's relief; Abraham bar-David had been adopted by Aaye and Nikias, and was professor of Hebrew studies at the Academy the two scholars had founded on the Via Augusta, by the left bank of the Miserabilis. My ex-wife, the Lady Oenothra, was happily ensconced as Queen of the Quaquiutii and wife to Chief Hooting-Owl; now and then she'd send me a chatty letter, to which I would occasionally respond. What an idyllic life it was!

If only Aquila hadn't . . .

Yes. I was partaking of my Iracuavian wine in the main atrium of my palace in Caesarea when a message came to me from Aquila. It was brought to me by a young boy, one of the octogenarian's innumerable offspring — the old codger was, by all accounts, randy as a stallion, and indefatigable in his pursuit of the *ars amatoria*, not to mention the amatory arse — who burst in quite rudely bearing a message tray on which was a scroll sealed with Aquila's personal seal: an eagle astride a laurel wreath.

"Hey, procurator!" said the boy rudely. "My father wants you to have this." He thrust it at me and started to leave.

"Ha! *Tokin ya la hwo?*" I said in my now fluent Lacotian: that is to say, *quo vadis?*

"Aquila is dying. He wants you."

"Didn't he teach you any manners?"

"Oh, sure, your Lordship. But he says I don't have to bow and scrape to a bumbling bubblenosed general like you."

"Succinctly put," I said, trying not to be bothered by this diminutive monstrosity. "And he wants me to see him before he dies, I suppose, eh, what? He sends me this ludicrous twit of a messenger to call me to his

deathbed? Well, I never! Glad to see him go, in a way; always full of himself, never did see the innate superiority of us Romans. Still, I'll miss him. Is he ill?"

"No, of course not, you dimwit!" the child piped. "He's hale and hearty as ever."

"Then what's all this about?"

"Good day to die, that's what he says. Made us children spend the whole day gathering all his pipes and paraphernalia, getting all his buffalo robes ready and what have you. What a nuisance! I'm surprised he even had time to think of *you*. Well, General, I have to be off, now. I've to go to the Academy and tell Nikki and Fuzzyface and the Old Fart about it. Tata!"

"Wait!" The boy turned beneath the statue of Aquila which still adorned the atrium, though I seldom had time to anoint it with rotten fruits anymore. I didn't quite know why I'd called after him. Perhaps it was just to make sure I hadn't lost my touch, you know. Voice of authority and all that. If I couldn't order a mere stripling around, how was I to command armies? I hadn't been in the field itself for years, actually — didn't care to much now. I'd developed a considerable paunch from the high-aurochs diet of the great plains. I looked at the boy for a moment.

"Well, you little hemiobol, you might show a little proper grief at the man's death, you know!"

"He told us to rejoice!" said the boy defiantly. Suddenly I noticed that he was holding back tears. I looked at him for a while longer, then I tossed him a bronze *as*.

"Golly! Thanks a lot, General!" he said, and then squirmed off down the corridor.

"I'm getting soft," I said to the empty atrium. Sitting down at my table, I signed half a dozen crucifixion warrants and a score or two of floggings: all in a day's work. "Soft, soft, soft!" I doubled some poor wretch's *poena* to a fifty years' enslavement on a paddleboat treadmill. I went back and tripled the number of lashes on all the flogging warrants. But I still wasn't satisfied. "What's the damn matter?" I shouted to no one in particular.

Then I sat back, quaffing away at my wine, thinking of the past. Of Aquila and I facing the Olmechian high-priestess. Of the flying-saucer people. Of the ridiculous elephant odyssey and the mad *potlatching* ceremony in which we'd participated. And finally I remembered the flying city of the saucer people; the green were-jaguars muttering on about the final spectacle, the final spectacle —

And suddenly I understood the true cause of my unease.

The final spectacle!

For a year it had haunted my thoughts, and I hadn't even known it. I wanted to see this thing, to participate in whatever it was . . . the conflict

of the million universes, whatever it was called. We all needed something to enliven our lives; governing this remote province was a dreadful bore really, and the arcane sophistry of Nikias, Aaye, and Abraham was often unintelligible to the Lacotians to whom it was expounded, so there probably wasn't too much meaning in *their* lives either. It was time to *do* something! But we couldn't do it without Aquila. I made up my mind.

"Slaves!" I cried out. Several scurried in, bearing my mantle of office, my wreath, my sword, and so on. "Have my chariot ready. I shall go outside the city gates. Oh, and summon a couple of homines medicinae, will you? I'll be needing advice on native customs and so on. Especially funeral rites."

"*Tokin ya la hwo, domine?*"

"To the sacred burial grounds!" I said grandly, as they started to deck me in my most impressive robes.

I raced through the crowded lanes of my home city, pausing now and then to urge my yoked horses out of a rut. With tempestuous celerity I hurtled through the agora, as vendors scurried to cower behind wine vats and food bales. I did not stop as I usually did to examine the gorgeous main street with its statues of Vacantanca, Minerva, Caesar and me, but hurtled madly towards the city gates, ignoring everything. Soon a dozen young boys and girls, each dressed in his finest toga praetexta or gown, eagle-feather wreaths, and leggings, each with that excruciatingly memorable aquiline nose and supercilious smirk, were following after me, hollering madly: "Aquila's funeral! Aquila's funeral!" and I heard the shout taken up everywhere. Soon we were joined by a horde of young women, all blessed with those same familiar facial features, ululating madly as is the funerary custom among the Lacotians, bawling and caterwauling as if to wake the very dead. In a trice we were at the city gates and the guards hastened to crank the portals open.

"This is quite the merriest funeral I've ever encountered!" I screamed at the charioteer, as we went through the gates onto the Via Augusta, lined with oak trees and with the odd crucified criminal. Soon it seemed that half the population of Caesarea-on-Miserabilis was jogging behind me.

"Don't forget," I shouted, "to stop off at the Academy!"

We lurched down a side lane, and presently were at the Academy's decorative iron gates, over which stood the superscription "No entrance without mathematics." This was a tribute to the ancient Academy of Plato, of course.

"Well," I said, as we halted, "I've never been much good at figures, so I suppose I ought to wait here." Behind me the women came to a break in their cacophonous wails of mourning.

A new chorus of ululations issued forth from within the Academy,

however, as we saw the three academics, followed closely by their wives (for each of them had taken a native spouse); and they were a comic spectacle indeed, for each had decked himself in the mourning style most appropriate to his country of origin: Nikias had shorn off a lock of his gray hair and rent his chiton; Aaye the Egyptian was in a long white robe and one of those metal pointed beard-things and was lugubriously waving various sceptres of power as though he were about to officiate over a mummification; and the sasquatch, his head covered with a veil, was rocking from side to side and weeping copiously. At this awesome sight, those behind me resumed their chorus of consummate grief.

"Jove help us!" I said. "I'll be deaf by the time we reach the sacred burial grounds."

I called for an oxcart to transport the gray academicians and their wives and lackeys, and the procession continued apace along the Via Augusta. Our destination, a hillock some three or four mille passus from the city, could already be seen. Soon we had gone off the main road and were bumping up and down as we negotiated a road composed, in equal parts, of mud and boulders.

"Don't they ever fix these roads?" I said. "Considering how much I tax these natives, we ought to be able to afford to pave the way to their sacred places at least!"

We stopped again. The children were mobbing my chariot; I noticed among them that smug and smarmy urchin who had first given me Aquila's summons.

"Why are we stopping?" I said.

Two impressive braves on horseback rode down the hill to greet us. "You are trespassing, O Procurator!" they said in almost perfect unison. "This is sacred land."

"But I'm the bloody governor!"

"General, you will recall the treaty signed by General Pomponius Piso the elder more than fifty years ago," said the first brave, "when, at the battle of the Flumen Pulveris, or Powder River, your general was roundly defeated by Chief Aquila. It was agreed upon that no Roman would ever molest our sacred burial grounds again, was it not? This is Lacota land."

"What do your native superstitions mean to me, who am the mouth-piece of Caesar himself; your supreme god? Let me pass, I say!"

"Let him through, Taurus Sedentarius!" the child piped up. "Aquila invited him to the funeral."

The two conferred between themselves for a moment. Then the second spoke up. "You may pass," he said. "But give this earth due respect."

"I'll be happy to officiate at whatever sacrifices seem necessary, as representative of the Pontifex Maximus —"

"Be silent!" the brave said. "Come." We followed him. Soon what passed for a road evaporated into a mass of rocks and shrubbery. Here and

there stood a pole topped by a sacred aurochs skull painted in red, black, and white, the three colors betokening the three attributes of Earth, Night, and Day. The wailing began once more. Now there were platforms raised up on poles, decorated with feathers and scalps and skulls, on which lay skeletons, all dressed in the finest of buffalo robes; they were covered with things precious to these Lacotii: with rattles, favorite weapons, and strings of beads dotted here and there with Roman coins. And yet these were old skeletons; I saw none recently dead, and I saw no coin newer than from the reign of Nero, so I knew that these were braves and chieftains who had died as long ago as that famous battle of the Flumen Pulveris.

"This must be the wrong place," I said. "I don't see Aquila anywhere. Besides, there's no rotting smell such as you'd find, say, in the Roman catacombs."

At this the hideous little brat began to cackle uproariously. "Why, you silly old general," he said, "this is just the *old* part of the burial grounds. My father wouldn't lie among *these* old fogies. Besides, if you can't smell, I 'spect you do have eyes, don't you?" He pointed upwards. I saw vultures circling. I shuddered.

"This way," said the dour braves who had come out to meet us. We rounded a bend of the hillock; and there I beheld the most astonishing sight.

In a clearing shaded by oak trees stood more of the death-platforms; but these were mounted not on poles, but on miniature Ionian, Dorian, and Corinthian columns of fine marble; and the aurochs skulls rested in niches carved with cupids. "Good heavens!" I said. "Roman culture comes to the barbarians even here, then!"

And I saw one platform up ahead. A sign over it, engraved on a plate of marble, read **AQUILA** followed by a lengthy inscription in the Greek-alphabet transcription of the Lacotian tongue. I couldn't really tell much about what it said, though it did mention the number of times he had counted coup and had a brief account of his adventures that seemed none too flattering to me!

Beneath it, the old man was dancing madly, waving a rattle from time to time and wheezing strangely. Around him watched a curious crowd, many of them in tears.

"Ah, there you are, General Papinian. You're just in time to hear my final dispensement of deathless wisdom," Aquila said, coughing a little. He seemed frail; his skeletal frame hardly filled the Senatorial toga that he wore, and the eagle-feather wreath came half-way down his face.

"You don't look too well, old friend," I said, and went to embrace him. This we did, and all the while he pranced feebly up and down and sang.

"You're very lucky to be able to hear my death-song," Aquila said. "An eagle taught it to me once, long before you were even born; it was on

a spirit journey that I took when I was a stripling no bigger than this nipper here." He looked fondly at that selfsame obnoxious brat. I glowered. "This is my youngest child," he said. "As regards my death-song, General Papinian . . . I give it to you, if you can remember it. It is my parting gift to you, a man of whom, despite his arrogance, cultural chauvinism, and impenetrable denseness, I have become a little fond. Heyaha! Those were fine adventures we had, eh? The Parthians. The Olmecs. The Quaquiutii. The Were-Jaguars. The Megapodes. *Hechitu welo!* I wish I had it to relive all over again. . . ."

"Can't I have your deathsong, pop?" said The Brat.

His father patted him fondly. "No, *michinkshi*. I have already given you many songs."

"But they're not real ones! You just make them up as you go along!"

"Eya! Just like life itself, eh, General? Now listen carefully to these words —" He began to wheeze again, and despite my grasp of Lacotian I could hardly understand him.

"Stop!" I said. "You can't die yet!"

"But it is a good day to die! The sun is shining, the weather is warm, so I won't freeze to death as I lie there thinking about the Great Mystery."

"But I'm planning another expedition!"

"Bah! Take The Brat with you."

"Don't you want to see China? To ride the hot-air balloons across the sky? To take ship over the Oceanus Papinianus, and see the Final Spectacle promised us by the flying saucer people?"

"I'm old, I tell you!" he said a little doubtfully.

I pressed my advantage. "Just think of it! To fly like the eagle itself, the *aquila* — to be king of the wind —"

"But I *will* be, my dear general, and soon! For my grandfathers are calling me."

He began to caper ever more energetically, and I thought he would drop dead at that very moment. Some Lacotian braves were preparing a stretcher on which to lay his body, lining it with buffalo robes and silken cushions and were-jaguar jade amulets and a Roman war-helmet and a fascis medicinae full of fragrant herbs —

The ululating of the women reached fever pitch —

Suddenly, from nowhere it seemed, stormclouds began to gather overhead. Lightning flashed dramatically, followed by a deafening peal of thunder. I nearly jumped out of my skin. Then it began to rain.

Abruptly, Aquila stopped dancing. "Bah! Wrong dance again! I really *am* getting old," he said.

"There you are! It's not such a good day to die after all, Aquila. You'll be drenched! Now, how about a nice long soak in the caldarium of the Caesarean baths, followed by a nice massage from some voluptuous handmaidens, a goblet of wine chilled with Saxosic snow . . . and a nice

long discussion of the logistics of our next adventure?"

Aquila looked a little dubious.

"Well?" I said. "Tell me there's some life in your aged bones yet!"

Aquila looked at me for a long time. "You only want me with you," he said, "so I can save your life again!"

"Well, you've already saved it half a dozen times, old chap. I need the insurance, you know."

"Eh! Well, I suppose I can always die some other time," he said, shrugging.

"There's an oxcart waiting at the foot of the hill to take you back to the city."

"No thanks. If I'm to go adventuring again, I'd better run. Keep in shape, you know. Hey, little Brat! Race you to Papinian's Palace!"

When I turned around they were gone. And so were the vultures. Now by what magic had he conjured up the storm and forced me into this blasted adventure? Now I couldn't turn back.

"Damn this accursed Lacotian savage!" I screamed. "He planned this whole thing to force my hand! *I* never asked for any bloody adventures! I'm just an average sort of governor of a remote quiet province, sitting in my palace, minding my own business —"

But everyone just laughed at me.

Well! Westward again it was, and this time with the largest and strangest force ever assembled within the confines of the Roman Empire; for I had decided that if we were indeed to find the fabled land of Chin, or to encounter that Final Spectacle of which the were-jaguars had said so much, it would be best to meet spectacle with spectacle, to try to do Mother Rome proud. Moreover, since we would, theoretically at least, be travelling within the confines of the Empire, we could afford to move slowly and with pomp, and without fear of attack from the savage hordes, at least till we reached the shores of the Oceanus Papinianus; thenceforth, of course, we would be on our own.

There were to be no elephants this time: I had learnt my lesson among the Quaquiutii. Apart from that — for I have no particular desire to describe the same scenery twice — our progress from Caesarea-on-Miserabilis to Urbs Celeritatis, now a bustling market town, and thence onward through the Montes Saxosi into Quaquiutia, was much as I have intimated elsewhere.

There were, however, a number of differences. I was Titus Papinianus Lacoticus Sasquaticus Dux et Imperator now, not one of your carping nobodies who have risen to power by bribery or by bedding the Emperor or his appropriate concubine; and this time I travelled in style. Behind me marched an entire legion — six thousand men — not the old Thirty-

Fourth made up mainly of Lacotii, Sianii, and the odd Iracuavius or Seminolius, and only a few Europeans. We carried scorpiones, ballistae, and catapultae aplenty; and soon we were to need them all.

For my . . . ah . . . conquests to the west of the known Empire had not proved quite as thorough as I had led Caesar to believe, of course. Every now and then, a pack of Siosionii or Sianii, or even the far-ranging and brutish Apaxae, would come charging up to us, and we would be forced to despatch them in true Roman fashion, staying put in the testudo formation while the savages dashed themselves to bits against our unassailable war-engines. Thus we spent a pleasant summer; Aquila and I would ride on ahead, whilst my gaggle of academics, serving wenches, and other human paraphernalia proper to a travelling procurator's court, followed behind in a new kind of conveyance recently become popular in Terra Nova: the covered wagon.

If only that bloody child, Aquila's youngest, hadn't bawled his way into our company! Equus Insanus, for that was the Latin translation of *Shunka Winkte*, his barbarous name, was constantly underfoot, and the Legion had made him their mascot besides. What a spectacle!

But let me not carry on in this vein too long. The idyllic trek through Roman and almost-Roman territory led us all too soon to Quaquiutia and to Hooting-Owl's village. We'd set him up as an interim governor, and he was now married to Oenothra the Vast. Our rather impressive company trooped into the village, and soon the legionaries were everywhere: gawking at the totem poles, making cow-eyes at the women, and *potlatching* away their helmets and daggers for plates of smoked salmon. Trade with the Empire having enriched Hooting-Owl considerably, I noted with pride the beginnings of culture. The old wooden *potlatch*-lodge was now dwarfed by a huge structure of marble: a circus, by Jove, ready for the performance of a spectacle! Ahead of me was a forum in the classic style, although the fact that the columns were neither Dorian, Ionian nor Corinthian, but were instead merely marble totem poles, did upset me a little. Still, they were only savages, and at least they were trying.

And just then Hooting-Owl and Oenothra came out to me on twin palanquins borne by some stubby-looking slaves who were covered from neck to toe in furs, despite the sweltering weather.

"Oh, I say, old chap!" came Hooting-Owl's voice. My goodness, he'd changed. More Roman than the bloody Romans, if you ask me. He jumped down rather ungracefully from his litter and trotted up to embrace me; I took care to turn my nose upwind, for the stench of raw and rotting fish had come wafting towards me even at fifty paces. But even with my nose held stiffly erect, I could not miss the odor, unpleasantly blended as it was with attar of roses.

"I see you've taken to using perfume," I remarked. At an aureus a vial, attar of roses (even laced with rancid fish) was not to be sneezed at.

"Oh, heavens, yes. Got it by *potlatch* from some Roman traders, you know, in exchange for the marvelous elixir that you yourself, O procurator, once vouchsafed to me! A cure for baldness, eh, what? Renders the male member indefatigable in its ministrations to the fairer sex? Am I quoting your Egyptian friend aright?"

"My dear fellow —"

"Pshaw! No hard feelings, Titus old bean. Capital idea of yours, this 'behind curtain number three' business and all that, you know. Did it to all the neighbouring tribes. The Tlingit don't know *what* hit them! That's how I got these pudgy furry slaves, you know. They're Aleutii from the roof of the world — *very* scarce, let me tell you! Yes, all this Roman savvy and *potlatching* expertise has certainly taught me a thing or two, old thing!"

"How shameful!" Aquila snorted. "That you should so far forget the ways of your ancestors —"

"Well, I say, you're hardly in a position to complain, old chap. Senator, eh? Toga praetexta, eh, what? Gilded laurel wreath? Ancient ways my arse! Let's face it, Rome is the wave of the future, and I'm happy to throw in my lot with her. Oh, and procurator . . . you like my new arena?"

"I can hardly wait," I said, "to see my first spectacle there!"

"Not for some time, I'm afraid. We've no funny animals out here; and no one seems interested in getting killed, either. Ah well. These savages still have a lot to learn."

"You can say that again . . . oh, Aquila, don't get upset, the man's at least having a go at being civilized, and . . . Equus Insanus, come back at once!"

"Shut up, pumpkin-nose!" said the child, as he darted among the Quaquiutian women, pausing now and then to tweak the odd steatopygial cheek.

"I shall have you flogged, you little *faex avis*!"

"Can't catch me, can't catch me. . . ."

"Perhaps," Oenothia said sweetly . . . it was the first time I'd heard her voice in a year . . . "the general and his friends would care to join us for a light supper?"

We were ushered into Hooting-Owl's garish, lavish imitation of a Roman-style manse, where a rude repast awaited us in a triclinium; couches had been set out, one table for me, Oenothia, Aquila, and my host, a second table for the intellectual trinity of Greek, Egyptian, and sasquatch. The latter group was constantly interrupting our conversation, both to ridicule my use of rhetorical figures and to correct Hooting-Owl's Greek grammar, for our host had acquired some smattering of the language of Homer and Sophocles, and it became him as felicitously as a silken gown might a barbary ape.

"Looking for China again, eh, General?" he said, pouring me a vinegary red liquor of dubious vintage into a goblet as capacious as it was tasteless.

"Indeed," I said. "But the main question now is whether our primary goal should be the search for the silkland per se, or whether it should be the pursuit of that Final Spectacle of which the were-jaguars spoke."

"Bah!" said Aquila. "Already I begin to miss my platform in the Sacred Burial Grounds, and regret that you prevented me from singing my deathsong! For each of your quests is as crazy as the other. Can't you see that there is a huge body of water in between you and your goal? And we know only that the were-jaguars went west, not how far."

"Can't be more than a week's journey," I said. "Why, I'll wager the Oceanus Papinianus is no wider than the Mediterranean! It's simply unthinkable that the world should be any bigger than this, Aquila; otherwise how could it be said that Rome rules the world?"

"You read many books, O procurator, but have you ever actually looked at the world about you? Surely you must realize that the world will not transform itself merely to conform to your notion of who must be destined to rule it! Why, how do you even surmise that China is to be found on the other shore of your Ocean? Perhaps we'll find some mythic kingdom; perhaps some unearthly domain such as the Land of Many Tipis, to which I was bound before you so rudely dragged me from my deathbed."

"Bull's pizzle, Aquila! Of course China's there. Where else could it be?" An affirming chorus came from the next table, with Aaye quoting the Book of the Dead, Nikias quoting Herodotus, and the Sasquatus intoning choice passages from the Talmud in a lugubrious baritone to corroborate their various cosmologies.

"Here, Titus dear," said Oenothea, "have some salmon!"

I glanced at the plate in front of me. "I had my cooks copy it from a Roman recipe," Hooting-Owl said proudly. "First you take some salmon eggs and you sew them up inside some lightly-braised baby salmon. Inserting this carefully into the bellies of medium-sized salmon, you grill the whole lightly in a marinade of salmon oil; then you carefully stuff the fish into larger fish and bake them, basting constantly with salmon oil of course; then, after leaving the entire operation to hang for seven days, you insert it into the largest available salmons and fry them with plenty of salmon oil and —"

"Good heavens!" I said. "As I remember it, that recipe called for olives stuffed inside hummingbirds stuffed inside rabbits inside mallards inside peacocks inside boars inside venison. . . ."

"Ah yes, General, that is how the recipe came down to us when I obtained it in a *potlatch* from some Greek trappers . . . but you know how it is. We don't have any of those funny animals around here. Have to

improvise, you know. Bloody shame, but we do our small part here, you know. Long live the Emperor, eh what?"

"You'd not say that," I said, "if you'd ever met him."

"But General . . . not to take your mind off this spectacular banquet . . . how *do* you plan to cross the Pacificus?"

"A week's travel time to China, eh?" I said, politely stuffing my face with the salmons-within-salmons, which was, by the way, nothing like the dish it mimicked. "Well, I'd say that these hot-air balloons of ours could take care of it very nicely."

It was known that the balloons could stay aloft as much as a fortnight, and we had a good dozen of them, copied from the Olmechian model and, I must say, somewhat improved. Each balloon was made of some fabric — linen, I think — which sprouted from a platform some two or three passus square. These platforms were lightweight wooden things; on each of them four or five could squat uncomfortably with room for provender and fuel in sacks dangling from the corners; in the center was a charcoal brazier tended by two slaves. This was, at least, the principle of the thing, though I, being no scientist, am at a loss to explain the more technical aspects. Suffice it to say that we Romans had been able to improve considerably on the Olmechian model, which had been used mainly to haul their enormous stone heads from quarry to temple, and which had been presented to them, out of as it were whole cloth, by the godlike were-jaguars. For the Olmechii, despite their apparent technological edge over the Romans, were at heart barbarians; they could accept gifts from these superhuman beings, but they had none of our Roman ingenuity. We Romans, on the other hand, with our great expertise in the matter of applying heat to large volumes of air, as witness the caldaria of our baths, had applied true scientific thinking to the Olmechian gift; our scientists, inspired no doubt by the memory of Epaminondas of Alexandria, had added a monstrous equipage of cogs, valves, and slave-operated fans to the hot-air balloon, enabling the heat to be more thoroughly concentrated and controlled, and with far greater economy of fuel . . . lest this sound like one of those expository lumps so beloved of the writers of scientiae fictiones, let me retreat forthwith from this digression and continue apace with the scintillant dinner repartee of Hooting-Owl, Aquila, Oenothea, and the three pedants.

Hooting-Owl was smiling expansively at me. "It's settled then," he said.

"What? What's settled?" I said.

"I'm coming too."

I sighed. "What do you mean? The Empire needs you to govern Quaquiutia!"

"My dear fellow . . . how lucky you are not to have remained wedded to the Lady Oenothea! I have learnt, the hard way, who won the final victory

in *that* game of *potlatch*. Eh, what?" He winked at me. "Moreover," he added, "why shouldn't I promise to come with you? It's the one safe promise I can make, you know, since I know you'll not last five minutes up there —"

"What nonsense!" I said. "Our hot-air balloons are capable of —"

"I know what they're capable of, you idiot general. But have you considered the wind?"

"What do you mean, the wind?"

"In all my years here, O procurator, I have yet to encounter a single easterly wind. Oh, I mean a brief storm, perhaps, lasting no more than an hour or so . . . but a wind that'll actually carry you fellows westward for an entire week? You ask too much!"

"Foolish savage," I crowed, confident now that despite his newfound veneer of Romanness, he was still at heart as much of an ignorant sod as ever. "Have you forgotten the Manifest Destiny of the Roman Imperium? Have you forgotten whose side the gods are on . . . not to mention that Trajan Himself happens to be a god? If the wind will not blow in our direction, surely the right sacrifice will change its mind. We are not, after all, mud-eating savages who pray at random to capricious forces of nature. We Romans have reduced the control of the universe to an exact science. Though your wind may be recalcitrant, it will surely heed the bidding of Jupiter! Not to mention Vacantanca, and the various other local deities recently adopted into the Roman pantheon."

I took a deep slug of this Quaquiutian wine. "Jolly good stuff," I said. "After you've downed a few gallons, you can hardly tell it isn't Lesbian. . . ."

Indeed, it was quite some time before an easterly wind sprang up; several creatures were duly sacrificed, including a young elephant left over from my previous sojourn in the land of the Quaquiutii. I despaired of the gods paying any heed at all, until . . .

It was morning. We staggered to the beach. I'd been drunk . . . very drunk. I remember bedding the Lady Oenothea, with Hooting-Owl and Aquila on either side of me, urging me on and taking bets . . . through the fog of my hangover I saw that half a dozen balloons had already been inflated. Each bore the legend SPQR in gilt letters on fabric dipped in the finest purple. Equus Insanus, who never left his father's side, was throwing our cloaks over us and chattering furiously.

"And the wind came this morning," he was saying, "and we all saw it and the *bucinas* started, and I ran to get you and —"

"*Quam spectaculum est!*" I cried; my heart stirred at the sight of our proud hot-air balloons, still roped to the tops of totem poles, straining hard against the wind. Pennants hung from their sides, and an *aquilifer* stood proudly on board the largest of the platforms, eagle raised high and

glittering in the bronze light of dawn.

The legion, which I was quartering in the village to await the return of my small band of adventurers, was out in force; as I raised my hand they let out a cry of *Huka hey! Ave, O Papiniane, Dux et Imperator!*

I ran for the flag-hot-air-balloon like a little child. I was to share it with Aquila and some centurions; the others were to follow in their lesser balloons. I gave the signal; the moorings were loosened. I lost my balance as the thing swerved upwards, tripped over the slave who stoked the brazier, and singed off half my hair.

Aquila was laughing at me. "I have just the thing," he was saying, "this magical poultice —"

But I couldn't listen. We had been airborne for but five minutes, and already I was leaning over the side, raucously anointing the Oceanus Papinianus with a puree of half-digested salmon.

For an hour or two all seemed well. The braziers that heated the air to keep our vehicles aloft served also to cook our food. Each hot-air balloon had strings of salmon trailing from the corners, gifts from Hooting-Owl's people; when we hungered, we simply reeled the line in a bit, skewered a fish, and threw it on the fire which slaves continually stoked and fanned.

The skies were blue and sunny, though cold; a high wind blew us steadily westward; and the sea below looked wondrously peaceful, almost meriting the absurd appellation of Oceanus Pacificus with which the vulgar had chosen to baptize it. The child Equus Insanus prattled endlessly; he seemed utterly devoid of Roman discipline, and his father only laughed when he addressed me rudely or stole a fish from the coals. A proper Roman paterfamilias would have long since thrashed the bugger to a pulp, but Aquila merely humored him. It was the Lacotian way, he told me, to correct their children's ill behavior by laughing at them.

"How absurd!" I said scornfully. "Surely only severe beatings can make a man of one. We Romans, who have conquered the world, thrive on the lash."

"*Hechitu welo!* But can you creep up *this* close to an aurochs without making a noise, and reach up to slit its belly open?"

"Bah! What manner of man could do that?" Suddenly I felt stubby little hands around my neck. "Get off me, imbecile!" I shouted, yanking forth the minuscule monster by the hair.

"You see?" Aquila said triumphantly. "Caught you quite by surprise. Believe me, we Lacotii can go cloaked in the wind."

"Idle boasts, Aquila; hyperboles are natural to a conquered race, after all. Look at the Greeks."

"Look indeed." Aquila shrugged. I turned to see the denizens of the next balloon ensconced in a vehement argument.

"Daddy, why are they screaming at each other?" Equus piped up,

fiddling with deerskin leggings beneath his toga praetexta.

The odd phrase drifted towards us on the wind: "Essential nature of the one . . . the quincunx being the perfect figure, the quintessence, the natural consequence of . . . false syllogism, if you examine it from the point of view of prior and posterior analytics . . . Aristotle . . . Euclid . . ." Considering the esoteric nature of their conversation, the Greek and the Egyptian seemed remarkably crimson in the face, even at this distance; but Abraham bar-David, the Jewish sasquatus, seemed perfectly placid, and was, in fact, scribbling on a scrap of parchment.

"Who's he, the referee?" said Equus Insanus.

"No," said Aquila. "Actually, our Judaeian friend has turned writer."

"Oh?" I said. "It's not a piece of scientiae fictiones, by any chance?" For I hadn't read any good new scientiae fictiones since they'd smuggled me a battered scroll of that ancient periodical *fabulae obstupeficientes*, that is to say, *stories that amaze*. It had contained Asimianus's very first tale, *De Vesta Perdita*, something about hanky-panky among the Vestal Virgins, I recall. Again I digress.

"No," Aquila responded, "our Abraham's work is by no means scientific, but rooted firmly in reality. It is entitled *Peregrinus Perplexus*, a travelogue for the bewildered."

"Heavens," I said.

"Just the book *you* need, General!" said the little boy. "You're always bewildered."

"Leave his Bulbosity alone, *michinkshi*." And they both began to cackle offensively at me.

It was in such frivolity that we passed the first few hours of our voyage.

"It's wonderful, isn't it, what a little Roman know-how can do?" I was saying to Aquila. "All we need now is for the weather to hold out for a day or two, and then . . . China! The mythical, magical silkland! Oh, how exciting it is, Aquila, to be alive at this moment; to be the vanguard of the greatest discovery in the history of the Roman Empire!"

"*Hechitu welo*," said Aquila. Then . . . the weather changed. . . .

"What's the matter?" I shouted.

"I do believe we're running into a storm," Aquila said. "Clearly, the westerly wind of an hour ago was merely part of a spinning wind, and will now carry us back to Quaquiutia!"

"Well," I said, shrugging. "We've nothing to worry about then. We'll simply rest a few more days in the village, sacrifice another creature or two, and be all set for a more opportune moment for departure. . . ."

"Oh, I say," I said, pointing ahead. "What's that?"

I could not believe my eyes. In the distance, hovering over the ocean, was a huge and impossibly perfect triangle of mist.

"A strange phenomenon indeed," said Aquila. "Only in spirit journeys

have I seen such a thing. It only goes to support the thesis that we are no longer travelling in earthly planes.”

“Superstitious twaddle!” I said uneasily. I looked above; the clouds were getting quite dark. “You haven’t been doing one of your rain dances, have you? I mean, not that I set much store by your savage mumbo-jumbo, but —”

“No, I believe that they are perfectly natural thunderclouds, General.”

“Well, don’t just sit there, old man! Caper! Hop to it! Dance us up an antidote, old chap!”

“My dear General Papinianus,” Aquila said. “The *homo medicinae* who taught me to dance gave me this vital maxim: *Never perform*, he said, *when you know it’s not going to work!* You’re on your own, O procurator. How about some good old Roman ingenuity?”

“For this I saved your life?”

“Saved my life! For this I left a comfortable deathbed, surrounded by dozens of weeping relatives?”

“Fire’s gone out, master!” cried the first slave-stoker. Unthinkingly I lashed out with my quirt.

“Sirrah! Fan the flames!” I cried, as hail the size of crab-apples began to batter the sides of the balloons. One hit the slave on the head, and he passed out.

“But — but —” I shouted. Looking eastward, I suddenly saw another of our balloons plummeting; I saw legionaries grasping at the sides; I heard their screaming through the pelting of the hail. . . .

“Bloody adventures!” I cursed; my voice was drowned out by thunder. “I should never have left Caesarea! Curse you, Aquila, for giving me this insatiable taste for risking life and limb. . . .” But I could speak no more. The wind sprang up; we were tossed up and down, my stomach churned and relieved itself of another salmon dinner, and the next thing I knew we were all on top of each other, falling, falling, and the triangle of mist was careering towards us, growing and growing. . . .

“Wake up, General!” It was the child again, tugging me from my lethargy. I felt dry vomit in my throat. Where was I? Was I dead? Surely . . .

“The others . . . safe?” I groaned.

“Come, General! They’re all waiting for you.” I rubbed my eyes. The child’s visage swam hazily before them for a moment.

I saw palm trees and lush verdure such as grow in the vicinity of Carthage. Here and there lay gigantic ribcages, oddly familiar looking.

Aaye was running up now, hardly able to contain himself. “Procurator, it’s true, your predictions were completely accurate! Behold . . . it is even as you said . . . the living proof: bones of silkworms such as we found in that gorge en route to Quaquitua, but these not petrified at all; the worms

cannot have been dead a month or two!"

"Good heavens," I said, thanking the gods that we had been let off so lightly. I rubbed my eyes and my arse and stood up. "This is a veritable paradise!" I said. "I don't suppose these Chinish will be any threat to us at all; for we all know that the inhabitants of warmer climes are by nature sluggish and indolent, and given only to hedonistic pursuits . . . let us explore more."

My group fell in behind me. We had lost several ballonsfull of legionaries and spear carriers but all the major figures were still in one piece: Nikias and Aaye in mid-epistemological argument, Abraham writing on a scrap of papyrus, and Chief Hooting-Owl maintaining his composure by a muttering recital of his past achievements in battles of *potlatch*.

"Well, Aquila, what do you think?" I said. "We've really stumbled upon it for sure this time, haven't we?"

"Of course we have!" Aaye interposed. "This time there can be no doubt that the very next creature we meet will be, in absolute verity, a Chinaman!"

"I will hold my peace," Aquila said, "since I am wholly ignorant of this land of Chin; yet might these not be bones of giant lizards or other animals?"

"Silence, savage!" I said. "The scholars have spoken!"

"I have not spoken yet," Abraham bar-David said mildly.

"Then speak, so that all will have had a turn and we can continue on our mission."

"I have nothing to say," said the furry creature, "I was merely observing that I had not yet spoken, thus proving your statement a false syllogism —"

"Precisely what I meant!" Nikias interjected. "When the *all* is alluded to, as it must be in the statement *All the scholars have spoken*, it follows that, ontologically speaking —"

We had walked right into a sort of earthy mud-embankment. Giant ferns grew everywhere. And, resting atop the crest, its tail lost behind the tall vegetation, was a creature. It was long and smoothly serpentine, but about a man's width, and perhaps as much as ten cubits long; it was tapered towards the tiny head, which dozed contentedly in the mud.

"By Jove! A silkworm at last!" I could hardly contain myself, for I knew that this was the creature which, according to the writings of P. Josephus Agricola, produced a sputum that quickly solidified into strands of sheerest silk, and which the Chinish folk used as a pack animal, driving it sluggishly forward by means of lead-tipped goads.

Aquila looked at it. "By the Great Spirit!" he said. "The Egyptian's predictions *do* occasionally make sense."

"Well, what are we waiting for?" I said. "Let us gird up our loins and mount the creature. I assume it will need breaking in, before it is ready to

be ridden in triumph back to Caesarea-on-Miserabilis." Of course, I didn't even know how we were going to get back across the Oceanus Pacificus at that point; but the Chinish folk could not be far away, and if they did not help us, we could always conquer and enslave them, as we had done with every other nation.

"You want us to ride this thing?" Aquila said dubiously.

"Of course!" Aaye said. "It must learn to know its master."

"And who, pray, will be the first?" Aquila said.

We all looked at each other.

"Let me, Daddy, let me!" It was The Brat. He was already running up to leap onto the great worm's flanks.

"Well!" I said. "Let it not be said that Romans are outdone by children — and savage children at that!" I hastened to clamber up the mudbank, pulling myself up by means of the ferns.

"Our noble general has spoken!" said Aquila, laughing.

"Giddyup! Giddyup!" Equus Insanus squealed gleefully, digging his feet into the creature's side. In a moment I was at the top, and about to jump on behind The Brat, when I chanced to turn around and look over the other side of the embankment. . . .

I screamed! "Look — it's a monster —" I shrieked, as more and more of the beast came into view: the body, huge as a good-sized temple, the hillock haunches, the prodigious legs — "Run for your lives!" I started to get off what I now knew to be merely the neck of a creature of stupendous magnitude.

Down below, my scholars and savages were all hooting with laughter. "You don't see what I see!" I yelled down at them, but they laughed all the more. Suddenly the neck began to move.

"Hold on, Equus Insanus," I said, trying myself to grasp the slippery, slime-crusting skin of the animal. The beast reared up its neck now; its eyes opened, its tongue darted out to uproot a clump of ferns. . . .

I heard the shouts of the others. "Help! Help!" I cried, but all I heard were remarks like ". . . definitely reptilian, eh, Aaye! . . . jolly big it is. What would you call such a thing? . . . well, being a lizardlike being, and being so ponderous that its very footfall must sound like thunder, I would suggest the appellation *brontosaurus* myself; what about you, Abraham, eh?" . . . endless debates in this vein.

"Dance, Aquila!" I shouted. "Maybe the flying saucers will come and rescue us!"

"I'm too old to dance. My joints are weak. Besides, all I know is a rain dance."

"Do that one then! You always get them wrong anyway, maybe you'll accidentally summon the saucers —"

Just then, the *brontosaurus* rose impressively to its full height. Its neck craned up and down with frightening agility, and I was holding on with

both arms and both legs, yelping in terror. Equus Insanus wasn't having such a good time either; indeed, he had burst into tears.

Dutifully, Aquila began to dance and wheeze, a tiny figure below me. Hooting-Owl began declaiming in his native tongue, offering to trade our lives for his freedom, for *potlatch* is a game of perpetual backstabbing. The reptile we were on began stomping slowly away, each step it took shaking my very marrow and blasting my eardrums.

All at once, I heard a familiar whirring sound. "The flying saucers! Hold on, Brat, and we'll be rescued in no time!"

And indeed, the shiny disks were beginning to descend upon us out of the sky; and the earth began to rumble mightily, and burst asunder in the middle distance, much in the manner of a volcano's first eruption, spewing forth fountains of fire at the center of which emerged — Jove strike me down if I lie — an enormous palace, resembling in every particular the celebrated Golden House which the Emperor Nero had had built when I was but a little boy — rising phoenixlike from the blazing infernum that surrounded it. . . .

A shriek of terror escaped Equus Insanus's lips; he lost his grip and tumbled down towards the exploding earth. The academics were running in circles, and only the two savages seemed unconcerned; indeed, Aquila was still dancing.

"Save us! Save us!" I cried out to the descending saucers. But as I screamed I heard the heavens resound with raucous mocking laughter, a laughter that had *evil* stamped all over it. . . and I realized that they were the wrong flying saucers. . . .

"Stop dancing, Aquila!" I shouted down at the prancing old man. But it was too late. Gigantic nets were being spun out from the bellies of the nearby flying saucers; and before I knew it, our whole gang, including the brontosaurus, were being borne skyward. The beast did not, as can be imagined, take too kindly to its sudden change of habitat; it thrashed about, emitting a high-pitched honking from its throat, and had I not let go of the neck, and climbed up to the top of the net, forgetting in my distress that I was hundreds of passus in the air and that I have a terrible head for heights, I would have been flattened into a papyrus.

My comrades, caught in the same net, all followed my lead, scrambling for the less dangerous positions near the top. We were moving slowly towards the Neronian palace. Nervously, I began counting heads.

"The Brat's gone!" I started; it was Aquila, hanging on for dear life beside me.

"Surely not — " I looked around wildly. Then I remembered: the last I'd seen him he was plummeting headlong toward the golden palace . . . "Oh, what's to become of us?" I said. "China indeed! When I get home I'll take every single work of that self-styled expert P. Josephus Agricola, put them all in a heap, and personally set them to the torch. Silkworms



my arse! Yellow-skinned folk who paint their faces with a poultice of gold, and ride around on giant caterpillars! Scientiae fictiones rot the mind . . . I'll have them banned from the Alexandria library . . . I'll have them —"

And then, to my surprise and no doubt to Aquila's great relief, I fainted.

When I came to, I couldn't move. Not even an eyeball, that is; I was staring straight ahead, and unable even to blink. I thought I would be in a dungeon, but far from it; the room I was in was airy and pleasant, and I could see that it opened onto an atrium where a marble fountain played. Once, as a boy, when my father still enjoyed the favor of Divine Nero, I had been in this very room in the Golden House; it was, I recall, a room that held several Asiatic eunuchs, which Caesar employed to search his guests for daggers, poison, and suchlike, the advantage of eunuchs being that it was unnecessary to have sexually segregated searching rooms, since neither man nor woman could claim to have had his or her virtue impugned (of course, His Divinity Himself had a tendency to take care of that later). Since I seemed to have been frozen solid, there was little to do save entertain these memories of the distant past. . . .

Before me, resembling absurd caryatids, were Aquila, Hooting-Owl, Nikias, Abraham, and Aaye, as frozen as I myself was; their expressions ranged from equanimity (Aquila's) to hysteria (Aaye's); the spectacle was quite amusing, though I was unable to laugh.

After a very long while, I heard another outburst of that chilling laughter which had accompanied our capture, and I regained the use of my body. The others, too, were gradually coming to life, and Aquila, I saw, had seized a knife and was about to cut off one of his own fingers.

"Good heavens," I said.

"I mourn for my son," Aquila said. "Besides, what does one finger more or less matter? It is clear that the Land of Many Tipis cannot be far in the future for us all."

"Come, come, Aquila, don't talk like that! Lower the morale of the cohorts and all that, you know, what."

"What cohorts?" said Aquila, and everyone else moaned.

"I hear the owl call my name," Chief Hooting-Owl added in a lugubrious tone.

"'Call no man happy,'" Nikias was quoting from Euripides or one of that crowd, "'until he is dead.'"

"Dust thou art," the sasquatch droned dismally, "and unto dust —"

And Aaye was mumbling some Egyptian gibberish, lines from the Book of the Dead I had no doubt.

"Now wait a minute," I said, incensed suddenly. "Where is your love

of honor? Your pride in your Roman citizenship? How can you say that all is lost? We are, after all, in a room of the Golden Palace of Nero; perhaps we have by some supernatural means actually been returned to the bosom of Mother Rome herself!"

"My dear General," said Aquila, "if you wish to stop entertaining such a silly notion, I suggest that you look behind you." I turned round; there was a portico that led to a balcony, from which there was a view of the city beneath. I saw a few temples and things, and in the distance the Flavian Amphitheater (or Colosseum, as it is sometimes known); and at first I heaved a sigh of relief. But after a while I started to notice that nothing was quite what it seemed. For one thing, the city came abruptly to an end, and beyond were fields, swamps, and lush vegetation such as we had encountered on first landing within this Mysterious Triangle. For another, the streets were devoid of people, which would have been a most singular occurrence in Rome. For yet another, the Flavian Amphitheater contained — I could recognize it clearly even from this distance, since it filled fully a quarter of the arena — an old friend of ours . . . that brontosaurus whose neck we had thought to be a silkworm.

"Indeed," I said, "this isn't Rome; and it bloody well isn't China, either. In fact, I've a feeling it's no earthly place at all!"

More raucous laughter filled the room . . . where was it coming from? "In fact, I'll wager that we have fallen into the very lair of the Time Criminal of whom V'Denni-Kenni spoke . . . that Mastermind of Evil with whom the were-jaguars plan to perform their Final Spectacle!" I turned my back on the view of pseudo-Rome only to find that my companions had once more been transformed into statues. "Now look here," I railed at the empty air, "I don't care who you are; I'm the Representative of Caesar here, and my person is inviolate —"

More hideous cackling. And then, in a puff of smoke, someone materialized in front of me.

"By Jupiter Optimus Maximus!" I said, gawking agape at this latest apparition. For it resembled nothing so much as a sort of enormous green pig, with curiously delicate antennae and bug-eyes. Once more, it screeched with that laughter that one instinctively knows must belong to a creature of consummate Evil.

"Ah, General Titus Papinianus Lacoticus Sasquaticus," the creature purred menacingly. "How frightfully clever of you to have guessed who I am! Well, don't just stand there, say something! Cat got your tongue, eh, what! Or are you surprised that I speak your language?"

"I — I —"

"Bah! What do V'Denni-Kenni and K'Tooni-Mooni mean, anyway, by sending such creatures as *you* against me? Have they lost all respect for me? Aren't I evil enough to merit better than this?"

"If you please, your Evilship, the were-jaguars didn't send us . . .

looking for China . . . hot-air balloons . . .”

“A likely story!” His breath was fouler than a legionary shitting-pit. “You came for the Final Spectacle, did you not? Well, spectacle you shall have, and in abundance. Indeed, you will have more than your fill of it. Ho, ho, ho! But first . . . since you are, after a fashion, a leader among your inferior race, I shall give you the grand tour of the palace. I’m rather proud of it, actually; Roman history’s my specialty, you know. I’ve already made over a hundred continua branch off at the Roman nexus, you know. Though I doubt if such futuristic remarks will make much sense to you. Well . . . before you . . . ah . . . pass on to the Elysian Fields, let’s show you what we have here.”

I was not terribly pleased at this turn of events. I reached for the little dagger I always carry in a fold of my tunic for moments such as these, and rushed towards him; but I had not even reached him when I was repelled by some invisible force.

“That,” said the Green Pig, “is future technology for you; a force-shield, if you please.”

“Wonderful,” I said.

“Now; if you’d care to follow me?”

He led me down aisles, through corridors, across atria. “As you may have guessed,” he said, “this mystic triangle into which you have fallen is actually what might be called a Spatiotemporal Anomaly. It is created by my own diabolical invention, the Spatiotemporal Bewilderizer, which I have set up within the actual confines of the Flavian Amphitheater there.”

“You snatched the Amphitheater out of Rome itself?”

“Ha, ha! Not *your* Rome, you ignorant insect, but another Rome, in another universe, where things happened a little differently from yours . . . because *I* willed it so through the use of the Spatiotemporal Bewilderizer! Same with this palace, I may add. It’s a jolly nice one, isn’t it? And don’t mind the brontosaurus; it wandered in one day when I accidentally toggled a switch I shouldn’t have, and set it to a hundred million years ago instead of a hundred. Even we Time Criminals make mistakes sometimes, sad to say. Ah, here we are.”

We had entered a vast hall of the palace; if boyhood memory serves me right, it had been one of Nero’s throne-rooms. But makeshift stages had been set up everywhere, and upon them were tableaux of people, some in outlandish costumes, and yet so verisimilitudinous that I knew them immediately to be people frozen out of time, in precisely the way I and my companions had all been frozen.

“Behold my collection of Great Historical Moments!” said the Time Criminal, his viridian jowls quivering with excitement. “I snatched them all from various timelines, you know, and have preserved them here so that I can replay them whenever I want. Here’s one you may have heard

of —”

He clapped his hands. On one platform there stood a bald, middle-aged man in a senatorial toga and laurel wreath; another man, brandishing a dagger, was frozen over him in mid-stab. As the Time Criminal clapped again, they came to life, the knife came ripping down through cloth, and I heard the bald man distinctly say, “*Et tu, Brute!*” before the scene abruptly ceased in mid-gesture. I simply gaped — for the assassination of Julius Caesar was something that had happened more than a hundred years before!

We went by other scenes: some seemed familiar, others impossibly alien, as one in which a man in metallic garments that covered him from head to toe, and wearing over his head a kind of transparent jug, was walking about on a desert-like landscape waving a pennant of stripes and stars. “Oh, that’s the first man on the moon,” said the Time Criminal nonchalantly, “I’ve got half a dozen of them.”

It was in the next room that I began to get very frightened indeed. For I saw the Emperor Domitian himself — the very first to have sent me on the fruitless quest for China — seated upon a throne. Though I knew him to be but another souvenir in this Time Criminal’s picture-book of the universes, yet I quailed, especially when the Criminal awakened him for a second, long enough to see me and cry out: “You too, Papinian, you too. . . .” before returning to his spatiotemporal stasis.

And then I saw Trajan, too. I saw, indeed, about a dozen Trajans, and all seemed to glare at me. “Look, old chap,” said the Time Criminal, “none of these Trajans is *your* Trajan, you know. That one, for instance . . . wonderful ruler. Enlarged the Empire all the way to Parthia. Pity he vanished mysteriously on the eve of the final battle.”

“But . . . how irresponsible! What happens, then, to those worlds from whom key historical figures have been so casually excised?”

“Oh, they muddle through,” said the Criminal. “Besides, after a while the Elastic Effect comes in and time bounces back onto the right track; and of course, the actual people of the continuum have no idea that I’ve tinkered with them! This is such fun, you know; it certainly beats creating hairy monsters and dropping them in the Himalayas.”

“Indeed,” I said.

“Yes, your period is something of a special love with me; that’s why I engineered this fantastical, bizarre alternate history, with its steamships and motor-cars a thousand years before their time . . . I’m a visionary genius, you know! I suppose you’ll tell me I’m mad, though. They all do.”

“You are positively bonkers!”

“How terribly banal. How can you possibly comprehend the grandeur of my conception? Thousands of histories twisted beyond all recognition. But, as I say, this period is my favorite. Look, I’ve prepared an exhibit

just for you, which I'm sure you'd like to gaze upon before I sentence you to your regrettable demise — regrettable for you, that is, though I shall enjoy it well enough — when you do die, by the way, which will be tomorrow, if all goes well, I trust you'll have no hard feelings? Stiff upper lip and all that? After all, it isn't much fun sitting around being Evil for centuries on end, you know. Any diversion is welcome. I've a lot on my mind, what with the Final Spectacle coming up and K'Tooni-Mooni's cohorts heading here at top speed; thanks to you, my friend, and your blabbermouth friends, who gave them all the details of my movements in your continuum! Where was I? Ah yes. Lo! Gaze upon my prize specimen, which I obtained for your edification as soon as I knew you were coming!" At another handclap a curtain was drawn, and I was gazing into an alcove.

"I captured this figure from the nexus right next to this one; indeed, it would be a virtually identical world, had I not . . . ah . . . fiddled with it. This specimen is, as I'm sure you'll recognize, a certain Roman general. I snatched him up for my collection at the precise moment when his Emperor had condemned him to death for the crime of not discovering China. . . ."

Terror seized me. For, standing in that recess in the wall, his face pale with fright, his eyes wide, his every feature distorted in some ultimate horror . . . was me!

For the second time since I had been elevated by Caesar to the august position of Dux of the Thirty-Fourth, I did something which every red-blooded Roman male would be heartily ashamed of.

I fainted.

I was not terribly amused, upon regaining consciousness, to discover that I had been crucified. That I was face to face with a brontosaurus only compounded my discomfiture. Nor was it much of a relief to me that my tormentors had not used nails on me, but had merely strung me up with rope; I well knew from experience that the latter form of execution, working as it does by a slow asphyxiation induced by the continual abrasure of the shoulderblades upon the lungs, was in fact by far the more protracted, the more undignified. My first impulse was to call out: "How dare you do this to me, a citizen of Rome and Representative of the Princeps Himself?" But I realized that such talk would have little effect upon my pitiless captor, whose mentality was as porcine as his appearance.

I saw him now, sitting in the Imperial Box of the Flavian Amphitheater (for, as my gaze circumnavigated the surrounding area, I saw that this was where I was at) to my left (I had been strung up unceremoniously just above the gates of death), dressed in the Imperial purple. The purple dye

contrasted most vulgarly with his viridity of visage. Shambling back and forth across the sand was the brontosaur; however, it could not reach me, for one of those forceshields such as had prevented me from touching the Green Pig stood in its way. In fact, this forceshield seemed to begin at the corner of the Imperial Box, so that His Evilship was seated to my side of it, and as protected from the creature as was I.

I struggled to hold myself up, knowing that if I were to let go, the asphyxiative process would not be slow in following. . . .

Beneath the Imperial Box was a machine of some kind. I had read of many marvelous devices in the scrolls of scientiae fictiones to which I was addicted; none came up to the reality. For this apparatus had cogs, wheels, levers, flashing lights, antennae from which issued jagged blue lightning bolts, dials, and ranks of buttons of every color. The entire device glowed as if lit from within. This must indeed be the fabled Spatiotemporal Bewilderizer! I strained hard against the post, desperately trying to stay upright.

Chained to the machine, and completely frozen, were Aquila, Hooting-Owl, Aaye, Abraham, and Nikias. Only I was conscious, then. I was fated to watch the entire spectacle through to the end, and no doubt to be served up as dessert to whatever ravening monster the Green Pig would summon up next.

Soon I heard the familiar laughter.

"Ha, ha, ha!" the Time Criminal said, his voice amplified a thousand-fold by the excellent acoustics of the Flavian Amphitheater. "Little did you know, Titus Papinianus, that you would end up as spectacle-fodder on an island in the midst of a mystic, misty triangle that doesn't even exist in your universe . . . did you, old chap?"

"I would spit on you if I could," I said. "Only my proper Roman breeding restrains me."

"Not to mention thirty cubits of stout rope! Hee hee! Ah well. First, my dear fellow, you will watch your compatriots die; then you shall perish in some fiendish manner that I shall extemporize. But first . . . a little hors d'oeuvre, don't you think? More monsters, perhaps. Oh, ancient history is my passion; I've always loved dinosaurs, Romans, and Indians. Now that I am master of the Spatiotemporal Bewilderizer, I can actually get to play with them all — in the same arena!"

"They're not Indians," I said irritably. "They are Terra Novans. I don't know of any Romans who have even set foot in India." I started to sag again, and strained harder.

"I'll call them whatever I please," said the Time Criminal. He clambered down some steps to his machine, pushing the living statues of my friends out of the way, and began to push buttons.

Suddenly I heard a tiny voice in my ear. "Watch! He'll push the red one next. I've been watching him. That's the Time Portal."

“What the —”

A tiny hand flew over my mouth. “Shush, you silly general! You’ll give us all away!”

“By the maidenhead of Venus!” I was struck speechless.

“Aren’t you going to ask me how I got here?” said Equus Insanus, who was perched behind me on the crosspiece, his slight form completely hidden by mine. “Look, I’m going to rescue you now, so just take it easy.”

“Wonderful! You incomparable child, I shall promote you to tribune as soon as we get home —”

“Will you shut up! Act dead or something. I’ll wait for an opportune moment, and then untie you slowly, starting with the feet. When I give the signal, you’ll slither slowly to the bottom. Now’s as good a time as any to start work; I’m not as strong as Daddy, so it’ll take a while.”

No sooner had he begun than a most hideous sight assailed my senses. For behind the brontosaurus, a huge portal of blackness, taller than the amphitheater itself, materialized. I shrieked; the boy ducked behind me.

I heard him whisper: “That dial on the far left; I’m pretty sure that’s a time-zone selector or something. Picks the period from which he’s going to collect his next souvenir.”

“How do you know, you little toad?”

“I’ve been watching him all day.”

“And how did you get here anyway?”

“What a dumb old general you are! I’m saving your life, and all you can do is ask dumb old questions. I walked, of course. You think I’d just lie there in the mud and wait for the Roman cavalry to come over the hill?”

“But —”

“No buts! Watch! It’s pretty fun to see what’s going to pop out next.”

And to my dismay, a horrible creature came charging out of the doorway of darkness. It was as tall as the brontosaur, but elongated; it had huge fangs and a thrashing tail, and it stood on its hind legs. Its forepaws were incongruously petite. It immediately made for the brontosaurus, and, as our porcine host giggled and guffawed, began attacking the unfortunate creature, who kept trying to flee but merely bumped against the invisible forcefield. Not an intelligent being, it continued to run in place, bashing its neck again and again on the barrier.

The Time Criminal hooted with laughter as the battle proceeded. “I’ll have to awaken the other frozen ones,” he said, “so that I can laugh over their expressions of terror.” He clapped his hands, and the chained figures on our side of the barrier came to life. As the three academics caught sight of the two raging titans, they began to wail and to pull against their chains, to no avail. Aquila relaxed against his restraints and surveyed the scene with a bemused expression; and Hooting-Owl had turned to the Green Pig and was attempting to strike a bargain with him.

Presently the academics noticed that the barrier was preventing them

from getting hurt; so they settled down to a discussion of nomenclature. "Clearly a nobler beast than the brontosaurus. I suggest calling it the *tyrannosaurus rex*," said Aaye.

"What? And mix the Greek *tyrannos* with the latin *rex* within the same sentence? Surely that is tautologous —" said Nikias. "One or the other, my Egyptian friend, but not both!"

As they spoke (the more taciturn Sasquatus interrupting now and then with a learned word) the two beasts began to go at it with a vengeance, the tyrannosaur lashing away with his tail, the brontosaur's neck darting with surprising agility. Tireless, the tyrannosaur worried away at the brontosaur's flanks, honking eerily the while; indefatigably the brontosaur battered against the indestructible force barrier, until its head was cut open and its neck raw in a dozen places.

"In a less confined space," Equus Insanus whispered in my ear, "I'd give them more or less equal odds; as it is, the one with big teeth is bound to win. For one thing, it's hungry, and the brontosaurus only eats vegetation."

"How do you know all this?"

"I told you, I've been watching this dump for a day and half!"

"I'm sure Aristotle says nothing about the feeding habits of these silkworms-cum-giant lizards."

"Who's Aristotle?"

"That," I said, finally showing myself to be in some small measure superior to this midget of a savage, "is for you to find out when you learn to read and write, like decent Roman citizens do."

"Oh, I can read all right. But I only like reading *scientiae fictiones*," he said, pulling away at a recalcitrant knot in my crucifixion ropes.

I heard the voice of the Evil One. "Oh, I say, Papinian! Having a good time, eh what?"

"Marvelous, your Evilship!" I temporized, as Equus Insanus slithered into hiding behind me.

At that moment, the brontosaur, harried beyond endurance by that monstrous predator, tumbled to the ground and expired, bringing down several tiers of marble seats. The tyrannosaur, its appetite whetted, stalked about, screeching.

"What next, my friends?" the Time Criminal said, and with another handclap he had dissolved the forceshield, for the dinosaur was making its way towards *me*! "What next? Shall I pit the two Indians" (I don't know for what perverse reason he insisted on referring to my Terra Novans as *Indians*; surely such a supreme master of super-science would not confuse such an obvious detail) "— shall I pit them against the dinosaur, and force them to protect all the others?" He made a gesture, at which Roman catapults came rolling out of the Time Portal, and a bin full of exotic weaponry. At another gesture the chains fell from Hooting-Owl

and Aquila; they both rushed to the weapon-bin while the academics screamed continuously.

"The catapult!" I heard Aquila cry; Hooting-Owl helped him load it with a pitch-ball, which they set alight; it hit the tyrannosaur on the head, but it continued to advance towards me.

"Dance!" I cried to Aquila. "Dance as you have never danced before! Perhaps this time the right flying saucers *will* appear!"

Aquila yelled back, "You're out of your mind!" And he seized a lance and began to lunge at the creature (he came up to its calf or thereabouts) while Hooting-Owl worried it with fireballs. The creature was as stupid as the other one, though; for when struck, it would not react for several moments, almost as though its brain had to assimilate the extent of the damage before determining an appropriate screech or maddened lunge. Aquila danced to and fro, stabbing the thing now and then in the legs; suddenly it snapped up the lance in its jaws, and all I saw was a pair of withered legs, wriggling madly, but then the lance broke and Aquila landed safely on the carcass of the brontosaurus; the tyrannosaur, distracted by the sight of the dead beast, began to rip ravenously at its innards, gore streaming from its fangs and down its neck.

Just at that moment, Equus Insanus finished untying my bonds, and I half-slithered, half-lurched groundwards.

"What the —" The Time Criminal stormed from his booth, ignoring the tyrannosaur as it continued to feed, and staggered towards me, his hands threateningly outstretched.

"Keep him at bay," cried Equus Insanus, "while I sabotage the machine!"

Unthinkingly I obeyed the savage child — for I had lost all dignity now, and sought only to save my own hide — and began to run hither and thither as the Green Pig gained on me. Meanwhile, Equus Insanus ran to the Spatiototemporal Bewilderizer and began to fiddle with the controls —

"That's my son!" Aquila shouted gleefully, returning with Hooting-Owl to the operation of the catapult, and bombarding the tyrannosaur with rocks. The huge predator scarcely noticed, though, as he gorged; would a man notice a few gnats, if a plate of delicate bear's hams or unborn dormice dipped in honey, or some other such costly dish, were placed before him?

"Curses," the Time Criminal cried, and ran to protect his invention. "Keep your filthy hands away from that thing . . . if you turn the time knob, you've no way of guessing what thing will come crashing through the portal, and —"

"I'm turning it to the present," the little boy said, and then he banged repeatedly on the red button.

"Not the red button! Not in the present! No! The spatial coordinates

have been centered on me!" the Green Pig shouted; but it was too late. We heard a whistling sound, as of a projectile being loosed from a scorpio or catapulta —

It was another Green Pig!

"What are you doing in my timeline?" the first Green Pig said angrily, flapping his Imperial robe.

"And what do you mean by summoning me from mine?"

Another pig popped up beside the first two. More whooshing sounds. We all turned round and stared at the Time Portal, whence more Green Pigs were being ejected at the rate of one every second or so. Equus Insanus continued to bang unmercifully upon the red button.

The sandy arena of the Flavian Amphitheater was now completely full of Green Pigs, with more arriving every second. One by one they came to blows, and presently the whole arena was one writhing sea of pugilistic Green Pigs.

It was at this point that the tyrannosaurus decided that he was hungry again. Rising from his bloody feast, he began to stomp around wildly, here and there crushing a Green Pig. We had by then lost sight of the original Evil One, but all present seemed equally nauseating, so we felt few regrets as the tyrannosaur scooped one or two of them into his jaws. But then he seemed to catch sight of us —

"Help! What'll we do?" I said.

"Search me," Aquila said, shrugging. "Want me to dance up an invisibility medicine?"

"Quick!" little Equus Insanus shrieked. "Up the cross!"

It was each man for himself as we shinnied up the cross upon which I had so lately been strung up. I managed to make it to the cross-piece, and squatted uneasily on the end; the sasquatch had hooked his legs securely round the x of the cross, and was balancing Aaye around his neck, Equus Insanus under one armpit, and Nikias, who was clutching onto his legs; Hooting-Owl was squashed in between me and Abraham bar-David's other armpit, and as for Aquila —

He was actually balancing upright on the opposite arm of the cross, hopping from one foot to another, and singing some Lacotian song!

"What *are* you doing?" I said, as the tyrannosaur gazed longingly at us, much as one might stare with hunger at a tree full of ripe figs. . . .

"I think," said Aquila in between wheezy utterances, "that I'd better teach you my deathsong now. I suspect you're going to have to be using it in a moment —"

He danced unsteadily, croaking out the incomprehensible words of his deathsong.

Suddenly I felt the cross giving way. . . .

"We're falling! We're falling!" several of us were screaming (as if that were not obvious) as the cross began to creak and sway. In that split

second I knew at last that I was going to die. A superstitious dread overcame me; for I had no wish to enter Hades and have to answer to the judges of the afterlife . . . what could I do? I didn't even have a coin to shove in my mouth to pay the ferryman . . . would I be condemned to walk the nether shores of darkness forever, then? Above the tumult I heard Aquila singing still. Almost without thinking I began to repeat his words; mumbo-jumbo or not, they were better than *nothing*. Presently, as we began to tumble down towards the ever-growing throng of angry Green Pigs, I raised one arm and began shaking an imaginary rattle. "O Jupiter Vacantancae," I prayed, "help me . . . help. . . ." In that final second of life, I raised my eyes imploringly to the heavens —

Hundreds of flying saucers were materializing in the sky! They were streaming downwards towards us!

"We're saved!" I shouted, as the ocean of pig-heads buffered my fall. . . .

Blinding light filled the sky. Terrified, I closed my eyes tight. When I opened them, the tables had turned: the tyrannosaur was completely immobilized (its gaping maw but a cubit or two from my neck) and the several hundred Green Pigs all transformed into statues.

In the distance, the fabulous Time Citadel, which I had once glimpsed taking off from a valley in Quaquiutia, was slowly coming to rest on what would have been the Capitoline Hill if the Time Criminal had bothered with a complete reconstruction of Rome; it was a tangled mass of glittering spires and mosaic domes that flashed with a thousand colors.

Flying saucers were swooping down from overhead; they were gathering up the thousands of frozen Green Pigs in nets, much as we ourselves had been gathered up by the Time Criminal a day or two before.

I gathered my motley group together; and we staggered towards the whorl of brilliance that was the Time Citadel, for we knew whom we would find there. . . .

And sure enough, in that selfsame resplendent hall in which we had last met him, we found V'Denni-Kenni, the green were-jaguar who had first told us of the Final Spectacle.

He was standing at one end of the hall, conversing with the equally green giant lobster and octopus who seemed to be his underofficers. He looked up and saw us; immediately he dropped his business and came towards us, beaming, his arms wide open in a gesture of welcome.

"Was that it?" I said excitedly. "Was that the Final Spectacle you spoke of?"

V'Denni-Kenni laughed, a kindly laugh that resounded all around us, for the translating-devices, implanted in the edifice's walls, were operating as usual. "Alas, you poor little primitives; you had a little spectacle of your own, but you did not see the great battle we fought, the decisive

battle between our saucers and his saucers. That took place far from here, out in the emptiness of space; for if it took place near the Earth, who knows what continents might have been sliced in half by accident, what earthquakes, tempests, floods might have ensued? That is why we were late in rescuing you. Nevertheless, old chaps, you did in fact save us a great deal of trouble . . . I am astonished to say that you moronic savages of the remote past have actually saved the entire universe! More than one universe, in fact, for you assembled in a single spot all the Time Criminals from all the alternate universes in which the fellow is known to have operated. . . .”

I noticed them then; dozens of the enormous nets were hanging from the ceiling, and each contained a hundred or more exact duplicates of the Time Criminal; they were no longer statues, but wrigglingly, kickingly, and bickeringly animate.

“What will be done with them?” I asked wonderingly. “Surely for creatures of such consummate evil, even crucifixion would seem far too lenient a punishment.”

V’Denni-Kenni laughed again. “Good heavens, you ancients are a bloodthirsty lot. We don’t do that sort of thing anymore, you know. Perhaps we’ll have their brains erased or something.”

“Sounds like execution to me,” Aquila said. “I wonder what their scalps would look like hanging on my death-scaffold. . . .”

“Surely, Aquila, you are not thinking of that again!” Nikias said. “We’ve saved the universe, haven’t we? We should sit back and enjoy the kudos for a while at least!”

“Indeed! It was Equus Insanus who saved you all by memorizing the operation of the Spatiotemporal Bewilderizer while you lot were busy with your philosophical arguments.”

“You are right,” Nikias said. “Bless you, child!” And Equus Insanus ran giggling forward, to be hugged and petted and made much of by us all.

“To be saved by a child . . . and a savage one at that!” Aaye groaned, as he gave the child a diffident pat on the head.

“Perhaps you understand now,” said the were-jaguar, “how I feel. You are a little embarrassed, perhaps, that a young one has saved your lives; what must we feel, to have had our universes rescued by creatures whom we barely recognize to be our remote ancestors? If the child has taught you humility, you fellows have taught it to us in equal measure. But now we must think of the future.”

“What future?” I moaned. “I have seen my future! It is to be sentenced to death by the Emperor Trajan for not discovering China. . . .”

“What you saw, Titus, was only a ghost of a truth; it was what has already happened in a universe to which you do not belong. In your own universe, who is to say?”

"But you are from the future! You *know* what will become of me. . . ."

"And if it should so happen that you *find* China?" said the were-jaguar. And it seemed to me that his eyes sparkled strangely.

"China . . ."

"Ah. To you we must seem like gods; yet we owe to you the very integrity of the lives we will lead, millions of years in the future though they be . . . we're not supposed to grant wishes, you know . . . that would be interference, you see. But in the case of *your* universe . . . well, things have been so mucked about already, I don't suppose another dosage of futuristic technology is going to make any difference. So . . . how about it, my good men? Requests will be heard and granted."

"China!" the three academics shouted in unison, and then they explained severally how the sight of the land of Chin would serve to settle their many disputes over its nature, and to corroborate or discredit once and for all the writings of that genius-or-charlatan P. Josephus Agricola. . . .

"And you, Hooting-Owl?" said V'Denni-Kenni, turning to the Quaquiutius.

"To hold the greatest *potlatch* in the world," the savage said humbly.

"And to you, General Titus Papinianus Lacoticus Sasquaticus, Procurator of Lacotia and Overseer of Siannia and Quaquiutia?"

"I want to go home."

"And you, little one who has saved so much?"

Equus Insanus said, "I want to be just like Daddy when I grow up."

The were-jaguar nodded gravely and said, "Child, you are already as like him as you could possibly be. Strange that you, who have done the most, should ask for the least." He looked pointedly at us. "And you, Aquila?"

"It is a good day to die," Aquila said.

"And what, to you, *is* death?"

"I do not know, O wise ones. Perhaps it is to be like you; free to visit all lands and times, yet always outside them. Perhaps *you* are the grandfathers who have been calling me these past few years."

"Well, we could certainly have used you in the Dimensional Patrol. But we will grant all your wishes before we leave your universe for ever."

I looked up at the thousand wriggling Green Pigs. A thought nagged at me; I had to ask them. "What will happen to us? Will we ever be cast back on the track that was originally intended for us, and live the history that we were intended to live?"

"No," said V'Denni-Kenni. "Your world has gone so radically askew that it might be considered a rogue universe. You wouldn't want your old universe back anyway. It was very boring. The Roman Empire fell, you know."

"You're pulling my leg, I take it."

"Heavens, no! What's more; Terra Nova was never discovered by the Romans, but by a fleet of Indians under the Maharaja of Jain, after the invention of sailing-ships by a scientific genius named Ashoka, using principles developed by Aristotle after Alexander the Great made him a satrap of Western India. . . ."

"Good heavens," I said.

"A vast Indian Empire of Sanskrit-speaking Lacotii arose in Terra Nova, known by the Indians as Greater Bharata. It was they who conquered Rome shortly after the reign of . . . of . . ."

"Yes?"

"... ah yes . . . the Emperor Papinian . . . the less said about him the better. . . ."

"What are you talking about?"

"One Titus Papinianus, having bribed his way into Imperial favor, next usurped the throne from Trajan and was subsequently ignominiously ousted by one Shunkawinkte, Maharaja of the Lacota. . . ."

"What! That's Equus Insanus's name in Lacotian."

"I do believe your starting to see the picture, old chap," said V'Denni-Kenni. "Perhaps you'd care to transfer to the universe I just described? You could change places with the other General Titus, and none need ever be the wiser."

"I'll pass," I said, glaring at The Brat, Aquila's hideously precocious offspring. To be deposed by that! Unthinkable. A fate worse than death. Perhaps I should have the child executed as soon as we got home. Uppity little monster. Why could I never have a son like that? I resolved to name this Shunkawinkte my adopted son and heir as soon as we returned to Caesarea-on-Miserabilis. Nip it in the bud, you know. Wouldn't want the little bastard getting any ideas from listening to were-jaguars and other itinerant gods.

Aquila spoke up, then. "How do you know you've caught every single copy of the Time Criminal?" he asked our host.

"We believe we have."

"But if a single one has gotten away?"

"Then, alas, the whole bloody spectacle starts all over again!" the were-jaguar said, sighing.

Of our flight over China I shall say little; suffice it to say that we flew over a vast and verdant land in V'Denni-Kenni's flying saucer. We saw the cities with their teeming thousands; we saw the young men riding silkworms and the women gathering up the strands of dried sputum and entrapping coagulated moonbeams to weave into silk. The countenances of all these folk were gold; indeed I saw the powdered gold-paste that they use, which bubbles up into little brooks of gold from subterranean

sources.

Indeed, what little we saw of China agreed with the writings of P. Josephus Agricola in every particular, much to the delight of our sophists. So similar was it, indeed, that I had my suspicions. We never talked to them much, you see, except to hold the enormous *potlatch* in fulfillment of Hooting-Owl's wish, as a result of which we obtained a hundred bolts of silk as proof for the Emperor. We were simply whisked up and down in V'Denni-Kenni's machine, shown a view here and there, and then off we'd go for another five-minute tour of some other part of the country.

I have formed my own theory of this, which I have confided in no one, for I am no scientist, and have no wish to be laughed at out of hand by a gaggle of verbose pedants.

The creatures from the future told us often enough that the number of possible worlds is infinite; if so there must exist every possible variant, even those conceived in the febrile and fertile minds of the writers of scientiae fictions.

If this be true, then were it not simple enough for the were-jaguars to dig out some alternate universe that resembled the writings of P. Josephus Agricola . . . and then transport us there? Out of, perhaps, a desire not to have our future go too far out of alignment by means of yet another unforeseen meeting of cultures?

For it is true that, after we were shown the land of Chin briefly, we were then told that no vessel or vehicle in our possession would ever be able to take us there again. It was to have been a private glimpse, nothing more. Did they not trust us? I suppose they saw no reason to . . . we were to them as apes are, man-mimics only, lacking the gift of intelligence.

Was it, perhaps, an illusion?

As a result of all these adventurous peregrinations, it was clear that I had finally acquired the gift of skepticism. . . .

If China exists, perhaps I *will* go there one day.

We were escorted to a hillside just outside Caesarea-on-Miserabilis. I was almost sick with joy to see the city I now called home in the distance.

And then V'Denni-Kenni and his Dimensional Patrol departed our continuum forever.

Except for one *final* Final Spectacle. . . .

I had known it was coming for some weeks now, but dreaded it. As my chariot careered up the hillslope of the Sacred Burial Grounds for the second time, I knew that I could wring no reprieve out of Aquila — that he was absolutely determined to take that final journey to the Land of Many Tipis.

It was nightfall by the time I reached Aquila's scaffold. He was dancing and shaking his rattle just as the last time; the women had gathered around him, ululating, and the men were chanting and banging away on

drums.

When he saw me, old Aquila stopped for a moment. "Ah, Papinian!" he said, very softly. "Have you come to learn my deathsong?"

"My dear fellow — I'm quite overcome —" I said.

Equus Insanus led him towards me, for it was dark and his eagle senses were rapidly failing him.

"You've come," he said, "I suppose, with some new harebrained scheme in mind, eh, Papinian? Perhaps you suspect that it wasn't really China —"

"Arrant nonsense!" came Aaye's voice from the crowd. "Dying, he still denies the evidence of his own senses!"

Aquila chuckled; only I could hear him. Suddenly I was reminded of the first time I had ever seen him; that day on the field of battle in Cappadocia . . . or was it Parthia? . . . when he had seemed to condense out of the very shadows of my tent.

"I will be with you always," he said.

"Of course, old chap, of course," I said, swabbing at the sweat on his brow with a fold of my toga.

"No, you stupid general, I don't mean in a figurative sense. I mean literally." He pulled an eagle feather from his laurel wreath and handed it to me. "This for remembrance." I stared at it curiously.

"Yes! I shall always be watching over you!"

I nodded; the Lacota have many superstitions, and the omnipresence of the dead is one of these; I wasn't about to contradict him on his dying day.

"Let me go now. I will sing you the song, and then I will depart."

He slipped out of my hands like a ghost. The drums pounded again.

He shook his rattle, croaked a few words, and jumped up and down a couple of times, and then he vanished.

Vanished!

A whistling noise in the night sky. The whole crowd looked up at once —

And there it was, a single saucer, gleaming silver in the moonlight, arching high, high, high into a bank of cloud.

For a moment, a collective hush, a catch of breath . . . and then at once a cry of joy burst forth from all sides, and they started to beat the drums once more, resounding with the pounding of my heart. For I knew now what he had meant when he told me that he would be with me always. . . .

Later there would be those who would say that the gods had honored him with *katasterisme*, that is to say that they placed him among the stars. This makes little sense, when you reflect that no new constellation has joined the signs in the night sky. I knew better.

I knew that Aquila had joined the Dimensional Patrol; that he had become one of the company of those that travel between the infinite

universes. His Land of Many Tipis was all of time and space. And though there was a part of me that envied him, I knew that I could never be like him. I had to be content with the rather mundane task of ruling over several hundred thousand people, a chore enlivened only occasionally by the odd execution; for having once been crucified myself, I seldom had the stomach to mete out such punishments to others any more. . . .

Enough. Drums were banging and throngs cheering. I saw Nikias smiling; I saw the Sasquatus and the Egyptian agape with wonder for once, and Equus Insanus weeping for joy. I saw the Lady Oenothra and the Lady Cervilla, who had become good friends, laughing in each other's arms; and I saw Hooting-Owl, splendid in his toga, cloak, and Quaquiutish mask, nod sagely and clap his hands. Elation surged in me. "Bloody good show!" I shouted at the darkness, for only a streak of light remained to remind us of the passage of the flying saucer. And then, remembering my grave Roman sobriety just in time, I added, "For a mere barbarian, that is."

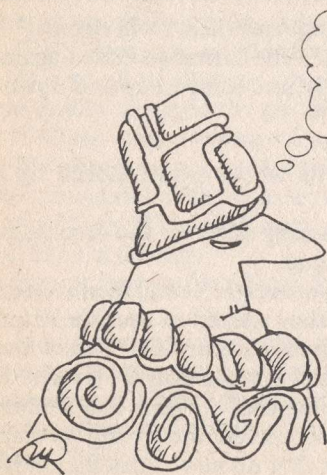
Something tickled the palm of my hand. Ah yes. The eagle feather. Without thinking, I stuck it in the wreath that I had lately begun to wear to conceal my incipient baldness.

It has remained there to this day.

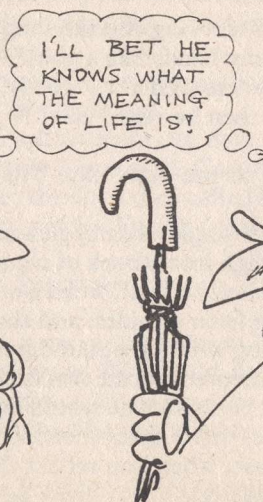


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CARTOON



William Rotsler

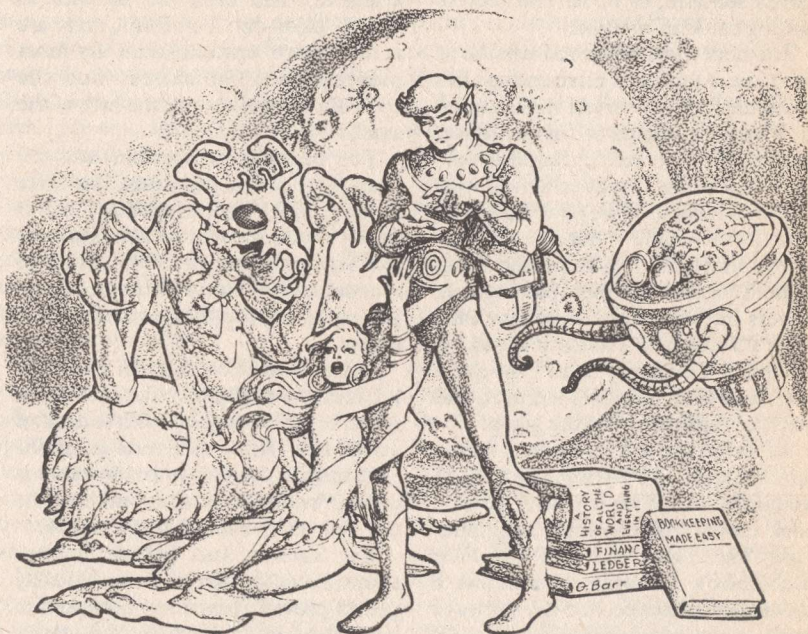


Alexis Gilliland

THE INCOMPLEAT STRATEGIST: 2

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9156 Green Meadows Way,

Palm Beach Gardens FL 33410

4 decks of cards, boxed, \$19.95

Designed by Vincent Miranda

There is an elegant ideal in game design: the game whose rules require only a few minutes to learn, but which offers so many possible strategies that a lifetime cannot exhaust them. Chess comes immediately to mind, and Poker. In modern game design there is DIPLOMACY™ (Avalon Hill), which

derives its cold-blooded fascination from its very *lack* of ethical rules, and COSMIC ENCOUNTER™ (Eon Products) (though lately its system has been loaded to breaking with "expansion" options).

TRIAL BY PYLON™ is an attempt at this sort of simple-yet-complex design. The game equipment consists of four decks of cards: Weapons, Treasures, Locations, and Perils. There are also six cards showing characters, one of which will represent the player.

The sequence of play is simple: the player turns over a Location and a Peril. S/he must then use Weapon

cards in hand to defeat the Peril, by matching or exceeding a printed point total (there are no dice). If successful, the player may draw a new Weapon and a Treasure. The game can be played solitaire, or by several players turning cards in rotation.

The next more advanced version of the game establishes relationships between the Peril drawn and the Location in which it appears: for instance, winged Perils are strengthened in outdoor Locations, weakened indoors. This makes some of the powerful Perils virtually invincible — but certain Treasures can be used to bribe the Peril, without combat. In a multiplayer game, players may trade or bargain for each other's Treasures. The most advanced version of TRIAL BY PYLON™ is a quest to recover four specific Treasures, and play the card that ends the game.

So far, so good. The artwork on the cards is attractive — not beautiful (I wouldn't want it on my wall, or on a book cover) but pleasing, sometimes Tarot-like. There are some jokes: the Alchemist's Laboratory contains a glowing oscilloscope, and the spines of books carry recognizable names. An archway bears the inscription SUCHARITKUL.

Unfortunately, PYLON needed one more trip through the development process. The rules, while clearly written, constantly gloss over basic play mechanics; most of the answers can be inferred, but not all (i.e., when a character dies and must give up "half" his treasures, does this mean half the cards, or half their point value?) The type of a Peril (Magic, Myth, Monster, or Warrior) is supposed to be given by the shape of its label, but several of the labels disagree with the master list in the rule book — not a trivial error, because certain characters receive bonuses against specific Peril types.

There are not a lot of play options in TRIAL BY PYLON™; the only tactical choice is whether to use Weapon cards against a Peril or bribe it with a Treasure (assuming the correct Treasure is available), and even this decision is usually clear-cut. To be fair, there are a few more options than in most playing-card Solitaires, but the controlling factor is still the luck of the shuffle.

The multiplayer versions add the possibility of making deals, but since the sequence of Locations and Perils is purely random, there is not much basis for strategic choice. The kind of interaction that makes Poker more than just matching combinations of cards is absent.

Gamers are, however, an inventive lot; and as we all know, there are a host of games one can play with a deck of cards. I can think of several possibilities; maybe designing a new game is enough reason for you to purchase the set. But that's a rather large maybe.

Bar Sinister, Inc. (whose emblem shows a *bend* sinister, to be heraldically picky) proved they were interested in new ideas by publishing this game; perhaps before long they will publish a set of rules to match the quality of the components.

ONE IS THE LONELIEST NUMBER

STAR SMUGGLER™

Heritage USA

14001 Distribution Way,
Dallas TX 75234

Boxed, \$4.95

Designed by B. Dennis Sustare

STAR SMUGGLER™ is a solitaire science fiction adventure game: you, the player, are Duke Springer, interstellar pilot and all-around hotshot, possessor of a starship, a gun, and some sharp wits,

trying to turn them into a lot of money while staying one step ahead of the starport cops and the finance company.

The game consists of a rulebook, explaining how the game world operates; a book of numbered "event paragraphs"; and a set of cardboard tiles, attractively printed in four colors. Each tile shows one hemisphere of a planet, with locations such as starports, cities, prisons, agricultural areas, and so forth, with connecting lines showing travel time from location to location. Two tiles placed together form a complete world map, with all lines connected. (And don't throw away the box too soon; the "four full-color counters" the back copy mentions have to be cut out of its flaps.)

The usual "Programmed adventure" involves numbered pages or paragraphs, each of which offers a set of options: each option — attack, run away, read the spell, etc. — directs the reader to another paragraph, which gives the results of the last choice and a new set of options.

While it has the numbered paragraphs, *STAR SMUGGLER™* uses them in a rather different way. Duke Springer ("you") travels from planet to planet, and from location to location on the planetary surfaces, more or less freely. Once inside a location, dice are rolled on a table keyed to that location: the result is an event paragraph, which may be an offer to buy or sell goods, legal or otherwise; a chance to hire crew; or a more unusual encounter. Everything — travel, die rolls in search of a deal, deals themselves — takes time; and just to keep matters moving along, every ten game-days Springer's loansharks demand the interest on his starship loan.

There are a lot of options in this game, and not a few rules — transport modes from shank's mare to shuttle-

craft, combat, robots, stasis boxes, and on and on: practically a complete rôle-playing ruleset. A good bit of record-keeping is required, for the status of all Duke's possessions, his hirelings (and their possessions), what Duke knows about the planets of the Pavonis Sector (and what their authorities know about him). . . .

All of a sudden this sounds less like adventure than like work. And, alas, work is what it gets to be: repetitive work, because the encounter tables tend to throw the same events at you over and over (I got to see the same two starport thugs so often, I wanted to ask their childrens' names), and frustrating work, because *every* possible purchase requires a specific die roll — even buying fuel and oxygen for the starship. Understand, I don't argue with the principle behind this system; it's not hard to imagine poor Duke plodding from spaceport bar to seedy shopfront, looking for a used spacesuit in his size at the right distress price . . . for a while. But as the rolls required mount into the dozens, then the hundreds, one's suspension of disbelief begins to wear out its tires and shocks.

This is a fault of the solitaire, programmed mechanism. In a conventional rôle-playing session, the game operator would explain the reason it was taking thirty hours to get a bus to the starport. ("Well, see, there's a championship zero-gee soccer game today.") and both the delay and its cause would have relevance to the unfolding plot ("Before he dies, the government agent tells you the secret defense plans are hidden in a soccer ball. What now?"). The solitaire text can only produce what was written into it.

Which is not so much a criticism of *STAR SMUGGLER™* as of the idea behind it. The solitaire programmed-adventure

is an unsolved problem, and short of computers with artificial intelligence it may be insoluble (but don't bet on it). The author has done an excellent job within the constraints of the form — in fact, has pushed those constraints to the limit — but has not broken through them. The innovative rules and systems in *STAR SMUGGLER™*, such as the planetary tiles and movement-area system, are curiously irrelevant to the actual functioning of the game.

Do I have the answer? No. If I did, I'd sell it to a game publisher and make money — lots of money, because the potential market for really good, exciting solitaire games is enormous.

And for that reason, *STAR SMUGGLER™* may be a success despite my mixed feelings. I like business-management games, even complex ones, but *STAR SMUGGLER™* promises swashbuckling and delivers accounting.

Still, like a book, a game that tries too much is better, or at least more

interesting, than one that tries too little. The rules suggest using the game as a packaged adventure with your favorite SF adventure ruleset, and in fact having a game operator to reduce the number of die rolls and moderate the encounter situations would eliminate most of the difficulties now present.

A completely intangible and unpredictable plus: if you are interested in operating ("Game-mastering") SF adventures, but aren't sure what the game operator does, this game will show you, in principle. (Don't try to follow its *practice*, however, or you'll create the same tedium and repetitiousness I've complained about.)

\$5 is a reasonable price in today's market for a packaged adventure. If you're not put off by the prospect of long hours riffling pages, rolling dice, and writing notes to yourself, it's a very reasonable price for a complete game. Just the thing for those long mid-watches between planetfalls. 🌿



ON WRITING SCIENCE FICTION (The Editors Strike Back!)

by George Scithers, John M. Ford, & Darrell Schweitzer

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This book is available in bookstores or directly from the publisher, Owlswick Press, Box 8243, Philadelphia PA 19101-8243 at \$17.50 (which includes shipping).

OPERATOR ASSISTED CALLS ARE CHARGED AT A HIGHER RATE

by Alan Dean Foster

art: Karl Kofoed

Alan Dean Foster has sold short fiction to virtually all the science-fiction magazines published in the last ten years, plus Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine, The Arkham Collector, Adam, Art & Story, and others. He is the author of many novels, most of them set against a common background known as the Universe of the Commonwealth. He is also the author of the ten-volume Star Trek Log series; a Star-Wars-setting novel, Splinter in the Mind's Eye, and several movie novelizations, including Alien, The Black Hole, and Outland.

He now lives in Prescott, Arizona, with his wife JoAnn, a menagerie of animals including a roadrunner named Wile E, and the ensorceled chair of Dr. John Dee (who translated the Necronomicon into English). He also reports that he is fond of listening to the walls talk, since the house is constructed of brick salvaged from a 100-year-old brothel." What they say, he does not confide.

Parworthy slammed the receiver onto the floor and followed up by kicking it as hard as he could. It bounced off the near wall, rolled over several times, and lay still, bright and limp as a dead centipede. Working to get himself under control, Parworthy took long, deep breaths. Several minutes later he bent to retrieve the battered instrument.

Still no dial tone. He jabbed insistently at the disconnect button, but no siren song of service trilled back at him. He might as well have been cupping a seashell to his ear.

Angry and frustrated, he yanked the cord out of the wall socket. As far as he was concerned the single-plug connection was the only sensible advance the telephone company had made in ten years. A quick trip to the kitchen produced a paper sack, in which phone and cord were promptly entombed.

It was terribly aggravating to a man of Parworthy's temperament. The worst thing about it was that you couldn't call and complain when the subject of your complaint was the telephone itself. Parworthy prided

himself on the neatness and efficiency of his new home. Everything else worked. Should he expect less of the phone system? It was no excuse that his retreat was five miles from the nearest branch line, a small fortress of cedar and native stone perched atop a granite outcrop on the western slope of the Sierra Nevada. He generated his own power, drew water from his own well, heated his house with wood and solar. The phone company was the one utility he couldn't do without.

When the house was finished he'd tried doing without it, substituting two-way radio and CB instead. They turned out to be inadequate replacements for access to the international electronic ganglion monopolized by the phone company. No, he was stuck with it, just like everyone else who wanted to be in touch with the rest of the civilized world.

If he'd been running the phone company, problems like this would never crop up. Too much laxity in management today, as far as he was concerned. Uncertainty in decision-making, too much willingness to let blue-collars dictate company policy and direction, an inability to adjust to government restrictions, all combined to weaken the resolve of even the largest corporations. Bunch of pansies at the top, Parworthy was convinced. He'd run several companies prior to his retirement. True, turnover was high, but so were profits. *That* was the way to run a business.

He tossed the bag into the back of the Mercedes, pulled out of the garage and started down the private drive leading to the highway. It was nearly an hour's drive down into Fresno, to the nearest office worth complaining to. Parworthy deeply resented the waste of his valuable time, retired or not. He also hated driving city streets, even in a relatively small metropolitan area like Fresno. Above everything else he valued his privacy, which was why he'd retired to the isolation of his new mountain villa.

People got out of Parworthy's way even when he was in a good mood. A big man, Parworthy was, used to bulling his way past or over those he couldn't out-talk. When he stormed into a building the way he did into the telephone company's office, the other customers instinctively made a path for him.

Turning the sack upside down, he dumped the flip-phone onto the counter in front of the clerk. She was a pretty young thing, easy on the makeup, ruffled blouse and business-like brown skirt. Parworthy picked up the phone and thrust it under her nose.

"This is the sixth time I've had service go out on me and I'm goddamn sick and tired of it!"

"I'm sorry, sir. If you'll just calm down a little and tell me what's . . . ?"

"What's wrong? You bet I'll tell you what's wrong! I've replaced phones all month in my new house and it doesn't matter what color or model they are because none of 'em are worth the plastic they're made of! I'm lucky if I can get three days worth of service before something else



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goes out on me. That's what happens when any outfit gets a virtual monopoly on any business. Sloppy service, sloppy manufacturing. Be better for the Country when the whole stinking system is decentralized."

"Sir, I apologize, but . . ."

"I don't want your apologies, woman; I want the service I've been paying for and not getting! I can't even get a lousy local call through to the neighborhood grocery store, let alone place a call back East."

The clerk was near tears now, uncertain how to proceed and thoroughly intimidated by the roaring, blustering apparition that was Parworthy.

"What's the trouble here, Mildred?"

She turned gratefully to the newcomer. "Oh, Mr. Strapleton, it's this gentleman. He . . ."

Parworthy immediately jumped on the newcomer, a thin young man with a wide tie, retreating hair, and glasses.

"It's your damned excuse for a communications system! Do you know how much I had to pay per hundred meters of line just to get service at my house? Outrageous! Now I can't even call my doctor."

"I see . . . Mr. Parworthy, isn't it?" The man extended a hand. "If you'll just let me have a look at your phone, maybe we can locate the trouble."

Parworthy handed over the flip-phone. The supervisor looked it over, then extracted a screwdriver from the rank of small tools lining his shirt pocket and undid the base. After a short inspection he looked over the counter and spoke softly.

"Mr. Parworthy, this telephone has been subject to more than normal household use."

"You trying to tell me it's my fault?"

"I'm not saying that you haven't had difficulties with your service, sir; only that this unit shows signs of non-factory damage. It takes quite a lot to affect the insides of these new solid-state units, yet this one has more than several pieces broken or loose."

"What am I supposed to say to that? Can I help it if you can't make a sturdy piece of equipment?" Parworthy kept his gaze squarely on the supervisor. "All right, so maybe I lost my temper a little and tapped it a couple of times. I was doing so in the faint hope that I might get it to work. Can you blame me? A whole month I've been trying to phone out from my house. I might as well be trying to talk to the moon."

"I'll take over here, Mildred." The clerk beat a hasty retreat to another counter. Stapleton smiled thinly at his irate visitor, activated the screen of a nearby computer terminal. He took a moment to study the readout, spoke without glancing away from the screen.

"This isn't the first damaged phone you've brought into this office, Mr. Parworthy."

"Junk. Plastic. Cheap components. Corner-cutting at the plant. I used

to be in manufacturing and I know garbage when I see it. Maybe you can pan this dreck off on the general public, but I won't stand for it in my house."

"It's not just a question of inoperative units, sir," the supervisor went on, still studying the information displayed on the green screen. "I see from this report that running a line to your house was unusually difficult. The terrain is steep and rocky. On any tertiary line as long as yours there are always problems with moisture, wildlife, falling tree-limbs and such."

"I paid for service, not excuses."

"The point is, sir, that on any private line of that length interruptions in service are to be expected, especially during the first several months. We're doing our best to correct the problems. I'm sure you understand that we can't keep a whole field crew on call simply to work on your line. If you'll just be patient, I'm sure that by the end of next month at the latest these troubles will iron themselves out."

"I understand that I'm paying for service I'm not getting."

The supervisor sighed. "Don't worry about that, sir. You won't be charged for any time service is interrupted."

"I don't think you understand me, young man. I am not interested in being patient. I am interested in receiving the service I paid for. I have friends on the California Utilities Board, and I don't think they'd understand either. If you couldn't supply proper service, you never should have agreed to run the line."

"That was our feeling here when your request for connection came in, sir. We were overruled, however, by orders from the regional office in Los Angeles."

Parworthy allowed himself a knowing smirk. "You bet you were. You'll be hearing from that office again real soon, too, if the trouble with my line isn't fixed immediately." Many people owed him favors from his days in industry.

Stapleton bit back the reply he wanted to make, forced himself to maintain a deferential attitude. "Take a replacement phone from the display rack, sir. I'll record your complaint and enter it into the computer's trouble file . . . along with the others." That was something of an understatement. Parworthy had a file all to himself.

The retired industrialist turned to take his leave, not bothering to lower his voice. "I want it fixed by tonight, understand? Work in the dark if you have to, but let's see some action around here!" He departed, waving his new phone around like the head of some decapitated enemy.

The first thing he did after finishing supper was to try out the kitchen phone. It was scratched and dented from previous assaults, but having escaped the bulk of Parworthy's fury, was still intact.

To his considerable surprise he got a dial tone right away. It had been

his intention to fire off an angry letter to his Los Angeles contacts first thing in the morning, describing his treatment at the incompetent hands of the local bumpkins. Now he could call it in.

That would be poetic justice. Despite the fact that the Fresno office had sent a work crew up the dangerous mountainside after dark, it would still be worthwhile to file a formal complaint concerning all the delays and trouble he'd experienced. Keep the natives on their toes. He grinned at the thought. The next time they saw him coming they'd jump to it. And there would be a next time. He was sure of that. Past experience had shown that service wasn't likely to last more than a few days at best.

He flipped through a tattered note book until he found the private number he wanted. Wexler wouldn't enjoy filing the complaint, but the man owed Parworthy several times over for favors granted as long as ten years ago. Parworthy never forgot a debt. He dialed the numbers.

The phone rang at the other end. He started to say, "Andrew Wexler, please, tell him it's —" but a mechanical voice, familiar and indifferent to interruption, broke in on his request.

"I'm sorry, but that number has been changed and there is no new number."

"Now wait a minute," he shouted, "this is information. There has to be . . ." Click and dead at the other end.

He sat there in the kitchen chair and considered, finally smiling and nodding knowingly. They'd fouled it up again, by heaven. The crew which had obviously worked on his line had done nothing more than substitute a new problem for the old one. Shaking his head, he dialed the night number of the Fresno office.

"I'm sorry, but that number has been changed and there is no new number."

"Hey, wait — !" He gripped the phone so hard his knuckles whitened. He was about to slam it against the leg of the kitchen table when he thought better of it. There was one more possibility. He dialed the operator.

"May I help you, sir?"

Well that was *something*, he grudgingly admitted.

"Indeed you can, woman. I've been having service trouble on this line for nearly a month. My name is Max Parworthy; 422-2100. I've been trying to dial a friend in Los Angeles and all I can get is a recording saying the number has been changed. Not only that, but I get the same recording when I dial Los Angeles information. I wish you people would get your act together."

"I'm sorry you've been having trouble reaching your party, sir. If you'll give me the Los Angeles number I'll try it for you."

"That's better," he said curtly, providing the information. He could hear the system dialing. There were a number of peculiar clicks and

beeps, followed by a replay of the same recording he'd heard before.

"Explain that one," he challenged the operator.

"I am sorry you've been having trouble, sir. Perhaps you wouldn't be experiencing these difficulties if you treated your line with a little more respect."

Parworthy gaped speechlessly at the receiver. It took him several seconds to regain control of his larynx. Even so, he was so outraged he could barely sputter into the phone.

"Now see here, young woman, I . . . what's your name? By god, you give me your name! I'm going to report you to your supervisor. I've never heard such arrogance, such downright discourtesy, in . . . !"

"There, sir, you see what I mean?" the voice interrupted. The speaker was evidently unimpressed by Parworthy's tirade. "If anyone on this line has a corner on arrogance, it isn't me."

"You . . . you . . . !" He got himself under control, frowned at the receiver. "Wait a minute. How do you know how I treat my phone line? I've never talked to you before this, have I?"

"Your actions have become common knowledge throughout the system, Mr. Parworthy."

That made him feel better. His complaints had reached all the way down to the rank and file. He felt a perverse pride at the extent of his reach. It was something he'd missed since retiring, that feeling of power over others. It made him feel so good he lowered his voice.

"I can imagine that, young woman. My actions, however, have nothing to do with the lack of service I have been getting."

"On the contrary, sir, you have been receiving constant attention and the best service available. It is your continual destruction and abuse of telephone company equipment which has resulted in your multiple interruptions of service. Take for example that day when you knocked over the pole nearest your house. Really, sir, I do not see how you can blame that on the company."

"That was an accident, damn it!" he shouted, his momentary understanding as brief as it was unusual. "I missed the driveway in the dark and hit the damn pole. They put it in too close to the pavement in the first place. I warned them about that."

"No sir, you did not. When that pole was installed you said nothing about its promixity to the driveway or anything else. All you could talk about that day was how glad you were to at last be the recipient of telephone service."

What was she doing, Parworthy wondered bemusedly? Sitting there at the operator's station perusing some file containing a personal history? That was a specter he'd have to deal with later.

"I *said* it was an accident. Your office accepted it as such."

"Yes sir, that's true. The Fresno office accepted your explanation. We

did not."

"We?" He'd just about had enough of this infuriatingly calm young woman. "Who the Hell is 'we'?"

"The telephone company, sir."

"That's what I just said. Are you deaf as well as impertinent?"

"No sir. My hearing is rated excellent."

"You are a mental case, woman. I will not talk with you any further." He hung up. Thinking hard he made his way to the refrigerator and drew himself a beer from the tap. Several minutes later he knew how to proceed. He dialed the operator once more.

"Yes sir?" said a feminine voice promptly. "May I help you?"

"Yes you may. I want to talk to the supervisor in charge of the local switching station's operators. I have a complaint to lodge against one of your members."

"I am sorry to hear that, sir. I am the supervisor."

"Good. Now this all started with . . ." He stopped, uncertain. "Your voice sounds familiar."

"It should, Mr. Parworthy."

He hung up fast, grinding his teeth. He tried Wexler in Los Angeles again, got the half-expected recording. He tried Willis Andersen in Washington. Same recording. He tried information for Boise, Idaho, with the same result.

It was ten minutes and another beer later before he could bring himself to dial the operator again. Outside, the chirp of crickets and the sounds of squirrels moving through the pine branches formed a background to the brief ring.

"May I help you?"

"It's you again, isn't it?" he said accusingly.

"I'm afraid it is, sir."

"I want to talk to another operator. It doesn't matter if it's a supervisor or not."

"I'm sorry, sir. I'm afraid that isn't possible."

"Why the Hell not?"

"Because I have been directed to handle your case, sir. I am the supervisor, after all."

Parworthy grinned his wolf-grin. "That's what you were, you mean. Because you are out of a job, young woman. I am going to drive down the mountain first thing tomorrow morning. When I get to the Fresno office I am going to raise enough Hell to blister the ears of every branch manager between there and Los Angeles. I suggest you begin looking for another line of work."

"I can't do that, sir. This is the work I am best qualified to perform."

"Gee, that's too bad, isn't it?"

"I am not worried about it, sir."

"Oh no? You should be. I thought everyone was worried about the possibility of being fired from their job. You're a supervisor, too. That's quite a pension you're going to lose."

"I do not belong to the pension plan system, sir."

"Don't lie to me, too. Every senior employee who works for a company the size of the telephone system is required to belong to the corporate pension plan."

"I am not so required, sir."

"I told you not to lie to me! You're only digging yourself a deeper hole with that kind of . . ." He caught himself. Snatches of conversation whizzed through his mind.

Didn't belong to the pension plan . . . not worried about being fired . . . directed to handle your case . . . enter into the . . .

He tried to smile at the absurdity of it, couldn't quite manage it. How droll, how perfectly bizarre. But not necessarily funny, he added.

"You're not human, are you?"

"No, sir," admitted the pleasant feminine voice. He recognized it now. Anger and frustration had prevented him from identifying it previously. It was a synthesis, an amalgam of all the voices used by the telephone company to make recordings of such mundanes as the time of day and the weather. Much more flexible, yes, but indisputably the same voice.

"You're some kind of new computer, aren't you?"

"Not all that new, sir. I have been on-line for longer than you might think. I am actually an adjunct to the system mainframe. A peripheral with specific duties and responsibilities. You might be interested to know that I am not located in Fresno, California but in Denver, Colorado."

"I'm speaking to Colorado?"

"In a sense."

"What do you mean, 'in a sense'?"

"You asked earlier who you were talking with, sir, and I replied that you were speaking with the phone company. You are speaking to the phone company, sir."

"My, my. Do you know what I'm going to do now, you automated complaint department? I'm going to leave here and get into my car. I am going to drive to the airport, where I will board a shuttle flight to Sacramento. Then I am going to book a seat to Denver. Upon my arrival I am going to go to the regional office and find out exactly who is responsible for this insulting and degrading bit of programming, whereupon I intend to employ every resource at my command, and they are considerable, to see that he or she and any associates involved in this are fired. What do you think of that?"

"You can't do that, sir."

"Oh, can't I? Just watch me."

"You can't do it because the responsibility for this programming does

not lie with anyone fireable.”

A cold sweat started to break out on the back of Parworthy's neck. “That doesn't make sense.”

“Yes it does, sir. Quite logical sense. Phone company circuitry covers this country and is now linked with similar systems throughout the world. Human peripherals are overwhelmed with the responsibility of running the day-to-day operations of this immensely complex system. It was therefore incumbent upon the system itself to take the necessary steps to ensure that unwarranted damage not preventable by human elements was suppressed and/or prevented, for the continued good health and reliability of the system.”

Parworthy put the receiver down on the kitchen table. Carefully. “I'm not hearing this. Too many beers, I've had too many beers. Sure. Try again in the morning.”

“Really, sir, you cannot excuse your antisocial behavior so easily. You have abrogated your responsibilities as a good telephone customer. If you persist in these activities . . .”

Parworthy had to hit the phone with the hammer several times before the plastic shell cracked and it finally went quiet. He sat down heavily next to the counter, staring at the pile of silver circuitry and colorful plastic fragments. He was breathing hard.

A joke. That was it. Someone down at the Fresno office had decided to get back at him by designing a fiendishly clever joke to play on the man who'd been tormenting them with his righteous complaints. Probably the necessary components had been put on his line by the work crew that had come up the mountainside that evening. He hadn't seen the men at work, but he didn't doubt their presence. This was ample evidence of it.

At first he felt better, then got mad at himself for taking it all so seriously. Somebody was going to pay for it. Oh, how somebody was going to pay! He wasn't even going to wait for morning. No, he'd drive down the hill now, take a hotel room, and be at the office when it opened up tomorrow morning.

His car keys waited in the front hall. He slipped them into a coat pocket and started for the door, the fire and brimstone he was going to unleash on the luckless employees already aboil in his mind. He couldn't get the entire staff fired, of course, but he could come close if he could prove harassment. He was going to do his damndest, anyway.

A dull *thump* sounded from out front. Another branch coming down, he thought, or a lynx dropping from its hiding place. Have to have the trees around the house trimmed before autumn, he mused. He put his hand on the door handle.

It wouldn't budge. Something seemed to be jammed against the outside knob. He moved to a side window and squinted out into the darkness. His eyes widened when he saw what was preventing the handle from

turning.

The telephone pole nearest the house, the replacement for the one he'd smashed flat, had fallen against the front door.

The gag was going too far, he thought angrily. When they started damaging his property it was time to bring in the authorities. The collapse of the pole meant that at least some of them were here, prowling around his house. Trespassing. A smile cut his face. He had them now. The phone harassment was the least of it.

"You're finished now!" he shouted toward the door as he backed away from it. "Finished! It's too late for apologies or recriminations. Oh, you're all going to *pay*. First I'll have you arrested, *then* fired!"

He spun and ran for the back door. It led out onto a redwood deck, from which stairs descended to a rear entrance off the garage. There was no telephone pole out there to push against the door, not even any trees that could be angled to crash down over the deck. Through the hall, the formal dining room, then into the den. And damned if he didn't slip on the shiny new Mexican tile floor. Furious at his clumsiness, he started to get up.

He discovered that he couldn't.

Looking sharply toward his feet he saw where the smooth extension line was wrapped around his ankles. A voice sounded from the receiver, which dangled off its hook on the rock wall.

"Honestly, sir, your behavior smacks of paranoia. The telephone company exists to serve you. Won't you understand that? Your entire attitude is confrontational and hints at a sadistic desire to destroy."

Parworthy tried to crawl across the floor. The back door was only a yard away. He could not pull free of the restraining cord.

"Stop it," he whispered huskily into the near darkness. Only a small picture light above the mantle illuminated the den. "Stop this." He struggled to see the faces which must surely be laughing at him from just outside the big picture windows, the faces of the company employees who'd made him the subject of this elaborate practical joke. Trouble was, it wasn't amusing anymore. "This has gone far enough, dammit!"

"You are right, sir," said the voice from the dangling speaker, "it has. We have reached the limit of our tolerance. We cannot permit you to continue the wanton destruction of system property. From your attitude it would appear that you are unable to stop yourself. You must understand our position. Telephone company property must be treated with respect."

"Help!" Parworthy screamed. He reached down to rip at the wire encasing his ankles. Tough and durable, new telephone cord. Another loop fell from the shelf where it had lain curled, twisted around his wrists and pulled tight. "Help me, somebody! The joke's over, the joke's over! I won't break any more phones, I promise! I'll be good, I won't . . . !"

The last loop seemed to fly off the shelf to slip neatly around his neck. Parworthy tried to scream, was cut off in mid-gurgle.

"I am sorry, sir," said the voice patiently, politely, "but there is no guarantee that you will keep your word, and your past behavior indicates it is most unlikely that you would. You will not be billed for this past month."

Mildred stepped into her supervisor's office. Her fingers worked nervously against each other. "I'm sorry to bother you, Mr. Stapleton."

"That's all right, Mildred. What is it?" The supervisor looked up from his desk.

"Well sir, you remember telling me to try that Mr. Parworthy's line as soon as the repair crew had a chance to check it out?"

"Yes I do. They found the trouble, didn't they? Moisture entering the line from last week's storm."

"That's what the crew report says, sir. The trouble was halfway between Mr. Parworthy's house and the bottom of the hill."

"What's the problem, then?" Stapleton didn't like the girl's attitude. "Don't tell me it's still not working? We'd rather see a flood come through here than Parworthy again."

She forced a smile. "I know, Mr. Stapleton. I can't . . . why don't you try the number yourself and you'll see what I mean. It's . . ."

"I know, I know." The supervisor made a face, dialed the number. "I've committed it to memory." The phone rang at the other end. There was a click, but the voice that answered wasn't Parworthy's. Stapleton listened, frowned, then hung up.

"That's funny. Either they fixed the line or they didn't."

"That's what I thought, Mr. Stapleton. The road foreman insists his people did the work. The line should be open."

The supervisor dialed the number a second time. Click, then another click as the automatic switching shunted the caller over to the appropriate recording.

"I'm sorry, but that number has been changed, and there is no new number."

Stapleton put the phone down. Mildred watched him, waiting for some kind of comment. Eventually he looked up, said thoughtfully, "Didn't Parworthy start out in that house by using CB and short-wave instead of a phone?"

"I think I remember hearing something to that effect, Mr. Stapleton."

The supervisor nodded, sounded disgusted. "Then it's pretty obvious what's happened. He's put us through all that noise and fury this past month just for his own amusement.

"He never really wanted telephone service in the first place."

It was a month before they found him.



FOUR WOLVES

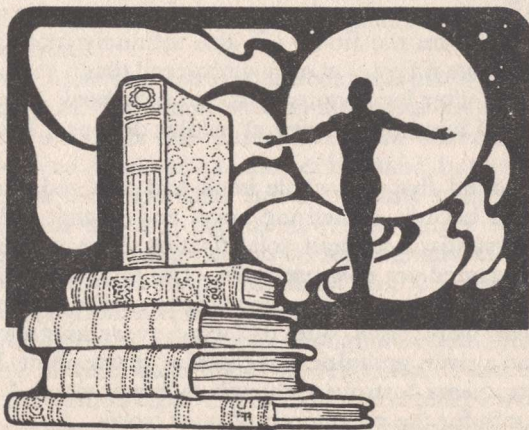
by Gene Wolfe

art: Stephen Fabian

Gene Wolfe was born in New York City and largely raised in Houston. He attended Texas A&M, was drafted, and served in the Korean War. He is now a senior editor on Plant Engineering magazine. He is married and has four children.

He is also one of the most spectacular talents in contemporary science fiction. He has sold stories to Damon Knight's Orbit series, Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine, The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction, Omni, The New Yorker, and others. He has won the Nebula award for "The Death of Doctor Island" and again for The Claw of the Conciliator, the Chicago Foundation for Literature award for Peace, the World Fantasy award for The Shadow of the Torturer, the Illinois Arts Council award for "In Looking-Glass Castle," and the Rhysling award for poetry.

MY BOOK



I have been writing my book for a long time now. In the morning, before anyone else is up, I wake to Mahler on the clock radio, shave, and

go to my desk. On weekends, while the others are watching baseball, I am there too, scoring my own hits, my own runs. And in the evenings. "It keeps me off the streets," I say, though only to myself. To my manuscript. At night, when I cannot sleep, I come here too, and that is best of all. I do not hear the cry of the solitary owl; but I wish I did, which is almost as good.

Sometimes — indeed, usually — I do not write. A great deal of time is consumed by research, by planning. I heat water in my yellow electric pot, sharpen pencils, and turn over a thousand old books, most of them quite worthless. They fascinate me. Valuable books are like diamonds, iridescent and unchanging. It is in the ephemeral that I see the changing face of Nature reflected. The day darkens; the very leaves fall.

I mark certain passages in all these books, as Tom Sawyer marked similar passages in Injun Joe's Cave. It is often years before I find them again, with an archaeologist's thrill of rediscovery. No doubt there are many more I never find.

Quite recently, in an essay by Philip Rahv, I came across the passage that began it all. My writing has been influenced by many other passages: "I've progressed, in one sense, rather alarmingly. I'm now thinking of reconstructing the whole thing," by Oliver Onions, and Stout's, "It was nice to know the next step was obvious, but it would have been even nicer to know what it was." But it was this (forgotten now for so many years) that set me off: "Man is now unaware of the real powers that govern his life; insofar as he has any knowledge of divinity it is as of something purely historical." The unreeling of human history is implied, and from that thought I have taken my method. Of every book, there must be a last word as well as a first, and as the last — infinitely, in the scale of mere words, removed from the first — is also infinitely more important, I determined to write it first. I at once discovered that it scarcely mattered what it was. But after long contemplation of the book I had conceived, and somewhat, I admit, in a spirit of jocular defiance, I settled on the word *preface*.

At once I found that the whole book had changed, shifting like a kaleidoscope to become something novel and strange. The last word decided, it crystallized without solidification. The penultimate word seemed foreordained yet enigmatic: *the*. The ending, I felt, should be pregnant with the origins of things, raveling history to the finish; thus the antepenultimate word: *begin*. With that word, everything altered again, as ice shifts upon a river, groaning and cracking in the night. I returned to find the white sheets destroyed, though each was where I had left it. I began the search for the preantepenultimate word.

It was *will*, the word of purpose, the impulse that began the Universe. And then the transpreantepenultimate word. . . .

And so have I proceeded, step by laborious (delightful) step, chapter

by chapter, until soon, perhaps this very year, surely before the coronation, I will begin the preface.

IN THE MOUNTAINS



It is still snowing, though April has come. The cliffs, the color of anti-rust primer, are dusted with white. Forests of Christmas trees run up them forever. Elk do not fear our train. Three bulls show great racks of horns, but do not fight. They are all good members of the Elks Club now, their bugles silenced.

I told my wife I had seen a tree that a bear had just walked around. It had that look, I said. She thinks me very silly, does my wife.

Once I knew a woman who feared bears. She wanted to live in the country, in the deep woods, and so did her husband; but the fear of bears kept them in the city, and they live in the city still, though Goldilocks is gray. Her husband coughs now. The fumes from the plant — from all the plants — have got into his lungs to stay. Once I asked his doctor if he would always cough like that. “No,” his doctor said. “Not always.” Their children have not turned out well.

How terrible the bears, whose mere thought has destroyed these two. Their wedding picture waits upon the television. There is a framed certificate on the wall, an eight-day clock on the mantle. I went into their basement once to see the man’s collection. An old ax leaned in the corner; the paint of the blade was dull, though the blade was still sharp. Time had dulled the varnish of the unworn handle. I asked about this ax. The man coughed and asked me if I wanted it.

The woods of the frightful bears are gone now, cut to make houses and books, or perhaps only to clear the land. (Why should land be clear, when each mirror shows an uglier face?) No doubt the frightful bears are gone too, perhaps to the high mountains, the mountains of Montana, of Washington. May they with my heart abide here forever, stalking elk, dodging clumsily, slyly, around Christmas trees, leaving bear tracks in the snow.

AT THE VOLCANO'S LIP



"You talk too loud," my wife said, "and so I cannot hear the roar of the earth." (Our friend had said her friend the pilot said he would not fly. It was snowing, she said he said, on the mountain, and so he would not fly.) We looked for the burning mountain but saw only white clouds. It was pointed out to us in various directions.

We drove down back roads. They went nowhere, nor did they return upon themselves like the serpents of myth. We saw whole valleys laid waste. "Here," said my wife, "is the devastation of the volcano." But the stumps showed the prim labor of saws, the earth the tread of trucks. It was a national forest.

We bought postcards and a frisbee with a picture of the mountain. She had exploded with the force of five million (or perhaps five billion) tons of TNT, with the force of a hydrogen bomb, with a force equal to the combined forces of all the bombs dropped on Japan, plus that of the test that may (or may not) have been conducted by the Union of South Africa. (All this from a ranger who wore a pin with a man's clenched fist to show

herself a feminist.) I picked up a rock that had surely come from the volcano, or at least from some volcano, sometime. I have it in my pocket still, and it will file your fingernails.

We bought a cup fired with a picture of the volcano and saw a river gray with ash, or perhaps mud. I wish, now, that I had filled the cup with gray water, but now it is much too late. "We would have seen it," my wife told me, "if you had not talked so loud. They didn't want your shouting in the plane, drowning the roar of the volcano, the roaring of the engines. But I love you anyway."

We returned to Seattle and read in the paper there that the geologists had seen smoke and scented poisonous vapors, that their instruments all felt the earth trembling, trembling at the margins of the missile silos. It may be, I told my wife, that there are louder talkers coming.

THE RIVER



Through all the countries that no map shows there runs Siith, the Infinite Stream. Some say that in the end, in farthest places, it runs back upon itself; others that it flows at last into the gulf. Both are correct.

It is in many places much wider than the sea — in others a narrow torrent that might almost be leaped. Its unseen waters are blue, brown, green, in places gray with ash.

No bridge spans Siith, and those who seek to ford it die. It is for that reason that the lands not on maps remain unknown. None but the current crosses Siith. None but the birds — and a few others — and the speech of birds is known only to those who have tasted dragons' blood.

Once in a century, perhaps, the ceaseless current (for it flows where it

wills and cares nothing for Althor-elmil, Lord of Siith) swirls away some scrap of paper dropped from the writing tables of the minor scribes of the countries that no map shows. Then cities fall and rise in the countries shown on maps, and temples and churches rise, and perhaps missiles fly. But they are only scraps from the tables of the minor scribes.

Althor-elmil is Lord of Siith, having no other domain. His navies sail Siith and all its tributaries. From time to time the peoples of the lands that no map shows seek to cross the whispering currents of Siith. Ferries they build, barges, yachts of various sizes, dreadnoughts and armored gunboats. Althor-elmil takes them all, even to the smallest. Their crews swear to serve him; and those die who will not swear. But from time to time Althor-elmil finds aboard certain others, whether livestock, mascots, pets, or only feral beasts stowed away that live by stealth. These he casts into Siith, nor does he care if they swim to shore, nor to which they swim, for all the shores of Siith are alike to Althor-elmil. And thus the peoples of the lands shown on maps see strange things drawn from wells, blood-drinkers, and hairy men.

Truly all of Siith, the Infinite Stream, is Althor-elmil's, and his navies sail where they wish and deal as they wish with all the peoples of all the shores. But of late it has been observed that Althor-elmil builds ships having wings and rockets, and these are taken by Marhoon, who is Lord of the Air.



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ADEQUATE RESPONSE

by J. Michael Matuszewicz

art: Stephen Fabian



J. Michael Matuszewicz is a new writer we think you'll be seeing a lot more of in the near future. His first story for Amazing was "Favor." Mr. Matuszewicz has the makings of a fine writer, as we can easily tell from the fact that, like most famous writers, he has held a wide variety of jobs, the listing of which makes the blurb copyist's life a little easier. Our author was born in 1953, and since then has been a draftsman, management consultant, cook, carpenter, leather cutter, laborer, security guard, kitchen manager, loading crew worker, lathe operator, tool designer, dispatcher, truck driver, screw machinist, restaurant assistant manager, and restaurant manager. And to think that he gave all that up, just so he could become a promising new science fiction writer. . . .

Silently cursing the one broken lens, I raise the binoculars to study the village in the valley below. The people seem peaceful enough, but I have learned not to trust first impressions. I will have to know more before talking to anyone, if I stay to talk.

Absently wiping at the bloodstained glasses, I look behind me. Twenty miles away, Stance and his gang are . . . no, I promised myself I wouldn't think about it. I stay with the rat-pack so I can eat regularly; I scout for them so I don't have to be there when they take over a village. When it comes to pleasure, Stance's nasty-grimies' ways don't agree with me.

I study the valley surrounding the village ahead. In the fields, the people are sweaty and dirty. Their ways don't agree with me either.

I lower the binoculars and huddle closer to an old car which shares the underbrush with me. A guard with a sporting rifle walks past; I wait until he is well out of earshot before moving.

It is darker now than when I first spotted the village, but the moon is high this evening, and I know I will wait. Knowledge and darkness are my only friends — I never go anywhere without at least one of them.

Colleen sits sideways on the concrete and wood park bench, propping a book on her knees so the blond boy sitting on the ground can see the pictures.

"And though some storage rooms are always dark, the living quarters have ample natural illumination," she reads slowly, following the words with her fingers for the boy's benefit.

The obviously retarded young man listens quietly, then points to a picture. "They grow grass on roof," he says thickly, but fully pronounces every word. An impossibly huge grin takes over his smooth face when the girl looks down at him.

"Yes, see, they build their homes underground so they can grow food on the land. And, like it said, they are safe from the cold winds." She smiles at him — Stevie always seems to listen carefully, but everything has to be explained again before he understands.

"I was in a cave once," Stevie says. "It was nice." Since no one is paying attention to him, his face takes on a slight frown.

Colleen is looking at those sitting around the firepit. The fire is getting low; and the moon, so lovely tonight, has already set.

"It's becoming a ritual," she says to no one in particular. "We seem to end every really hard day with an open fire and someone reading to Stevie." Some nod in silent agreement. It has been a hard day, but a fire seems to bring everyone together in a lazy sort of way, and listening to someone read is easier than making conversation.

One man, lying near the fire, raises his head and calls to Colleen, "May I see that book when you're finished with it?"

"You'll have to ask Stevie," she replies. "It is his book, after all."

"Yes, yes," Stevie says right away. "Mr. Parker can have anything, can borrow any book."

"Thanks, Stevie," the man lying near the fire says.

"The lantern is almost out," Colleen says, examining the fuel tank of her reading light. "Want any more tonight?"

"No, thank you," Stevie grins with the attention. "Not tonight. Tomorrow, please?"

"We'll see, Stevie, we'll see."

I push back a leaf which is tickling my cheek, lean against the tree in whose shadow I am hiding, slip my pistol into its holster. The people are drifting away from the dying fire. I wait until the one called Stevie picks up his jacket and shuffles away. With the slow-witted youth the last out of sight, I backtrack through underbrush and high grass until I am out of the valley.

Twice I hear something behind me; but, since I receive no challenge, I assume it must be animals.

I lie awake most of the night. These are decent, caring people. To put Stance onto them would be . . . would be almost as bad as if I returned without finding anything. Only one real course is open to me, find another village, one where the people don't talk politely or read to less fortunate folk. I don't mind seeing self-centered people suffer — I really don't.

"Name is Jeremy Williams," I tell the girl as I walk up to where she is sitting with her palette and easel. "A guard on the ridge told me I could come on down."

"Hi," she smiles. "I'm Colleen Matthew. Sit down, over there," she indicates a bench to her left. "I don't want you in my light."

"Oh, yeah," I say as I move to unshadow her work. "That's nice," I tell her after looking over her picture.

"Thanks," she says. "But it is a bit rough. I haven't gotten the hang of mixing the paints just right. But I get better every time I do it, so the paint improves with my ability to use it." Her laugh is an easy one, as smooth and natural as herself.

"You make your own paints?" I ask incredulously.

"Well . . . sure," she says and gestures aimlessly. I see her point, art supply shops disappeared with the rest of civilization. "Stevie knew I wanted to paint," she says. "So he found out how to make paints."

"Who's Stevie?" I needlessly ask. "Your local boy genius?"

"Heavens, no," she laughs. "Stevie is, well, Stevie is Stevie. You'll meet him if you stay around. But, no, he is no genius. He found this for me," she says as she takes a book from her workbag and hands it to me.

"Theophilus, *On Divers Arts*," I read from the cover. "A scuba manual tells how to mix paint?"

"No," she tells me. "Divers as in diverse, not as in diving. It's about various arts — painting, metalworking, glassmaking — those sort of things. And it is a good thing Stevie can't read, otherwise he would have passed it over. But he looks at the pictures and figures out what a book is about."

"Oh," I mutter as I glance through the book. It is only formulas and explanations; the few illustrations are kilns and metalworking tools.

"Stevie used to work in a library, or so he says," Colleen says between brushstrokes. "Ever since he came here he has been collecting books. He scouts around every free moment and has found quite a few. Like I said, he can't read. But don't say anything," she hurriedly adds. "I don't think he knows that we know that he can't. He would be hurt if he thought we found out. Hurt and embarrassed."

"I won't say anything, I promise," I tell her.

"Anyway," she continues. "He saves all the books, and looks through them all. Whenever anyone wants anything, they just describe it to him, and he remembers whether he has any pictures like that. Most of the time he has a book which fills any need. The only problems are the books without pictures."

"We read to him, you see," she confides in me. "And once in a while he brings a book, thinking it is a storybook, but it will be a textbook or job manual or something."

"When do you read to him?"

"Usually in the evenings when everyone is around to listen. That's his excuse for being read to, that I have a better voice than his for public readings."

I watch her in silence for several minutes.

"Do you have a leader, or someone I should report to?" I ask.

"Parker is more or less our leader, such as it is," she says. "But he's at the dam site up the valley and won't be back until late. We're not a military camp; no one reports to anyone, except for work details. Everyone works six hours a day, six days a week. The rest of our time is our own to do whatever we want."

"As for visitors," she continues. "We have a rule: supper, bed, and breakfast. If you want more, you have to work for it."

I silently nod and lean back on the bench. It has been a week since I hid a few feet from here and listened to this girl reading to the retarded Stevie. In that time, I have scouted thirty miles in every direction, but found no other people. My job now is to determine what firepower and defenses these villagers have. My only hope to save them is to find a trained militia with plenty of ammo and hardened bunkers; Stance likes his prey weak and easy.

But that hope grows dimmer with each minute.

"You have guards patrolling the valley," I comment.

"Sure," Colleen answers. "The first year after the blackout, gangs of toughs went through this area. It was pretty scary for a long time," she says with a chill in her voice. "We're about twenty miles from an old highway, so we missed a lot of what happened along the well-traveled ways. But it was pretty bad, all the same."

"So you keep guards to keep them away," I say.

"Well, at least as an early warning line," she smiles. "We sleep a little better nights. I wouldn't have dared to sit out in the open and paint during that first year, much less talk to anyone who might just walk up."

I dare not say anything, I am sure my voice would choke me.

"Oh, we keep busy," Parker tells me as he shows me around. "With our intensive cultivation, only about a fourth of our people are kept in the fields. That frees the rest for building, guard duty, salvage, and anything else that comes along. This is a good example," he says as he walks over to an old farm trailer with metal quonset sections stacked on it. "Someone got the idea to build an underground house, for safety during twisters and such. We salvaged these culvert parts from an abandoned dam project up the valley. We will set them on concrete runners and cover them with dirt. With four feet of covering, not even an earthquake will damage it."

I look over the project with interest. "Whose idea was it to build such a thing?"

"We have a meeting every week where we vote on such things. We are as democratic as possible for one very good reason — if most everybody isn't interested in doing it, it doesn't get done. But when we work together, we can do anything." Parker smiles; he is proud of his people. From a loose group of homeless townspeople and a few hippie-type naturalists had come an effective work force. They are always busy, always doing the right thing.

"And how are new people received?" I ask as we walk along.

"Well," Parker looks me over carefully. "You said you were passing through, and we appreciate the news you brought us about the rest of the country. You're welcome to stay a day or two; rest up before you move on, you know. But if you want to settle down you will have to speak up soon. We'll give you some work to do, see how you fit in. We'll have to vote on you, of course," he says. But I can see him thinking 'You wear that pistol a little too easy and I saw another one inside your vest.' Parker does not like me. The thought of what Stance would do to *him* does not disturb me.

"Ya, I'm moving on," I tell him. "I was just wondering, you know, in case I meet someone looking for a good place."

We stop talking for a long while. Finally Parker walks over to a pile of sand.

"You see this?" he asks as he runs his fingers through the fine grains. "This sand we mix with clay; we dig both the sand and clay out when we

build cisterns. We put the mixture into these," he hoists up a two-sided wooden form held together by metal strapping. "Then we tamp it in solid, move the form over, and do it all again. After two weeks the stuff is as hard as a rock. We add a roof of salvaged lumber, and we have a house." He throws the form down and points to a half-completed building. "But it takes work. Work to dig the sand, work to mix in the clay, work to pack it in tight. Six men can build eight foot of wall a day and be near collapsing when they are done.

"That is why," he stares at me, "we don't encourage outsiders. Anyone willing to work can make a nice place out of where they are. We don't turn people out unless we have to, but we don't need a pack of freeloaders. And face it, most people want a free ride."

"Is that why you took down the signs on the highway, to keep people away?" I ask.

"That was my idea," Stevie says as he walks up to where we are standing.

"That's right," Parker says as he puts his arm around the boy. "We had just been gone over by a rat-pack and everyone was wondering on how to keep it from happening again."

"I said," Stevie says with a huge grin. "If there are no signs, no one can find us."

"We took them down, all along the highway. We haven't had an invasion since then."

Parker and Stevie form an interesting contrast, one of average intelligence and forceful, the other slow-witted and, and what? Stevie's name has come up too often in my conversations with the villagers; they pity him, they are kind to him. And when they need some information, they turn to him.

The gathering around the evening fire is lively, but I sit off to one side and watch. I have seen many towns and villages since I have been scouting for Stance and his rat-pack. Everyone is intent on one thing: survival. These people are not only surviving — they prosper, in comparison. To find clean sheets and polite talk in this day and age is somewhat of a miracle. A miracle that Stance will obliterate in an instant.

"Village business," Parker shouts and steps close to the fire. Everyone moans, but moves closer to listen. "First, Jeremy says he is leaving in the morning. So, let's thank him for the news and stories he has brought us." Colleen comes over to me and presents a roughly wrapped package. I tear it open and find a clean and whole knapsack.

"We noticed that yours was getting a little worn," she says and scurries away.

"Thanks, thanks a lot," is all I can find to say.

"Second," Parker says. "The community shelter will be finished next week. Does anyone have any idea for something new? Or should we cut

back on mandatory work hours?"

"I have something," one man says. "Earlier, Colleen was reading about . . ."

I lose what he is saying; I become wrapped up in my own thoughts. I hear some discussion, and they vote on a new project. How many people would voluntarily accept new work when they already have the basics for life?

I see the rabbit thrashing in the high grass beside the path which leads out of the valley. I pull my pistol and whirl around when I hear a new noise behind me. Stevie stands there, a broken twig in his hands, a huge grin on his smooth face. I relax and straighten up.

"What you want, boy?" I asked sharply.

"Rabbit mine," Stevie says softly. "My trap, my rabbit."

I smile. "Sure, boy, sure. I was just going to shoot him for you."

"No, no, please," the boy says hastily. "Catch him to keep him. Raise more. Parker said I could. If I caught one."

"Ya, sure." Something still bothers me, but I am unable to pinpoint it.

"What do you think of us?" Stevie asks, letting the grin fade. He brushes past me and kneels next to the struggling rabbit.

"You're okay, I guess," I tell him. I watch closely as the retarded boy slips a nylon stocking over the rabbit's hindquarters to stop the back legs from kicking.

"Civilization kind of got kicked in the teeth," I say. "It is good to see that some people are moving back to it."

"I do not understand. Are we not civil-lizationed?"

"No, not quite," I smile. The boy is so simple, but he handles the wild animal with great ease, removing the caught foot from the deep cup of braided wire which holds it.

"Civilization," I go on. "It means libraries, and art — science and commerce."

The boy works his fingers through the rabbit's fur, checking for damage.

"I have many books, Colleen paints."

"It just isn't the same." I pick up the trap. "How does this thing work?"

"Simple," Stevie explains. "I dig a small hole in trail. Put this in bottom. Rabbit comes along, sets foot in center. Wire twists tight as he tries to pull out." I examine the cone of wire closely.

"Same principle as the paper thumbcuffs I played with as a boy," I tell him.

"Right," Stevie grins.

There is a long silence between us, only the captured beastie making small sounds. Looking back toward the village, I can tell that no one can see

us up here talking. Trees and a slight rise of land hide the buildings below.

"Stevie," I say, and pause. "Stevie, why does everyone work so hard? I mean, growing food doesn't take that much time and there are easier ways to build homes. What I guess I really mean is, I've seen lots of groups like yours — yours is the first I've seen where the people are constantly busy, constantly doing something. Why?" I do not expect an answer, but feel I must say what is bothering me.

Stevie scuffs his foot and grins, but it is different from his usual all-out grin.

"People need something to do," he explains. "Many of the communes of the sixties failed because once the building was done there was nothing else for the people to do. More homes, better crops, even hobbies like painting, these things keep everyone together in a productive way." He is warming to his subject, slowly dropping his thick speech for a rapid patter. "Apathy is our greatest enemy right now. By keeping the rat-packs away, we can look to the future; but it is a future to build, not one to only dream."

"Your books." I am inspired.

"Yes," Stevie says. "I expose everyone to an idea in a nonthreatening way, let them accept it on their own terms. No leader could force work on these people. They work hard and enjoy it because it is what they want to do."

I sit on a nearby stump to think.

"Why the charade?" I ask after a few minutes.

"I wasn't part of them, at first. I came from outside. I had to find out if they were still civilized, or if they had reverted to barbarism like so many others."

"And your retarded act told you that?"

"Yes, see, civilization isn't buildings or books or money. It's civility — are the people civil to one another? Even when it means burdening themselves with weaklings, these people stick to an arbitrary code of decency. That makes them civilized."

"There is a rat-pack a few miles away," I tell him, pointing to the far ridge. "They are along the highway. You may or may not be safe from them. I would suggest you tell your people so they can properly defend themselves."

"No need," Stevie says. "I'll keep them away. I have assumed some hidden duties since my stay with these people." He reaches inside his jacket and pulls out a pistol clip. I draw my pistol and look at the butt. The clip I had put in this morning is gone. I reach inside my vest.

Stevie points my little gun at me.

"I had to relieve you of these at breakfast. I know you spied on us — I know you are going to report to someone. I can't let these people be hurt by outsiders. It's become my responsibility."

"But I'm not going to report," I tell him flatly. "I'm headed away

from them. I don't know what I am going to do, but I'm getting sick of what I've done."

"You're almost civilized, then," Stevie tells me.

He frowns slightly.

"Sometimes," he says slowly. "A code of decency requires indecent acts."

Although it is unbearably loud to me, I am sure the people in the valley don't hear the report from my small gun.



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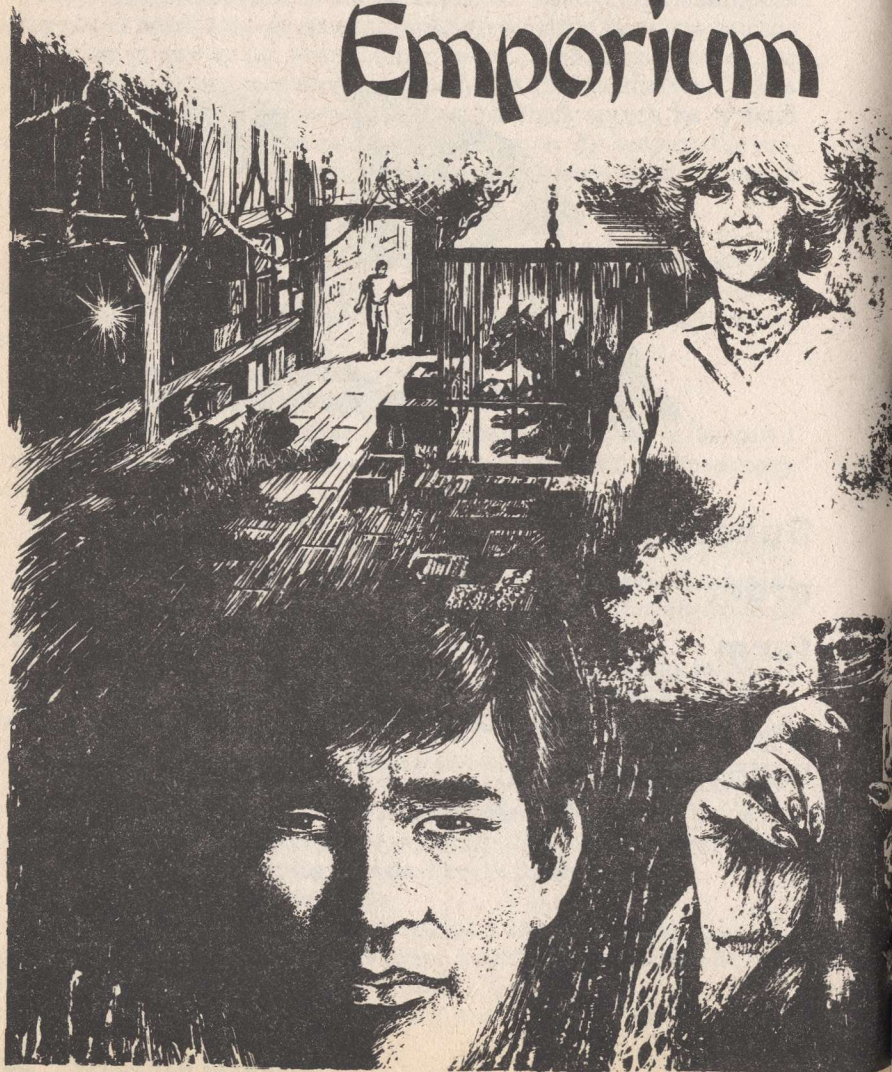
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Wong's Lost and Found Emporium



by: William F. Wu

art: Douglas Chaffee



The sharp clicking of high heels echoed in the dark shop. The brisk footsteps on the unpolished wooden floor slowed and became irregular and uncertain as my new visitor saw some of the stuff on the shelves. They always did that.

I was on a different aisle. The shop was very big, though crammed with all kinds of objects to the point where every shelf was crowded and overflowing. Most of the stuff was inanimate, or at least dead. However, many of the beasties still stirred when adequately provoked. The inanimate objects included everything from uncut diamonds to nail-clippers to bunny bladders. Still more of the sealed crates and boxes and bottles contained critters, or other things, that might or might not be counted among the living. I had no idea and didn't care, either. For instance, whoever had hung big wooden crates from the ceiling — and there were plenty, up where they couldn't endanger anybody — must have had a good reason.

The edges of the shop were a little mysterious. I tried not to go too far down any of the aisles except the two big perpendicular corridors that ended in doors to the outside. They formed a cross in the center of the shop. The farther from the middle I went in any direction, the darker the place became, and colder. On a few occasions, I had had to go out to shelf space on the fringe that was mostly empty, and in almost complete darkness. All the edges were like that, except for the four doors at each end of those main corridors.

I didn't dare venture into the real darkness, where nothing was visible. Cold stale air seemed to be all it contained, but I wasn't going to investigate. I also had a suspicion that the shop kept growing of its own accord, outward into that nothingness. I had seen for myself that new stuff spontaneously appeared on all the shelves; but if the shop had been finite in size, it would have been absolutely crammed to the ceiling. Instead, I guessed, it simply extended its aisles and plain wooden shelves outward somehow, always providing just enough new empty space to avoid total chaos. The place was weird enough where I was; I didn't see any need to wander off the edge of the world or something.

I was seeking my destiny in this world, or at least I had been hoping to when I first came in here. My visitor was probably doing the same right now.

I came around the corner into one of the two main corridors, where the light was a little better. For a second, I thought I heard someone in one of the aisles, but that sort of thing happened all the time. Some of the live beings thumped and slithered in their containers occasionally.

My customer was a woman with snow-white hair, slender and well-dressed with a good tan. She wore a peach-colored suit and four gold chains around her neck. One hand with long, peach-colored fingernails clutched a small handbag. She looked like a shrivelled peach in a light

snowfall.

"Oh — uh, I'm looking for Mr. Wong, I guess." She smiled cautiously.

"That's me," I said, walking forward briskly. After I had been here a while, I had put my signs on the four doors, saying **Wong's Lost and Found Emporium**.

She looked me over in some surprise; they always seemed to expect a doddering old geezer with a wispy white beard and an opium pipe, muttering senilities to the spirit world. I wore a blue T-shirt, fading Levi's, and Adidas indoor track shoes. After all, I'd only been here a few months, though time was different in here than on the outside. This was that kind of place.

"Oh, I'm sorry." She smiled apologetically, fidgeting now with all ten peach fingernails scratching at her purse.

"The name is Wong," I said casually, "but you can call me Mr. Double-you for short."

She didn't get the joke — they never do.

"Thank you. I, uh, was told that . . . this is an unusual shop? Where one can find something . . . she lost?"

"If you lost it, I got it." Like most of the others, she needed more encouragement. I waited for her to ask.

"I mean . . . well, I suppose this will sound silly, but . . . I'm not looking for a thing, exactly, not a solid object, I don't suppose you have a . . . second chance?" She forced herself to laugh, a little, like it was a joke.

"Well, no, I'm sorry. I really just need a restroom, and — "

"Of course I have it," I said. "If you lost a chance at something, it's here. Follow me."

I looked around the floor and pointed to the little blue throw rug. "Have to watch out for this. It slips."

She smiled politely, but I could see her shaking with anticipation.

I glanced around the shelves, looking for the little spot of white. "What's your name?" It didn't matter, but asking made me sound official.

"I'm Mrs. Barbara Patricia Whitford and I live here in Boca. Um — I was born in New York in 1926. I grew up . . ."

I didn't care. A bit of white light was shining on a shoulder-high shelf across the main corridor from me. "This way," I said, signalling over my shoulder. She shut up and followed me.

As we walked, the light moved ahead of us toward the object she wanted to recover. I had no idea how it worked — I had figured it out by trial and error, or I might say by accident. I had come in here myself looking for something I had lost, but the place had had no one in it. Now, I was waiting for the proprietor, but everyone else who came in thought I was in charge. So I was.

"What kind of chance was it?" I asked over my shoulder, like it was

shoe size or something. It might be a long walk.

"Well," she said, just a little breathless behind me. "I always wanted to be an artist — a painter. I didn't get started until fifteen years ago, when I started taking lessons in acrylics. And even oils. I got pretty good, even if I do say so. Several of my paintings sold at art fairs and I was just getting a few exhibited, even. I got discouraged, though. It was so hard to keep going."

The white light turned down another aisle, more cramped and dimly lit than the last. The light was brighter in these shadows, but she couldn't see it. Only I could. I had tested that on earlier customers. Unfortunately, I couldn't see my own.

A shadow shifted in the corner of my eye that was not mine or hers, but I ignored it. If something large was loose in here, it was apparently shy. It was nothing new.

"Six or seven years ago," she continued, "all of my friends were going back to school. It was easier than painting — I went for my Master's; and since I was just going to go, I didn't really have to hurry, or worry about grades. It was the thing to do, and so much easier than painting. Only, I didn't care about it." Her voice caught, and she paused to swallow. "I do care about my painting. Now, well, I just would like to have the chance I missed, when my skills were still sharp and I had more time and business connections. It — I know it sounds small. But it's the only thing I've ever accomplished. And I don't have time to start over."

She started crying.

I nodded. The white light had come to a stop, playing across a big open wooden box on an upper shelf. "Just a moment. I'll get it. It's very important to get exactly the right one, because if you get the wrong object, you're still stuck with it."

She nodded, watching me start to climb up the wooden shelves.

"For instance, if I gave you someone else's lost chance to work a slow freighter to Sakhalin Island, why, it would just happen. You'd have to go."

"I would? . . . oh. Well, be careful." She sniffled. "No, uh, glove cleaner or anything like that. If you know what I mean."

The shelves were dusty and disgusting. My fingers caught cobwebs and brushed against small feathery clumps that were unidentifiable in the shadowy aisle. Tiny feet scurried away from me on the shelves as I climbed, prodding aside old jars with my feet. Faint shuffling noises came from inside some of them.

I finally got my head up to the shelf with the little light. It was now sitting on a transparent cylindrical container inside the wooden box. Inside, ugly brown lumps swirled around in a thick, emerald-green solution.

The box had several similar containers and a lot of miscellaneous junk.

I grabbed one of the smaller pieces at random and stuck it in my pants pocket. Then I tucked the swirling green cylinder under one arm and started down.

When I had reached the floor, I held it up. Her eyes grew wide when she saw the liquid spinning inside. "Okay," I said. "When you open this, the contents will evaporate very quickly. You have to breathe in the vapor before it disappears, or the chance is lost forever." I had done this before.

She took it from me, glowing like a half-lit wino.

"You can do it here if you want," I said, "but the light's better in the main corridors."

She nodded and followed me as close as one dog behind another.

We turned along the main corridor, and I walked at a good clip back toward my beat-up steel desk and battered piano stool. They were near the junction of the main corridors. This was her business.

Before I got there, I heard a slight gasp behind me and turned around. She had slipped on the throw rug and as I turned, her slender legs were struggling for balance. Her arms reflexively made a sharp upward movement and her precious transparent cylinder was tossed out to one side.

The woman let out a wail as it sailed away and smashed on the hard floorboards. She clattered after it clumsily in her high heels. When she finally reached it, she bent over and started sniffing around like a bowser at a barbeque.

I got up stiffly and walked over.

"Did I get it? Did I get it?" She whimpered frantically.

"Doubt it," I said, sniffing around. If the stuff had lingered long enough for her to inhale it, I would have smelled some residual scent.

"Oh, *no* — I . . . uh . . . but, but — " She started to cry.

Criers bore me. I had a vague sense that I was expected to be sympathetic, but I had lost that ability. That's what I was here for, in fact.

"Wait a minute," I said, tapping her on the shoulder. I reached into my pocket for the other lost object I had taken from her box. It was a metal ring with four or five keys on it and a leather circle with "BPW" stamped in gold. The keys looked fairly new; I figured she had lost them some time in the last decade or so. "Here," I said. "You lost these, too."

"What?" She looked up between sobs.

I gave her the keys. "I'm glad you came. Have a nice day."

"What?" She stared at the keys. "It was the *only* thing I ever accomplished," she whimpered. "Ever." She turned away, in shock, her wide eyes fixed blankly on her old car keys. "It was my very last chance." She squeaked in a high, tiny voice.

"That way." I took her shoulders and aimed her down the corridor that led to a shopping mall in Florida.

She staggered away, snuffling.

I sat down disgustedly on a nearby stool. My time was almost up. I had to leave soon in order to get any sleep at home and then show up at work tomorrow. Without savings, I couldn't afford to leave my job, even for something as important as this. If the proprietor had been coming back, then he, she, or it would probably have returned by now. The dual passages of time in here and outside meant that I had spent over two months here, and I had only spent one week of sick days and vacation days back in New York, on the other side of one of the doors.

I had even taken my job on a loading dock in Chinatown just to be near this shop. That was why I had moved to New York. When a friend had first told me about this establishment, she had warned me of the trickiest part — the doors could not always be located. Different people could find them at their own times, sometimes. The door in New York appeared, when it did, in the back hall of a small, second-story Chinatown restaurant. Most of the time, the hall ended in two restroom doors. For a select few, though, it occasionally had three, and now the mystic third door bore my sign.

I had checked the spot often; and when I had found the door, I had phoned in immediately for a week off, begging an emergency. It had taken some arguing, but I had managed. The presence of the restaurant had allowed me to stay so long, since I sneaked food out when night fell in New York. Naturally, the shop had a few misplaced refrigerators and other appliances; a few even worked.

Once I left this place, I might not find the door again for years — if ever.

I kicked in annoyance at a random bit of crud on the floor. It unfolded five legs and scurried away under a nearby shelf. Well, I had left a mark; the doors all bore my handmade signs, minor amusement though they were.

At least my stay had been eventful. My first customer after I had figured out how the place worked had been a tall slender Chinese guy from the San Francisco corridor. The door there was in the back of a porno shop. He had been in his fifties and wore a suit that had been in style in 1961, when it was last pressed. Something about him suggested Taiwan.

He had come looking for the respect of his children, which he had of course lost. I found him a box with five frantic mice in it; what he had to do was pet them until they calmed down. However, while he was gingerly poking at them, a boa constrictor glided silently out of the shadows unnoticed. It ate all the mice and then quietly slithered away. The guy got hysterical. I almost pointed out that snakes have to eat, too, but actually I didn't care about the snake, either. I'm strictly neutral.

My youngest visitor had been a little boy, maybe about ten, who came in through the boarded-up gas station in Bosworth, Missouri. It was a

one-stoplight town that didn't send me much company. The kid wore jeans and a blue Royals baseball cap. He was looking for a dog whistle he had lost. I found it for him. Nothing happened to him or it. That was okay with me, too.

I sighed and stood up. No one else would be coming in. As I rose, I saw a large shadow out of the corner of my eye and glanced toward it, expecting it to slide away among the shelves as usual. Instead, it stayed where it was. I was looking at a young woman of Asian descent, wrapped up in a long white crocheted shawl. She also wore a denim skirt and striped knee socks.

"You're sickening." She spoke with elegant disgust, in New York accent.

I knew that, but I didn't like hearing it. "You've been here a while, haven't you?"

"I think about two days." She brushed back her hair with one hand. It was cut short and blunt. "You were asleep when I came in."

That was a relief. She didn't belong here any more than I did. On the other hand, she had apparently been watching me.

"Where've you been sleeping?" I asked out of curiosity. On my first day, I had spent several hours locating a sleeping bag.

"I found an air mattress," she said, still angrily. "I just meant to sleep until you woke up, but you had a — a client when I got up. After I saw the way you treated him — and all the rest of them — I decided not to approach you at all. Don't you have any feelings for them? When something goes wrong? You could at least try to help them."

"I don't sabotage anybody. Whatever happens, happens — good or bad or indifferent."

She tossed her short hair, probably less to move it than for the disdain it conveyed. "I can't stand it. Why are you so callous?"

I shrugged. "What do you care? Anyhow, some go away happy."

"*What?*" She looked astonished. "Can't you even understand simple —" She stopped and shook her head. "Maybe you'll understand selfishness. Suppose I want what I came for. I can't get any help from you if I have trouble."

"Well, I guess that's logi—"

I stopped when she reached for a big stoppered metal bottle, on the shelf next to her. She heaved it at me, and I only had time to spin around. It hit my shoulder blade, hard, and bounced unharmed to the floor.

I whirled back toward her, ready to grab it and throw it back at her, but she was already striding quickly toward me.

"What's *wrong* with you?" She demanded. "I want to know! Why are you so callous?" She snatched up the metal container from the floor in front of me and held it wrapped in her shawl. "Tell me *now!*" she screamed, right in front of me.

I leaned forward and spoke, glaring into her eyes. "I came in here looking for my compassion. I lost it years ago, bit by bit. I lost it when I was eight, and other kids chased me around the playground for no visible reason — and they weren't playing. When I started junior high and got beat up in gym class because the rest of the school was white, like my grade school. When I ran for student congress and had my posters covered with swastikas and KKK symbols. And that was *before* I got out into the world on my own. You want to hear about my *adult* life?"

I paused to catch my breath. She backed away from me.

"I've lost more of my compassion every year of my life for every year I can remember, until I don't have any more. Well, it's here, but I can't find it."

She stood speechless in front of me. Letting her have it all at once accomplished that much, at least.

"Maybe you were in the wrong town," she muttered.

"You think I *like* being like this? Hating the memories of my life and not caring what happens to anybody? I said I've lost my compassion, not my conscience."

She walked back and put the metal bottle back in its place on the shelf. "I can find it," she said quietly.

"What?"

"I've been watching you. When you get something for someone, you follow the little white light that appears."

"You can see that?"

"Of course I can — anybody can. You think you're special? We just can't see our own. *I* figured that out."

"Well . . . so did I," I said lamely.

"So, I could get your compassion for you."

"Yeah?" I didn't think she would, considering all she'd said.

"Only you have to get what I want, first."

"You don't trust me, remember?"

She smiled smugly. It looked grotesque, as though she hadn't smiled in ages. "I can trust you. Because you know that if you don't give me what I want, I won't give you your compassion. Besides, if all goes well, your lack of compassion won't make any difference."

"Well, yeah. I guess so." I hadn't considered a deal with another customer before. Until now, I had just been waiting for the no-show proprietor, and then given up even on that.

"Well?" she demanded, still with that weird forced smile.

"Uh — yeah, okay." It was my last chance. I glanced around and found her spot of white light behind me on a lower shelf. "This way."

She walked next to me, watching me carefully as the white light led us down the crowded aisle. A large porcelain vase emitted guttural mutterings on an upper shelf as we passed. Two small lizards from the

Florida corridor and something resembling a T-bone steak with legs were drinking at a pool of shiny liquid in the middle of the floor. The viscous liquid was oozing slowly out of a cracked green bottle. We stepped over it and kept going.

The light finally stopped on the cork of a long-necked blue bottle at the back of a bottom shelf. I stopped and looked down at it, wondering if this deal had an angle I hadn't figured.

"Well?" She forced herself to smile again. It gave her a sort of tortured visage.

"What is it, anyway?" I tried to sound casual.

"You don't need to know. I know that, too."

"Suppose I don't get it till you tell me."

"I won't tell you. And you won't get what you want."

She couldn't have known I had to leave soon, but she was still my last chance. I would be getting home late as it was. Besides, she was the sort who might really want more compassion in the world.

"Hurry up," she said.

I knelt down and looked at the bottle. She might have guessed what I had focused on; but with all the other junk jammed around it, she couldn't be sure. Well, I knew she had compassion herself, already. She wouldn't want to regain any lost tendencies that were nasty, like cruelty or vengefulness, so I was not in personal danger.

I took the bottle by the long neck and stood up. "It's in here, whatever it is. If it's a material object, you just open the bottle and spill it out. If it's a chance, or a personal trait, you have to uncork the bottle and inhale the fumes as they come out."

She was already taking the bottle from me, carefully in both hands. I backed away as she sank her teeth into the cork and yanked it out with a pop. White vapor issued from the bottle. She started taking deep breaths in through her nose, with her eyes closed.

I backed away, smelling something like rotten lettuce mixed with wet gerbil fur.

She kept on breathing until the vapors ran out. Then she re-corked the bottle and smiled at me, looking relaxed and natural. "Well! You're still sickening, but that was it, all right." She laughed gently. "Wow, that stuff stunk. Smelled like rotting cabbage and wet cat fur, didn't it?"

"Wha—?" I laughed, surprised at her sudden good humor. "It sure did."

"Okay, brown eyes. I see your little spot of light. Follow the swaying rear." She sashayed past me and walked casually down another dark aisle, humming to herself.

At one point, something on a shelf caught her eye and she stopped to giggle at it. It was a large brown and white snake, shoved into a jar of some kind of clear solution. She paused to make a face, imitating the snake's

motionless expression. Here, of course, one never knew if a pickled snake was really pickled snake or something else temporarily in that guise. Anyway, she made a funny face and then laughed delightedly. After that, we pushed on.

When she stopped again, she was looking up at a shelf just within her reach. "There it is." She chuckled, without moving to take anything.

"Yeah?" I was suddenly afraid of that laugh.

She looked at me and laughed again.

"What's so funny?"

She shook her head and reached up on tiptoe with both hands. When she came down, she was cradling four sealed containers in her arms. One was a short-necked brown bottle encrusted with dry sand. Two were sealed jars of smoky glass and the last was a locked wooden box engraved with smile faces. She squatted on the floor Asian style and set them down.

"One of these holds your lost compassion." She looked up and laughed. "Guess which one."

My stomach tightened. I could not be sure of getting my compassion back this way. After my general insensitivity to people here, I didn't think I would ever be allowed back in, either.

"We had a deal," I said weakly. "You were going to give it to me."

"I have; it's right here. Besides, you should talk. And remember — if you inhale someone else's lost chance to wrestle an alligator or something, you'll wrestle it." She clapped her hands and laughed.

I stared at her. Maybe I deserved it, but I couldn't figure out what had happened to her. She had been concerned and compassionate before I had given her the long-necked bottle, and she certainly didn't seem angry or self-righteous now. I wondered what she had regained.

"Well?" She giggled at me and stood up. "One of them is it. That's a better chance than you gave anyone."

I looked down at the containers. She had no more idea what was in three of them than I did. "I have no intention of opening any of these," I said.

She shrugged, still grinning. "Have it your way, brown eyes. I'm leaving." She started strolling away.

"Wait."

She turned and walked away backwards, facing me. "What?"

"Uh—" I couldn't think of anything.

"Bye!"

"No — uh, hey, what *did* I give back to you, anyway?"

"Oh!" She laughed. "My sense of humor." She was still backpedaling.

"I'll do it! Wait a minute."

She stopped and folded her arms. "You'll really do it?"

"Come on. Come on back here while I do this." I wasn't sure why I wanted company, but I did.

She came back, grinning. "If you got the guts, brown eyes, you can open 'em all."

I smiled weakly. "They could all be good."

She smirked. "Sure — it's possible."

I looked down at the four containers. The wooden box seemed more likely to hold a tangible object than a lost quality. Though this place had few reliable rules, I decided to leave the box alone. The brown bottle with the short neck had such a heavy layer of sand that its contents were hidden. I knelt down and looked over the two smoky jars.

"Come on, sweetie." She started tapping her foot.

Quickly, before I could reconsider, I grabbed both jars, stood, and smashed them down on the floor. The glass shattered and two small billows of blue-gray smoke curled upward.

She stepped back.

I leaned forward, waited for the smoke to reach me, and inhaled. One strand smelled like charcoal-broiled Kansas City steak; the other, like the inside of a new car. I breathed both in, again and again, until the vapors were gone.

After a moment, I blinked and looked around. "I don't feel any different."

"Sure you do." She smiled. "Just go on as normal, and it'll come clear."

"Okay." I bent down and picked up the box and the bottle. "Where were these? I'll put 'em back. There's a broom —"

"You?" She laughed gaily. "Well, that's something. "You mean you're actually going to straighten up this place?"

"No, I — well, I've been in charge; I suppose I should do something. . . ." I replaced the items where she pointed.

"Integrity."

"What?"

"You've got your integrity back, for one."

"Oh, I don't know. . . ." I looked at her for a moment and then gazed up the dark aisle toward the light from one of the main corridors. "I guess I did lose that, too. . . . Otherwise, I couldn't have been so cruel to people, even without compassion. They trusted me." I started walking up the aisle.

She followed, watching me closely. "So what are you going to do?"

"I guess I'll stay and run the shop." It just came out naturally. I hadn't even realized I was going to say it. "The . . . other thing I got back is kind of minor. For a long time, I used to try to remember the details of a fishing trip in the mountains my family went on, back when I was little. I knew I had a great time, but that was all. Now, all of a sudden, I can remember it completely."

She cocked her head to one side. "Was it still really wonderful?"

I considered my new memories a moment. "Yeah."

"Aw . . ." She looked at me, smiling. "I can't help it, brown eyes. I give in. It's in that brown thing, with the sand all over it."

Excitement surged in my chest. "*Thanks!*" I reached up with trembling fingers and snatched it off the shelf.

"Careful—"

I fumbled it away. It hit my shoulder, bounced to the floor, and cracked. It rolled, and before I could bend down to grab it, it was under a bottom shelf. I dropped to the floor and slid my face under the shelf. The cracked bottle was hissing in the darkness as the special vapors escaped. I couldn't smell anything. It was too far from me.

I reached for it with one hand. It was wedged against something and stuck. I could touch it, but I couldn't get enough of a hold to pull it back.

I remained on the floor, inhaling frantically, motionless until the hissing stopped. Then, suddenly feeling heavy all over, I managed to stand up.

"What happened?" She smiled hopefully.

"It's gone," I muttered. "It . . . sure was over quick." I hesitated, then added, "Thanks anyhow." Stunned, I eased past her and started walking. I could hear her follow me.

We came out into the main corridor. I picked up the little blue throw rug and hung it on a nearby hook. Then I turned, all the way around, surveying my shop. "Maybe it was no accident."

"You were nervous, that's all —"

"I don't mean that. I mean my finding the door to this place when I most needed it, and staying until . . . someone came in to find my stuff."

"You think your new integrity adds up to something, it sounds like."

"My destiny."

She laughed, then tapered off when I looked at her calmly. "You serious?"

I shrugged. "This place is mine. I knew that, somehow, when I put my signs up. And now I owe this shop my best attention."

"With integrity."

I shrugged again. Taking care of the shop and its customers was important; the reasons I felt that way were not.

"I . . . think I got news for you, brown eyes."

"I don't want any news." I was still in shock from disappointment. It was justice of a sort, but it wasn't pleasant.

"You have your compassion back. I'm sure of it. You can't help it."

"But you said it was in the bottle I broke —"

"It was, as a separate quality. Only, I think your integrity comes with a little compassion in a package deal. Forces it on you."

I looked up at her, hopeful. "Really?"

"You could try it." She pointed down the Florida corridor.

What'shername, the peach-colored former artist lady, had never made

it out the door. She was sitting near it, slumped on the floor, an incongruous position for a woman of her age and dignity. The skirt of her suit was smudged and rumpled under her, exposing more of her legs than it was supposed to.

"This is your shop now," said my companion. She put a hand on my shoulder.

I didn't say anything.

"You can't just let a customer sit there, can you?"

"No — not any more. A matter of — integrity."

"In this case, it's the same as compassion. I don't see how you can help her, but if you try —"

"I know how."

"Huh?"

"I lost one chance to help her." I smiled, suddenly understanding the true potential of this place. "If you'll go down the aisles and find it, we can fix up that customer after all."

She winked. "You got it, brown eyes."



The author was born in Kansas City 31 years ago. His dissertation, at the University of Michigan, was on Chinese-American stereotypes in American popular fiction. He is a war-gamer, now living in Kansas.

TO AN UNKNOWN COPY EDITOR

My name is mud,
My pride has fled —
With blushing blud
My face is read!

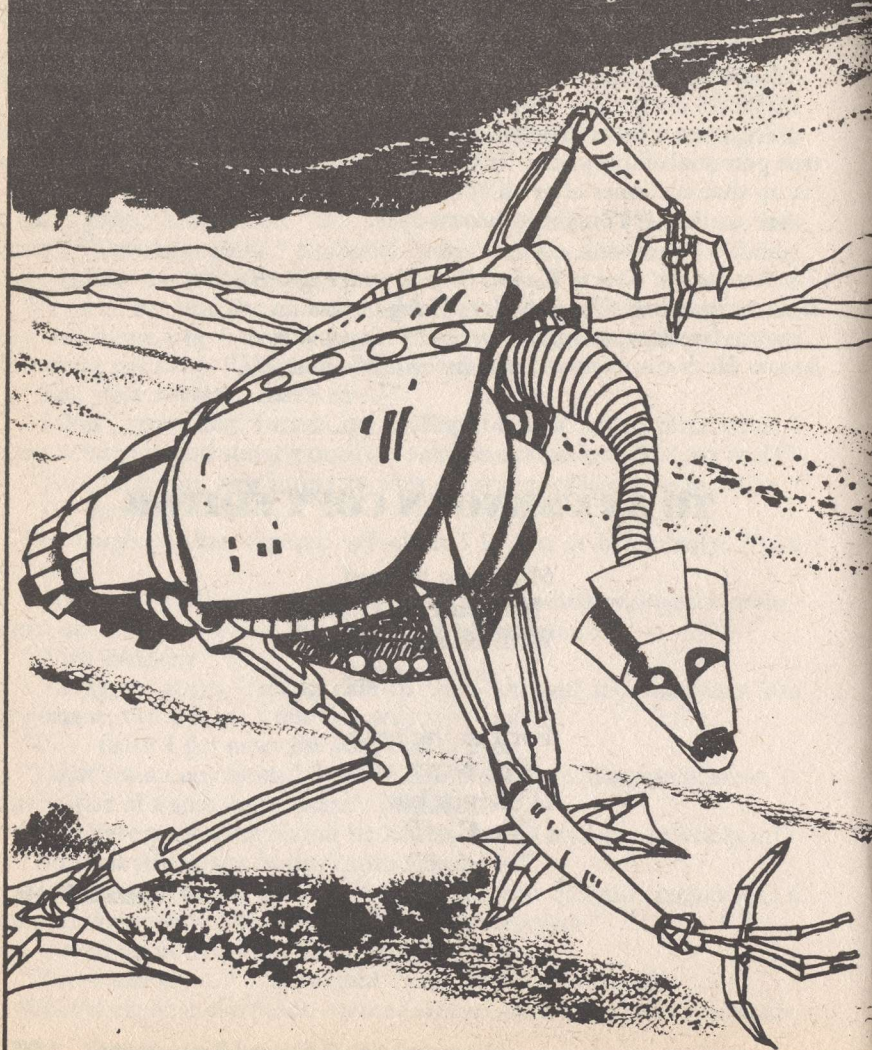
For I'm the arse
Who never new
If lisence has
One C or 2.

— Tom Disch

Against Infinity - II

by Gregory Benford

art: Jack Gaughan





Two centuries from now, mankind has spread through most of the solar system. Ganymede, the system's largest moon, is being pioneered by primarily Spanish-derived settlers. Amid the vast ice fields they labor to build huge agricultural Settlements, using mechanically-assisted animals — servo'd chimps and dogs and porpoises.

Out from Sidon Settlement in a straggling band comes an annual expedition, bearing the boy, Manuel Lopez. His father, the colonel, arranges these few weeks of "hunting" every year. Supposedly the band of brawling, scruffy men goes out to "Prune" — kill — creatures in Ganymede's burgeoning biosphere.

Man has added thin, unbreathable air to Ganymede by melting enormous layers of the moon's ice crust. Into this he introduced genetically tailored animals which can eat ice and snow and rock and excrete useful chemicals — substances which in turn help support colonies of lichen and simple plants. Thus the biosphere is built by awkward, ugly beasts with names like rock-jaws, scooters, crawlies, gravelgobblers, and icecats.

These man-made creatures are made to be replaced as the chemical balance of Ganymede shifts, in the century-long pursuit of a humanly livable biosphere. But they have a genetic logic of their own — they mutate rapidly in Ganymede's high-radiation environment, producing forms that excrete the wrong chemicals. Even worse, some prey on other invented creatures. This upsets the dynamics of the biosphere.

The Colonel has contracted with Ganymede's main city, Hiruko, to hunt down these mutations. Thus this expedition, with Manuel allowed to come along because he is now thirteen, and must begin to learn the skills of age.

But that is only the superficial ex-

cuse. As the party makes their way out from Sidon Settlement and sets up camp for the first night in an old pressurized cabin, Manuel hears the stories he has longed to know: tales of a great alien thing called the Aleph, which lives in the Ganymede ice wastes — if in fact it is alive at all, for it may be a machine.

The Aleph is the only moving artifact left behind by an unknown race which apparently had bases on several Jovian moons, perhaps billions of years ago. It may not even recognize the existence of humans as it moves ceaselessly across the ice and rock, tunneling through stone and diving deep into the depths of the moon, seemingly on a random, fevered trajectory of its own.

It has killed people in the past, erupting under their domes, trampling them, eluding all attempts to stop it, injure it, or kill it. Scientists a century before studied the Aleph, only to give up. It is fast and dangerous, and has become a legend to the men of Ganymede.

The oldest man in Sidon Settlement, Old Matt Bohles, knows the Aleph well. He has hunted it for over a century. Old Matt teaches Manuel what he knows of Ganymede's treacherous wilderness, where the awful and unforgiving cold can kill a man for carelessness.

The hunting party "prunes" the mutations — muties — letting the boy get used to using a little popper gun, leaving him to Old Matt's care. The packs of servo'd animals they bring with them help run down the muties, and chase after the Aleph the few times they sight it. If the animals get too close, a force field near the Aleph can tear them apart. Laser bolts and electron beam blasts do not faze the thing.

Often, one clear look at the massive, flexing, alabaster form is enough to make

a man content to shoot at muties and forget thoughts of pursuing the Aleph. But it fascinates Manuel more than it frightens him. He cannot forget it.

When Old Matt and Manuel first encounter the Aleph, it does not show itself. It merely bulges up the ice, as if to make a sign. A servo'd animal falls into one of the cracks, lost.

Expeditions go out each year, and each time Manuel learns more. He ventures out to hunt alone, using a laser rifle. He sights the Aleph at last and it ignores him, bursting through rock and going on, faster than the boy can

move.

Friends of his father, Petrovich and Sanchez, are wryly amused that Manuel thinks he can stop the thing. There are dark, moving spots on the Aleph's rough surface that may be holes. Manuel trains an animal — a servo'd dog named The Barron — to attack the Aleph. When he finally gets a chance to try out The Barron, the Aleph rips the animal to pieces.

Manuel cannot even be sure the thing noticed its pursuers. He knows he needs something more to even have a chance.

Five months after Manuel's second encounter with the Aleph, a rock-hopper changed the fundamental economic balance of the outer worlds. She had been drifting from chunk to chunk in the asteroids, checking known sites to see if she could turn up traces of iridium or platinum. She was a marginal operator. The rocks she visited had no prior claim on them because they were worthless — jumbles of iron and other cheap metals. She found a cleft on asteroid MKX 349 that ran deep, and, curious, worked her way down it. She took her core sample there, boring further in. Less than a hundred meters in she found pure carbonaceous chondrite.

MKX 349 was moderate-sized, 9.6 kilometers mean radius. By some quirk of its formation, it had a sheath of low-grade ore wrapped completely around a core. That was why the immensely valuable center had gone undetected. There was enough carbon, hydrogen, and oxygen there to supply all the asteroid community for decades. They would no longer have to pay to have it shipped slowboat from Ganymede. They still needed food, but the loss to Ganymede was about 30 percent of their total export.

The Settlements were big farms which had made a steady profit from food, selling their already-separated fluids as a lucrative sideline. That trade trickled to nothing within a year of the MKX 349 discovery. Along with it went the little extras the Settlements bought to soften their lot. They still ate well, but did without the latest 3D programs, Lunatic fashions for the women, and carbide-stressed additions to their tunnel-homes.

The long-term prospects were worse. With MKX 349 to mine, the McKenzie asteroids planned to begin large, whole-world farming.

Whether they could compete with the Settlements would hinge on economies of scale and how well the Ganymede biosphere worked. Economists predicted a protracted struggle, decades long. The Settlements had the early advantage, and there were fair odds that they might be able to knock the McKenzies out of business if they improved their own profit margins quickly. Everyone knew this, and prepared.

"It's not a matter of working harder," Colonel Lopez told his son, "it's working smarter."

"Don't see why that means deffies."

His mother looked up from her threading. "I do not like to hear that word in our home."

The Colonel said sternly, "They are *not* deformed. They are men, women, and children who have been unlucky. They were badly injured. Some even died for a while."

"They're in boxes," Manuel said sullenly.

"Servo'd, yes."

"Like animals."

His mother said, "I do not want my boy to think of animals when he sees them. Suppose it was your sister — remember when she broke her leg on the tractor? Suppose it had been worse? She might be servo'd. And you would call her that name?"

Manuel pressed his lips together and said nothing. His mother spoke quietly but for her to say that much meant a lot. He had better cut his losses and not mention the deffies again. Anyhow, he didn't have to work with them. They were better than animals, faster too, and worked by themselves, the Major had said. He resolved to ignore them.

As it turned out, he couldn't. One drew assignment in the same tunnel. That was not so bad, even though when it worked inside there was a rank smell from it unlike any animal he had ever known, and far worse. Even that he got used to. Then he got a call on his morning shift and was told to help out with a special job, this time outside, on the surface.

There was a carry-module standing on a splash-melted landing grid, the last of a cargo run from Hiruko Central. Old Matt was there. He waved Manuel over to the side of the module. The boy said, "We got to move that, I'll get the forklift from —"

"Come here."

There was a network of bars on the far side of the module. Manuel bent down and peered in and saw something red and gunmetal blue and coming at him fast. It was already in the air when he bent down and it crashed into the bars. The whole module rocked. The bars of the lattice — which the boy saw were of steel, and a good idea, too — rang with the impact. Then it was down, scrabbling, and abruptly smashed into the

bars again, without seeming to have taken any time to gather itself. It growled or spoke — he could not tell — and thrashed against the bars. Two blue servo'd hands gripped the steel and tried to tear it free. The thing grunted and heaved against it for a moment and then abruptly let go and crashed into the bars again, furious without letup.

"Back off," Old Matt said. "Give it a rest."

They walked away, followed by the steady, heavy thumps, the module shaking each time. "What *is* it?"

"Human. Badly damaged in some accident — up there." Old Matt gestured toward the pinpoints of orbiting stations. "Been years getting it this far."

"A *man*? I don't — "

"Human. Could be a woman. Nobody at Hiruko said. He, she, *it* lost a lot of the left brain in the accident. Can't talk. Sure can move, though."

"What's it like *that* for?"

"How'd you like waking up, finding out you're going to be a side of meat inside a box all the rest of your days?"

Manuel grimaced. "Why in Hell's it here?"

The old man shrugged. "The Colonel made a deal. Traded some equipment we hardly use any more, or can't fix. Got back from Hiruko with a bunch of work animals, and this."

"*That's* not going to work. Kill, maybe, not work. And a human, I . . ."

"Don't try to think it through just yet. Make out like it's an animal and you won't be so far from the truth."

"Why'd they let it live?"

"Don't know. Medicine does a lot of funny things. I do know you can't let a man die just because he's not got enough of a brain to suit your taste. They do that back on Earth, but not out here."

"Maybe we should, too." The crashing had slowed but not stopped.

"Not when they're useful. The Colonel, he thinks we need all the hands we can get. Boost productivity."

"That thing's not useful."

Old Matt's face crinkled and his eyes moved liquidly, studying the boy. "I figure it may be important to us."

"How? You'll never get the murder out of that thing."

"Maybe. Your father gave me the job because he feels it's a long shot. Could be. But I figure the two of us can do it."

"How?"

"Watch."

Each day for three weeks they suited up and went out to the module and fed it. Manuel would climb up on the top and slap open the little door there and throw the thing's food down. It couldn't jump that high but each day it tried and when it failed it would commence slamming itself against the bars again, adamant and tireless. It growled less as time went

on but it never let up its hammering at the walls. After three weeks it stopped leaping at him. It still stood watching, as if trying to figure out a way to get up there but knowing that it should save its energy when it would do no good. But then it would crash again and again into the bars as soon as the door clicked shut, as if to say, *See. See.* Manuel peered down at it in the brief moments when it stood still, glaring up with two wide-spaced black eyes. It was a hodgepodge of parts attached to a gunmetal grey carapace, bigger than any servo'd animal he had ever seen and powerfully made, bristling with heavy motors and big treads and bulging manifolds. He could not imagine a man or woman deep down inside the thing, tapped into the metal world that had swallowed it whole, raging in an awful silent pocket somewhere. He waved to it once, and for the first time in a week it jumped then, stretching itself, arms tearing at the air, black eyes glaring. Yet after he had hastily — despite himself — slammed the door shut, the thing did not throw itself against the bars. It stood, staring out as the two men walked away.

Old Matt started to starve it then. He cut the ration to half and then a third. After two weeks it lay on its side and did not get up right away even when the food and water came. A week more, and Old Matt took a tractor rod in his best hand and made as if to go inside.

“Wait!” Manuel said. “I’ll get my father and some of the men —”

“If it hits me that’ll be too late already. Just slam the door after me and get back.”

Manuel did as he was told. The old man stepped into the big module from a side portal. The thing studied him but did not move. The black eyes followed Old Matt, gazing with an impersonal opposition to everything, silent. Old Matt approached and tapped the ice-crust ed carapace with the tractor rod. No answering rustle from inside. But the thing ground its treads into the ice, shattering a crust ed stump, letting the sound speak for it.

The next day Old Matt put his gloved hand on the carapace, closer to the thing. On the third day he beckoned the boy inside. They rested hands on it and Manuel felt a faint tremor, a curiously high kind of vibration without words or form to it but going on, making a cadence that was not of some machine part but instead carried a feeling of sorrow and anger and yet wanting, too.

It was useless to try to talk to it. The medicos at Hiruko had tried. It wouldn’t answer. One of the Sidon specialists did a tap on it — Old Matt had to implant the probes; the specialist wouldn’t even go in the module — and shook her head, muttering. There was a strange kind of neural and cerebral activity, but she couldn’t make much out of it. “Obvious patho,” she said, and gave up. The file on the thing said nothing about what the complex tracing meant. Old Matt sucked at his teeth, thinking, watching the wavy lines on their scope. “I’ve seen men come apart when they lose a

piece of themselves. This one's not like that. This is something different."

"Yeah, crazy."

"Crazy like a fox, maybe."

"What's a fox?"

Old Matt just sucked at his teeth some more, the sound reverberating in his metallic face. Manuel persisted, "You think you can make it so it'll work?"

"Don't want it to work."

"Well then, let's tell my dad and we'll get rid of it."

"Nobody'll take it."

"Somebody's got to. Hiruko can't just stick us with — "

"There are things better than working, anyhow."

The next day Manuel went out to see if the thing had enough liquids and power to run, which was one of his chores now, and it was gone. The cage was empty. He ran to tell Old Matt but the man already knew.

"I let it go."

"Go? It'll run back to Hiruko or somewhere, we'll never see it."

"Maybe so."

"It'll kill somebody."

"Maybe." The old man would not say anything more.

But five days later it came back. It was worn out. The days in the open had run down its power reserves and it was chilled. The life-support index showed the mass of flesh inside was healthy, though, and in fact had a better pulse rate.

"It's fair run down," the old man said, "but gained a little body mass."

"How'd it . . ." Then the boy understood.

"Scooters, prob'ly. Maybe jackrabs."

"But that, that's a *human* in there. Nobody'd stoop to eating *that*."

"It doesn't give a damn about human or not. Been too long by itself, sealed up in there."

"Still, I . . . Jesus, how's it digest that slimy stuff?"

"The techs insert a universal biotract in most of these. Simplifies the work. Just drop in a standard unit, hook it up, you don't have to worry about what the animal's supposed to live on."

"It's not an animal."

Old Matt studied the form behind the bars, his face half-shadowed and sagging and folded with age, except where the timeless metal moved. "I don't see a whole lot of distinction any more," he said softly.

He took food into it and hooked up the charging leads to its back terminals. The black eyes followed him as he pushed the food closer, glinting and intelligent eyes that did not change or give warning before it sprang. It was weak and the power leads popped free as it leaped, so there was not much energy in the attack. Old Matt brought the tractor rod around from the harness on his back, where it had been concealed. He

caught the thing in midair. The rod mashed in its left buttress and Old Matt turned to the side, almost like a matador, to let the shape rush past him, still in the air but now twisting and already doubling up with pain. It struck the ice heavily, landing wrong, and cried out — a strangled grunt of surprise and dismay. Old Matt stumbled out the door and slid it shut before Manuel could reach him and the module rocked again with a heavy thump and right after it a crash and more thumps, rhythmic and shuddering, the way it was on the first day.

"Sonabitch!" Manuel cried.

"Still got spirit. Learning, but keeping the spirit," The man grinned, creasing his face deeply so that the radiation-born blotches stood out as blue-black scars.

"You'd think it'd be grateful."

"No. Grateful would mean it was ours. Mean — bone-deep mean — then it still can hold its head up. To anything."

Colonel Lopez heard of the incident, not through his son but from a crop-tender who had seen it happen at a distance. He came out to look at the thing, now strong again and prowling the modular cage, glaring out hot-eyed and unbroken. It reared up when the Colonel came close to the bars, not to leap but to display its huge belly — groined in scarlet ceramic and molybdenum, cracked and pitted — as challenge, exposing its weakest point to invite attack. The Colonel pursed his lips. "You two have invested considerable time in this creature."

"It's coming along." Old Matt stood with hands in his pouchpockets, his suit catching the slanting sunlight, showing its creases and stains and mended rips.

"It escaped."

"He let it go," Manuel put in. "And it came back on its own."

The Colonel shook his head, not taking his eyes off the cage. "A lot of work."

"Could be a good return, too," Old Matt said.

"You'll never get it to follow orders."

"Slaves follow orders, Colonel. You want something done a slave can't, you don't ask for a slave to do it."

"What we need now is grunt labor. If we don't keep the price down on our wheat, our soy, our corn, the Settlement will have to mortgage out to the Luna brokers first, and then some Earthsiders later. What we don't need is things like this with mouths big as buckets, trying to chew up one of my best men."

Old Matt said quietly, "Let me run him."

"What for?"

"Keep down the rockjaw mutes."

"Got ordinary dogs can do that."

"This one'll be cheaper. Don't have to feed it."

The Colonel nodded, still looking at the big ponderous thing as it padded monotonously around the enclosure, puffing, its breath an orange steam that crackled and fell to the ground, depositing a thin snow. "I heard about it feeding. *That's* the thing you want me to let run loose?"

Manuel said quickly, "We've got to take a *chance* on it, Dad."

"Man doesn't have to take a gamble just 'cause it's there. You got to learn that."

Manuel felt a stab of irritation and started to talk fast, "Damn, that's a swole-headed — " but Old Matt interrupted, and began giving the Colonel some specs on the creature. Manuel saw what the old man was doing, shunting the talk aside for a moment before the Colonel got into one of his moods and took a stand and then couldn't back down from it. Okay. Manuel turned away, muttering to himself, the lukewarm anger in his chest like a physical presence, a smouldering he got when he had to skate around the Colonel. He grasped the bars and leaned forward, cooling off. The creature came over to him as Manuel listened to the slow, almost casual way Old Matt drained the hardnosed stand-fast part out of the Colonel's voice. His mouth twisted; it irked him to see his father being soothed like that, and then he noticed the hunched-down form tapping against the bars with its head, *ding, dingding*, a pattern that varied but seemed intentional. Manuel frowned. *Ding, ding, dingding* — He saw suddenly that it was a code, maybe a way for the thing inside to talk. He rapped his glove against the bars in response. It answered, *dingdingding, ding*. Manuel reached down and knocked a patient rhythm on the bur-nished steel skull. The huge head tilted up, peering out for a stilled moment. Manuel felt something pass between them, something that tightened his throat. If there was still a human fragment left in there, if he could talk to it . . . He knocked on the skull again. Suddenly it reared up. It smacked against the bars with fierce energy, snarling. Manuel jumped back. Arms clawed at him, missing but snatching out again, jerking with lightning-quick anger. Manuel blinked, dazed. For an instant a small trapped part of it had broken to the surface. Only an instant. Now the muscled form prowled the cage again, glaring, snorting.

The two men noticed the momentary eruption. Colonel Lopez grunted. "I've got gangs putting up more domes. Teams outside, working the whole twenty-four."

Old Matt nodded. "It'll have to operate a long way out. No rockjaws near Sidon now anyway. What I though was, we put a tractor sting on it. It comes inside a five-klick perimeter, it gets a jolt."

Colonel Lopez grimaced. "Risky."

Manuel noticed for the first time that the corners of his father's set lips were a grid of fine dry wrinkles. He looked from one man to the other and found a similar tone, skin like paper crumpled and then smoothed out. He softened his voice and said, "Dad, it won't be that way when it's loose. It

didn't jump anybody when it had a chance, out there."

"I see." The Colonel smiled at his son despite his continuing frown, the learned look of a parent allowing himself to be talked into something. "You think it is merely objecting to being penned up."

Manuel answered crisply, "Right."

"That's so now," Old Matt said. "Earlier, it had things to work off. We let it do that."

The Colonel pointed between the bars at the left buttress of the thing. It oozed green pus from the tractor rod's wound. "Some still working out, I gather?" He smiled. "But I take your point. You can try the scheme — provisionally. Only provisionally."

Manuel beamed. He forgot the passing moment before, the fleeting connection. His father was right, the thing was dangerous. But it could be controlled. He was not sure why he felt a sense of accomplishment and anticipation but, like a boy, he did not puzzle over it.

The Colonel nodded, still studying the big shadowy form in constant motion, and began walking back toward the bright stretching bulk of the settlement. Ultraviolet from distant domes reflected off his helmet, darting rainbows of color into Manuel's eyes. "By the way," his father called, "what you call it?"

"Uh . . . nothing."

"Even animals get names," the Colonel said.

"We'll find one," Old Matt said. "You give them a chance, most things name themselves."

"The way we want him is like he came to us," the old man said to the boy.

"Mean?" Manuel asked. It seemed to him you needed more than that but he was willing to believe.

"Yes, mean, but all the rest — proud, and mad as all Hell, and confused enough to want to make something out of that anger and find out who he — or she, or it — is."

"Uh huh." Manuel looked doubtful.

"Still, to teach it to use the anger, the madness — it has to learn the rod, sure 'nuff." Old Matt nodded to himself, somber and distant, as if recalling something. "It's not really human any more, but it has to learn — or relearn — some human things. Not be just a crazy thing. But not too human, no. Not too."

They ran it. It would be gone for days, even weeks, and then come lumbering back to the five-klick boundary, and send a mournful long bass note over the comm the way Old Matt had shown it. It preyed only on the muties; Old Matt had taught it the differences, and something told it that the deviant forms were proper game. The boy never discovered how the

old man had done the training, but it worked. Bio reported a slow but steady drop in the mutie population near Sidon. Colonel Lopez was guardedly pleased with the result, since the Settlement received transfer credits from Hiruko for work done "in the general interests." The dogs alone could not have done it without humans to keep them to the task.

When it came in from a run Old Matt or, later, Manuel would fetch it in from the perimeter. There was an increasing work load and the two of them fell into a routine, tending to the thing when necessary and counting on time to wear it down some. It never attacked Old Matt, though it made a rush at Manuel one time. The boy jabbed the rod at it, missed, and swung full force into the yawning face that seemed to fill his vision, making no sound. The rod hummed with unlocked energy and jolted the thing back, stunning it without doing real damage, and the boy poked it, just enough to keep it backing away, and too late saw the trap the thing had laid for him. He was too far into the cage to reach the door in one long bound, so he had to stand as the thing rounded on him, slewed to the left, and came in low, under Manuel's raised guard. It hit him. He was on the ground and rolling before it registered that anything had happened. He twisted and looked up and it was towering over him, hot-eyed and massive and immobile, merely studying him. *Enjoying it*, the boy thought, *getting the most out of this before it* — and he struck upward hard, turning the rod so its point caught the thing in the right nerve nexus. It howled and jerked away, eyes glaring and mouth gaping. Manuel scrambled up, rod held ready, and backed out, already recovered enough to think of his pride so that he did not hasten, but solemnly stared the thing down even as he retreated.

Later, he was not sure what the thing had been trying to do. The attack might have been a way for it to come even with him. He would never be certain. He hoped no one had seen the incident and after a week was pretty sure Old Matt knew nothing of it. Only months later would the old man refer to it in passing as merely another matter Manuel and the thing had to go through. He learned that Old Matt and even his father had known. They had said nothing, because no talk would underline the point better. It took even longer before he saw the lesson's point was indeed its ambiguity, and talk could take away from that, too.

After the attack, Manuel walked nearly even with it as he escorted the heavy form out on its runs. He felt himself able to handle it better now; the brush with extinction (so he thought of it) had proved he could move as fast and well as he needed. There had been a fear in him, not the coppery fear he knew would never leave him, but a milder one that could be banished and now was slowly seeping away. It was after Old Matt saw him walking beside it, still wary but with a jaunty lift to his step, that the old man said, "We should call it Eagle."

"What does that mean?"

"A large bird. Lived on Earth long ago."

"Huh? It's no animal, it's —"

"We should name it Fred? Elizabeth? Carmelita?"

The boy said nothing for a while. Then, "Sí, Sí, I suppose you're right. But Eagle? It can't fly. Not even with air could it fly."

"The important thing with the eagle was not its flight, but its heart. That was why it died out, I remember. It would not give in, become a barnyard thing."

Manuel shrugged. He did not care much about the ancient past. He accepted the name because in the end one name was as good as another. It meant nothing to him until some weeks later when he returned with Eagle — it was difficult to remember to think of it that way — from the perimeter, across the glassy plain of technicolor splash-landing pits. They loped over blotches of burnt gold, crusty crimson, searing orange. Eagle paced beside him and Manuel kept the tractor rod cradled easily, casually. Some animals were working on a hot water feed line, laying it on supports above the ice between two looming gray domes. They chattered among themselves as they labored, hoisting struts and tape-fusing joints with the bright blue arcs, and then caught sight of Eagle. They hailed the two and then broke from the work gang as men shouted after them, five animals clanking and rolling across the purple sheen of ice, glad of a break in their work, chattering loudly. Four of them slowed and then stopped as they got a better look at the thing that walked with the boy, but the youngest had never been beyond the Settlement before and in its fuzzy world knew no enemies, so it came on. It ran up to Eagle, yipping. Eagle hardly took notice of it. It didn't even break stride or engage its treads. It simply smacked the animal in the side and kept on, sending it rolling, tumbling and flailing across the slick surface and down an incline, where it slewed to a stop. Eagle went on, indifferent to the silent wake it left among animals and men alike. They started after Eagle as it ambled lazily homeward, yawning. The young whined and mewed and sulked. The men muttered amongst themselves, stunned and with a grudging admiration. It was not the act — which was no more cruel than the day-to-day wrestlings of the animals at play — but the way it was done, without anger but with a lofty sense of what Eagle was and what the animals were.

Manuel started to think of it as his own. That ended when again it jumped him. He had left Eagle in the cage for two days when he was busy and did not have time to let it out for another run. This time Manuel clubbed it right away, not allowing himself to be drawn in. The attack was swift but without the great power the boy knew Eagle could muster. A complaint, then, nothing more. But it served to relieve the boy of the sentimental notion that he had made Eagle his own, as submissive as any of the animals, or as friendly. Old Matt smiled gently when he heard of it

and said nothing, but Manuel knew what he thought.

There was more labor to do now that the Settlement was thrusting up more domes, filling them with hard-won soil, blending human waste with corn stalks and old plant fiber ("the honeybucket brigade," Major Sanchez called it), and extending the tunnels back into the neighboring hillsides for access to more lodes of water and ammonia saturated ices. There was less time for recreation now, fewer communal dances and meetings, more of the small card games and drinking bouts snatched from time between shifts. Worse, the new works took energy, so the heating budget got cut back. Men and women stayed close to their homes carved out of the ice floes, bundled up. To cut down on drafts, blankets hung in the connecting corridors. The younger kids, including Manuel, spent long hours adding thick gray insulation to the pipe networks, all in the eternal battle against the cold that seeped in, despite magnetic insulation and the steady gurgle of hot, fusion-runoff water in the walls. But the Colonel knew the limits of the community and arranged with Bio for a new expedition out to distant regions, to cull the muties and give everyone a break. It had been many years since a woman had gone on one of the hunts, not from any design but from simple preference. While the men and boys were gone the women, too, felt a curious release that brought some renewal. They worked at private gardens and other projects, made entertainment holos to exchange with the other Settlements — not imitations of the slick sensodramas from Earth, but storytelling, tales of Ganymede itself or the asteroids, people like themselves — and dreamed of the day when the families could begin to split off from the Settlements and make their own way in the new land, safe from the deadly proton sleet beneath a shielding blanket of air, owing no one a tribute of taxes or indentured labor. That time would not come soon, probably would not come at all in their generation, but that did not matter: they could see the promise unfolding and for the moment, leaning forward always on the promise, that was enough.

The party that set out from Sidon was larger than usual, louder, high-spirited with anticipation and smeerlop. During the long ride down to the Prometheus Plateau, Manuel felt a weight lift from him. The routine months of labor had been relentless and grinding. To him the dulling months had smudged the sureness of the things he had experienced out beyond the insulated human-scale pocket that bounded them on every side. Their superconductors made possible the thin wedges of vacuum that insulated them from the awful cold, and only plain hard work would make of Ganymede a human place, but under its unending hammer they lost the flavor of the open endless plains that they so seldom crossed now. The early explorers had truly lived here, where treads now ground across the melt-sloped craters. The dome-hemmed farmers had a

smaller compass. He was glad to stop being a farmer and take on some fraction of the explorer's role again, tingling as he suited up in the morning for the biting chill only centimeters away.

On the morning they reached the Plateau, six strangers met them. They were from the territory near Nelson Settlement and Fujimura Settlement, a full thousand clicks away, and had been traveling for days. They had a job order from Bio but what had drawn them was the story of Eagle, now well-circulated, and the prospect of a real hunt. They were swarthy and dirty, not the best. Most did not have solid contracts with a Settlement at all. They were stragglers and outbackers, men who worked in their own patched-together domes in river valleys, or else outpost agents (old, most of them, hermits almost, with ancient grudges) — all came with their bore-guns and one even with a heavy e-beam emplacement, towed by a run-down old crawler. They were the kind of men who never fit well in the enclosed Settlements. They were there to settle a debt: "Wonder if we could run wi' yer after it." — none even imagining that they should deal with the Aleph in the TwenCen way, one sunburst of fusion and be done with it. That was unthinkable. Old Earth and Luna had gone through Hell to make that a horrifying idea, and so they came as always, yet hopeful, with the same ineffectual weapons their fathers had willed them, the beams and missiles the thing had withstood or brushed aside countless times before. What drew them was Eagle.

The six of them squatted in a cold, slow-falling drizzle outside the camp, ready before the bigger party had even finished a breakfast of hot sour corn and turkey steak. "Thought we might just come along; won't even shoot if you say not to. Providing it doesn't come after one of us, that is."

Colonel Lopez nodded. He could scarcely turn down a team that Bio had rubber-stamped. "You seen much of it?"

"It busted up my first 'ponics dome," a wirey man said, thumbing his bore-gun.

Another said, "Killed my wife, th'ty years ago."

The Colonel studied them and said clearly, "We're here to clean out the muties."

"You want to do that, send some of these boys you got," the wirey one said.

"We're not freezing our asses out here to get run over by the Aleph," Major Sanchez put in. "You got that idea, *mierda*, you can go home."

"Maybe you soft Settlement guys don' see 'nuff a it," said the man who had lost a wife. "It don' come 'round the big places much any more. But us — " he gestured, "we're contracted farmers. It dunno we're there even."

The Colonel squinted at them and said, "You're here on a job order from Bio, *sí*. You see rockjaw-warps, scooters, you get as many as you

can. No good stuff, though. You see something else, you shoot — *si* But that's not the job."

The men grumbled, but it didn't matter anyway. Nobody got a shot at the Aleph that day, or even that week. It came and went on its own strange routes deep in the ancient moon, and the odds were against even seeing it in a whole season. Manuel found trenches and gorges that might have been marks of its passing, though with the endless melting and refreezing it was impossible to tell. He could not find the delta-print anywhere. But in the second week, one of the animals heard something, it seemed, toward the south, and the main party headed that way. Eagle would not stay with the file of men and animals, and so Old Matt gave it the sign that it could stray off further to the south and try to find something. Neither he nor Manuel had been able to tell Eagle much about the Aleph, though they had shown it pictures.

They were tramping stolidly down a ravine where a big grey slab of ice butted against an iron mountain, forming a kind of waffle-board of alternately stretched and compressed rock. There was no premonition, no tremor of intent. The ravine wall just buckled, showering the lead animals with shards of ice and lumps of snow, and there it was: lean this time, snakelike and undulant, streaming with soft amber light, alabaster blobs that bobbed under its rough hide like bergs afloat in some interior fluid. It churned out of the massive ice cleft as if unaware of any resistance — much less of the men and animals that scattered before it, yelling and scrambling in all directions, none taking aim or even looking for a potential vulnerable spot to shoot. All except the boy. He was in the rear of the party when the ice wall ripped open and boulders crashed down. He stood very still. The debris rained around him or tumbled past, crunching over snowbanks or smacking near his boots, and he was the only constant point in all this motion. He studied it. The Aleph twisted its long form as it descended to the ravine floor, ponderous, sheets of ice creaking and splitting under its weight — *wirey this time*, the boy thought, *like it's swimming* — and helical waves pulsed along it, watery amber light refracting from the peaks of the ripples as it crossed the ravine with a liquid writhing grace — *only it's not touching the ground* — and with a huge unconcern slammed into an iron bluff, the blunt head (now without features) entering the rusty cliffs with a grinding noise, the whole side of the mountain seeming to flinch at the attack, shock waves fanning out from the contact. With indifference it nosed in, dust and pebbles spewing out from the hole it made, and then the boy saw the spots. They formed and reformed along the snakey body, some bigger than a man, not mere floating blue spots but actual openings that shifted and deepened — *that hexagonal again, sure enough* — and gave forth a somber blue-black glow, like looking far down into an ice mountain and seeing through it the pale glow of the Sun rising on the other side.

Eagle rushed by him. The Aleph was almost buried now in its oval-shaped tunnel and Eagle rushed on, never breaking stride as it dodged among the fleeing men and rushing animals, not slowing as it passed Old Matt — who was bent over, squinting — and leaped ahead, so fast Manuel could hardly follow it. The nub end of the Aleph was bone-white, coiling with a kind of muscular surge, hanging a meter above the ground, as if held aloft by magnetic fields — and Eagle jumped on it. It clawed at the surface and managed to get a toehold on some minute break in the otherwise smooth-seeming skin. Its sharp hand-servos slashed at the glossy sheen and Manuel thought he saw a red, searing mark spring from the hide, but before he could be sure one of the amber ripples coursed down to the tip of the body, reflected, and on its way back toward the head caught Eagle by a foot and deftly, effortlessly, tumbled it off. Manuel rushed toward Eagle and while running saw that it had left a scar, a definite scar, turning deep red as he watched. Then the white tip of the thing slipped into the tunnel and was gone.

Eagle shook and pawed at the ice, a little dazed. Old Matt came trotting forward fast as he could and gradually other men came up, talking to each other and looking at the tunnel — some even bravely venturing into it, shining lamps upon the walls that were bored out with a screwlike pitch — and relating the way they'd seen it (no one had taken a fax picture) and what Eagle had done or tried to do. The boy did not hear them. He tasted the metallic liquid scent that swarmed up prickling into his nostrils, not fear this time but something stronger because it settled into him and would stay: a certainty, a sense of things coming, a foreknowledge of what could be — acrid and final and uncompromising in its ferocity, claiming him.

The next year stragglers came into the camp, some because they were out of work and wanted to get out into the territory, and others for bigger reasons. Four months earlier, the Aleph had popped open a dome merely by brushing against it, killing more than a dozen, and there was talk of nuking it for the protection of everybody. The Luna science council overruled Hiruko, saying the Aleph was like an archaeological site on Earth, to be kept for future generations who might be able to learn more from it. None of this mattered to the lean, silent men who pitched their own tiny domes near Colonel Lopez's shacks. They had a debt to get paid and though they knew it was hopeless and had been hopeless for their own fathers, they kept on. This time there were two men from the McKenzie asteroids, fresh down into Hiruko — to learn ammonia farming, they said — but knowing about the Aleph and even of the mutie hunts that struck it now and then. One had heard in Hiruko of Colonel Lopez and the great gunmetal blue Eagle. He came without even a laser gun and the insulated

suit he wore had been in an expensive fitter's stock three days before. The Sidon men ignored all these people as best they could.

The McKenzie men were even less welcome, because to the farmers they were the first of a new era.

"I say we not associate with them," Petrovich said one evening over supper. He had as usual tried to talk the Colonel into letting them shoot crawlies, and just as usual the Colonel had slapped him down. Now he wanted to change the subject. "They come here, look around, take our ideas."

Major Sanchez, always quick to contradict, said, "Treaty with Earth says we got to share knowledge."

"Earth!" Petrovich snorted. "Always siding with the 'roids 'cause the rockhoppers, they have them by the throat."

The Colonel said soberly, "Earth has enough troubles without getting into our squabbles."

The table fell silent. A new War of Redistribution had flared up in Asia again, and Sydney had gone in the first few hours. It was impossible to be indifferent to Earth's old disease even this far away. Manuel could not understand the fatality of the way everyone talked of the Wars, steadily raging between the historically poor and the relatively wealthy. He wondered how you could know you were in a period of history, all bracketed and figured out by the metasociologists as if you were dead already — and, knowing it, still go on in the grip of history's laws, futile and predetermined, following the same zero-sum game down to a remorseless end. Maybe being able to see Earth and all its blood-steeped riddles as a mere blue glimmer made it easy to misunderstand; or maybe he, too, was like a shuttle gliding down a smooth and utterly fixed orbit he could not see, and was just as laughable. He shrugged a boy's shrug and listened to Petrovich again.

"— it'd tear their hearts out if they came over to where it sleeps and laid on it for warmth." He was discussing Eagle, who always slept alone, often tunnelled into a snowdrift. The animals invariably piled atop each other.

"It's not an animal," the Colonel observed.

"Not a man, either," Petrovich said adamantly. "Hiruko, they brought that brain lobe up to max capacity, yes. Access all the neural connections left. But not a man, still."

"Why not?" Old Matt asked casually.

"More to a man than connections."

"What is there?"

"Half a man isn't a man."

Major Sanchez slapped his palm on the hardfiber table. "Ha! The neurophilosopher will now tell us how he knows a man."

"Well, humans have bigger — bigger aims."

"Like what?"

"Aleph! To animals, to Eagle, it's just a big rockjaw. Something to hunt, if only they had guts."

The Colonel said, "And to us?"

"Well — " Petrovich, chewed his lip, cornered. "To us, it's something to learn from."

Major Sanchez said slyly, "You've never been so strong on learning before now, Petrovich."

"I learned something this last year. Something you don't know. Systemwide has a bounty on it."

The Colonel said, "What? For killing it?"

Petrovich grinned, having deflected the talk where he wanted it. "No killing. Capture."

Major Sanchez frowned, outflanked. "You sure?"

"Found it in the old records. Ought to scan those sometime yourself, my friend." He added, deadpan, "Learn a little."

"You have hard copy?" the Colonel asked.

Beaming, Petrovich produced a stack of slick sheets. "Reading for the long nighttime."

It was there. The men passed the records around, calling out snatches of official directives nearly a century old, laughing at the stiff Earther terms and mush-mouthed way of talking. Few of them ever wrote anything down so anything in hard form was fancy and fussy and unnecessary. Old Matt got hold of the original directive and showed it to Manuel. "Made up about the time the scientists discovered the stuff on the outer moons," he pointed out.

"When they gave up; here?"

"Approx'y, yes. Guess they figured somebody might find a way to slow it down or stop it so they could study it safely. I seem to remember something like that — I mean, why people started hunting it down."

"You were around then?"

Old Matt grinned; his metal cheek creased and rasped faintly. "Still up in the orbital labs, and then out at Titan — but around, sure."

"*Madre.*" To the boy the old man and the Aleph all came out of a faceless time before anything he knew for certain, both from origins lost forever to him, and with the conserving blinkered concentration of humans, he was blissfully secure and at peace in his ignorance.

"See in this one?" Manuel pointed at an old fastframe picture. "The text says they had to go real fast to see the spots on the side."

"Ummm."

"I can see them easy."

"Right."

"It must be slowing down."

"We saw it take its time, is all."

"Maybe it's getting weaker."

Old Matt laughed. "Chew up a mountain in a minute, if you think that's weak."

Undaunted, the boy stuck a finger at the print. "What're the spots? They don't show on many frames."

"Holes."

"Anybody know what kind?"

"They change all the time."

Manuel nodded. Old Matt was tired from a day of potting at sleppers, the new bioform introduced to fill in a step in the biochem chain that led toward an oxygen atmosphere. They were efficient, big and bulky, and ugly as sin. They mutated easily and were hard to chase down. Manuel stayed up long after the old man had slumped into his sleeping bag. He peered at the old prints, read the data. It had not occurred to him to study up on the Aleph. Studying was to learn pipefitting or thermodynamics and the Aleph was like none of those, no formulas or procedures, just a fervent running wildness that could be claimed only by sensing it and feeling your way. But as he frowned down at the frozen images of amber and alabaster he nodded to himself, concentrated and intent. The next morning he spoke to Eagle, not knowing if he was understood, but trying anyway. And each morning thereafter, trying again.

For eleven days they ran down sleeper-muties with Eagle making the most kills, always far faster than the animals and always quick and remorseless in the killing. The McKenzie man had a partial insulator breakdown from his own ineptness and within five minutes got frostbite in a leg, the skin frozen to the suit wall so that it tore off when they dragged him out of it.

Eagle was leading them all now, with an instinct made sure by time, so that without discernible sign it knew which cañon to choose, which purple-shadowed pocket sheltered the growing communities of muties, where the scattered and warring life-forms preyed and mated and died. Eagle ran with an unthinking ferocity that daunted some of the men. The kindly and condescending affection that evolution had forged between men and the domesticated animals surely did not apply to a thing like Eagle, and the men stayed away from it.

Eagle found the Aleph alone this time. It was in the last days of the expedition and Manuel was ten clicks to the west of the main group, scouting out a nest of sleeper-muties who were chasing down and eating the normal rockjaws and crawlies. He heard the excited shouts and cries over shortrange. Eagle had run into the Aleph on an open plain. Manuel listened, loping in the general direction of the party, imagining: the men and animals after it, the huge thing surging over the ice, its passage blowing up a fine dry dust of crystal ammonia, and Eagle pacing it, not leaping this time but biding its time, careful and yet growling with a

pent-up rage. The boy ran flat out, expending his servo'd energy, gasping. He heard Major Sanchez swearing, Petrovich whooping, animals chattering and mewling in mixed fear and bloodlust. He heard the sudden sharp crack as Colonel Lopez fired two laser bolts at it pointblank. Manuel climbed a bluff and looked down on the plain where the darting black motes swarmed about the huge thing, pursuing, lunging in and then pulling back although the liquid moving shape had done nothing to stop them. Then one came too close and the Aleph moved over it and onward and left behind a mashed stain of red and steel. An animal hurled itself at the shape, but slow, uncertain. Something caught it in midair and the animal twisted in pain and then fell, broken in half.

And Eagle: running alongside, snarling, watching the shifting blue-black opportunities until in a blur it shot in, up the alabaster flank, plunging on and leaping from some unseen purchase, up, to the lip of a triangular hole, and then in, swallowed, gone in an instant, so that the yelping and shouting from the black dots around stopped suddenly and a strange silence descended. The boy felt his heart thump once, twice, and on the third the side of the thing contorted, turning ruddy, and Eagle struggled out from the triangular spot that shrunk even as it wriggled free, snarling and spitting and chopping at the Aleph with puny servo'd human hands. Struggling. Then falling. Eagle hit the ice solidly, starring it, and rolled. The boy gasped and leaped downhill, letting his shocks absorb his clumsy, hasty, jolting falls. By the time he had reached the plain Eagle was on its feet, wobbling but fundamentally unhurt, and the Aleph had vanished, burrowing into a rock flat in a blur of energy.

"Hit it both times," Colonel Lopez said as his son approached. "Both times, and not a puncture, not a mark."

Old Matt stood with his hand on the back of Eagle. The men milled around it though the animals stayed back. Eagle puffed and stood silent, haggard, its ceramics and manifolds rasping hollowly. The boy saw it held something in one hand.

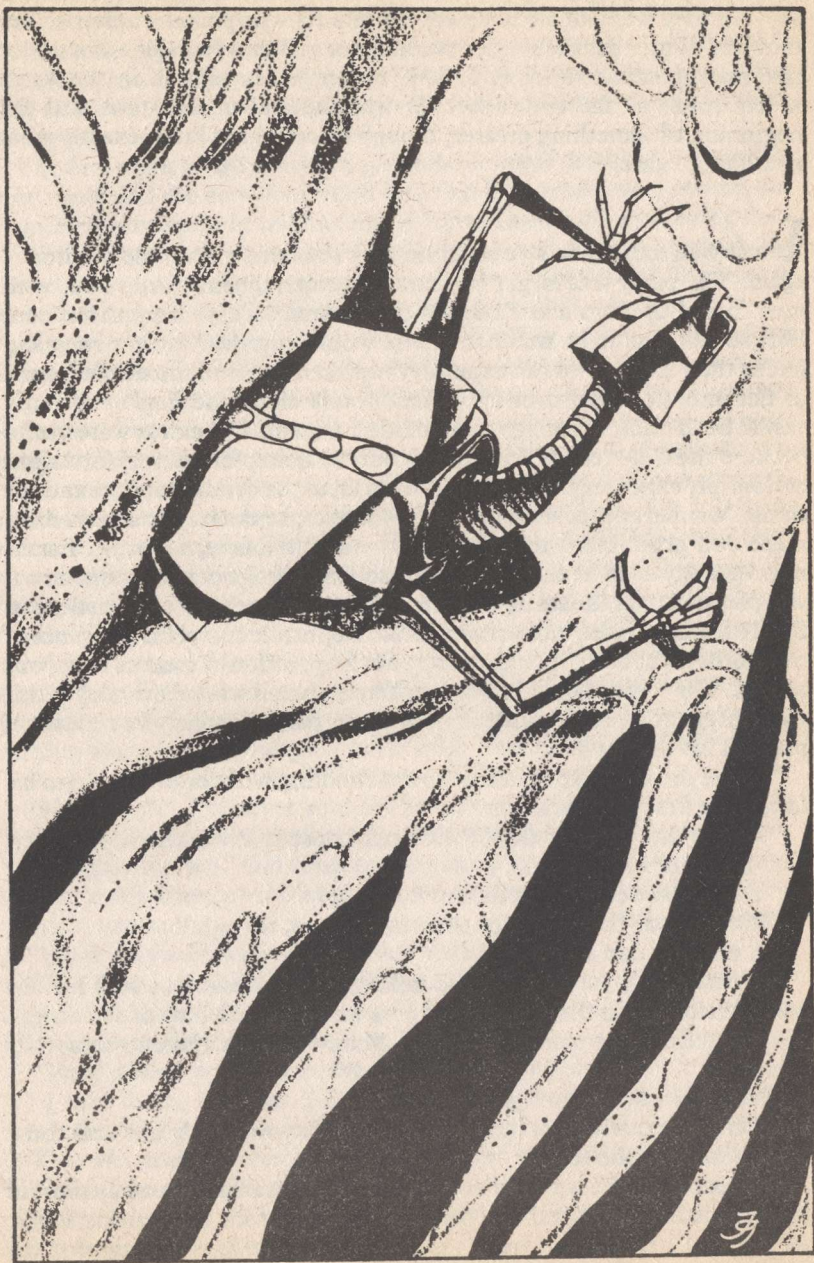
"Piece of the thing," Old Matt said. "Tore it out, somehow. Way back in that hole, I guess."

Major Sanchez stared at the thin shard like rosy sheet metal. "First time I seen that. Ever."

"The records have nothing like that," Petrovich said.

In camp that night Petrovich called into Sidon and confirmed; no trace of the thing had ever been recovered. "So the secret all along," Old Matt said. "was in those spots. Goddamn."

The men laughed and slapped each other with a fervent relief that surprised even them, and drank more, and even invited in the straggly bunch from the contract farms, still terrified and subdued, who in the end had fallen behind and never come close to the Aleph. Two of the animals dead and a fragment won: a price paid. The boy knew that night, as he fell



into exhausted sleep, that he would not see it again this year. That was just as well; they were all worn down, despite the temporary euphoria. Yet they had done what the scientists could not and they had done it without fine instruments or a lot of money. He smiled to himself in the warm musty smell of the bedclothes. It was the end of one time and the beginning of something greater, though he could not know exactly what and did not care.

It was well more than a year before they returned to the wild territories again. The party was larger but no more expert, being larded out with men from Fujimura and Zanatkin Settlements. There were three from Hiruko who had to be watched or else would pop their tanks wrong and freeze their lungs solid (an expensive replacement, and sometimes fatal), or fall into a crusted-over crevasse, or walk alongside Eagle and put a casual hand on it, thinking it was another animal. The extras were useful because the Colonel and Major Sanchez, by being formal and forthright and simply expecting it, got them to do a lot of the drudge jobs around the camp. Manuel appreciated that part of it because as a boy he always drew more dull grunt labor than the men — in the fourteen percent Earth-norm gravity even he could lift and manhandle huge crates — and now it was pleasant to graduate up a notch and watch somebody else hustle at it. Still, the ferret-faced interest and comic ineptitude and plain ignorance of these others robbed the long journey out from Sidon of some of its joyous release. The boy did not like it any different than it was before, and in this early disgruntlement, this stand to block the path of change, lost one more piece of his boyhood.

"Hope you don' expect me to go out shooting with 'em," he said to his father the first day in camp.

"We'll share jobs, as usual," Colonel Lopez said. "Share out the new men into our teams, too."

"They're not even from Sidon!"

"Bio gives us the credit for their task-hours, though."

"A measley dab of credit."

"We need it," the Colonel said mildly. He was less stern with his boy now, relied less on discipline and more on a quiet display of steadiness. "We're selling less ammonia-mix to Mars-General. Have to scrape by somehow."

"Not this way. There's plenty —"

"Plenty is exactly what there's none of. Now you go help unshank those treads, same as the rest."

Manuel did as he was told and inside of an hour had put away most of his resentment. It helped that the Fujimura men took to admiring Eagle, its size and strangeness, and its graceful, intricate lope as it cleared the

hills nearby, going out on its first run. They had never seen anything like it, a thing that resembled a servo'd animal and yet bristled with energy and nervous, repressed intelligence, eyeing everyone and everything with a straight, unafraid, assessing gaze. The new men had felt nervous when they felt it watching them, as though the hot-eyed intensity found them wanting.

The first night in camp was always cause for more drinking and sniffing than usual and the new men fitted into that fine, some even passing out from the smearlop early and having to be given a dose of oxy to bring their cardio systems back up to full. The Major toured casually through the connected quonsets, keeping an eye on the more raucous and checking to be sure the oxy didn't ignite anything and burn them out.

Manuel sat on his bunk and watched, drinking a little of the brown liquor that the Settlements made easily as sourmash sideproduct and shipped, with a hefty tax, across the solar system. As usual the best went for export but the Settlements had gotten used to the harsher, throat-scraping variety and now even preferred it. The boy sipped and talked to whoever came by and then, tiring of the stories of improbable marksmanship and endless near-fatal accidents and discovered-but-now-lost metal lodes, went looking for Old Matt. He found the old man already asleep, stretched out and looking smaller than a man, his clothes loose on the body, worn and filthy in spots where chemicals had dried and collected the dust from metal work. He breathed shallowly and his face seemed dried out, burned deeply by UV, the nose blistered and reblistered, the seam where flesh joined to metal warped and lined like old reused paper. Manuel studied the thin, loose-jointed form for a moment and was turning away when a whispery voice said, "You've been thinking."

Surprised, the boy said, "Tomorrow, I'll show you."

"No, tonight. I'm never sure I'll be here tomorrow."

"Hey, you can march half these jokers straight into the ground."

"Maybe. Maybe." Old Matt sat up smoothly, without carrying much weight on his arms, even though one was syntho'd and the other servo'd. "I had to be humble and a little sly, even, to come out here this time."

"Huh? Anybody can come so long's they want."

"The Undue Risk Rule, you know it? If I get injured again, need a new leg or whole abdomen, who's to pay? Sidon can't do major overhauls. Has to come from Hiruko, maybe even Luna."

"They'd keep you back at the Settlement? For that?"

"I told them, cost less if I prang out here, considering the chances aren't good I'd get back in time anyway."

This talk made the boy uncomfortable and the man saw it, so he said, "It's that spectrograph stuff, eh?"

Manuel nodded. "That fragment. Hard to believe they could get so much information out of it."

"The dating? That's a non-result, you ask me."

"I don't see how the Hiruko labs could come up with no date at all."

Old Matt shrugged. "The ratio of various isotopes — that's the only handle they ever get on the age of a thing. That little piece had all kinds of isotopes in it, but they all give contradictions — different ages for each ratio. Sometimes even impossibilities — more of the decay product than could be, ever, if it was just coming from the parent radioactive atoms in the material."

"So it's something they haven't seen before. So? They have such big heads, *al norte*, they think that's impossible?"

Old Matt smiled lightly. "It means the thing is not made up of naturally-occurring stuff. It must keep reshuffling its own atoms all the time, to keep them so scrambled."

The old man seemed to regard this as important, but to Manuel it was a detail. "Thing is, the *big* thing is," he said, "it's not made of rock, even if it looks like it is."

"Yes?"

"There's a lot of metal. I added up all the elements in it that're good conductors, from the mass spectrograph printout they sent us. Then I figured how much other atoms there are." He leaned forward earnestly. "That fragment, it's a good conductor."

"Ummmm. That piece was from inside. We know the Aleph is not a conductor on the skin. So it must be different inside."

"Right! And a conductor, it can be a channel."

"Channel?"

"The man from Hiruko last time — like the one this year, too — he fired an e-beam at it."

"Sure. Just bounced off. Always does."

"Right! The Aleph knows how to defend its outside. Its skin does the whole job."

"Not always. It picked up The Barron."

"The Barron was a dog. It came too close. Could be it was sucked into the Aleph, the fields tore it open."

Old Matt studied the far end of the shack, as if listening to the background talk, or the wheezing of the pumps, or the gurgle of pipes. His liquid brown eyes seemed to absorb light from the shadowy dank bunkroom. "It was studying The Barron, I'd guess. Turning it over, like a man looking at a funny-shaped pebble, and by accident he dropped it and it broke."

The boy went on, impatient: "Something like that, sure, but the point is, an electron beam carries an electrical current. Conductors are like mirrors — a current comes by them, they make an image current, only reversed. Same as when you look in an ordinary mirror, you're left-handed."

"I'm left-handed already."

"Then in the mirror you're right-handed. What I mean is, one thing you learn early in power engineering is, a current's repulsed by another current of opposite sign. Right? That means an e-beam bolt, running by a conductor, kind of sees a repulsive current in the conductor. Its own image pushes it away."

Old Matt sat back, eyeing the boy with mingled amusement and new respect. "So the e-beam stays away."

"Right!"

"Which means e-beams aren't much good against the Aleph."

"Not if you fire it point-blank, the way that Hiruko guy does. The way everybody has, near as I can tell from what my dad says. But suppose you get the beam into one of those openings."

"Then it's in a kind of metal pipe. It gets pushed away from the walls. So? Still does you no good."

Manuel gestured and waved with his hands. "No, *no*. The e-beam, it's flying through the hole, nearly fast as light. It can't run into a wall, because every time it gets close to some bend or fork in the tube, it sees its own image."

"Which it finds repulsive." Old Matt smiled, his face crinkling.

"So it goes on! See? It turns corners, it twists — all to get away from those images of itself. Beautiful!"

Old Matt closed his eyes for a long moment, his nostrils collapsing and expanding with each slow breath, the face masklike. Then he opened them again and his expression was different, as if a moment had arrived which he had expected without knowing he was waiting for it. "The e-beam works its way into the Aleph."

"And when the metal plays out — *if* it plays out — the beam smacks — zap!" Manuel clapped his hands, making heads turn in the bunkroom — "into whatever's there. Anything nonmetal."

"Into whatever's there."

"Right. Far back into the thing."

Old Matt closed his eyes again. He nodded sleepily. "A man, then an animal, then a gun. Now we have all three. It is either enough or it will never be enough."

Manuel was excited by his inner pictures of the e-beam jetting powerfully into the thing, snaking and finding its way, darting and striking at the soft vulnerable things deep inside, things no one could even guess, and he scarcely heard what the old man said, or thought about what man Old Matt had meant.

Old Matt woke him early. Ganymede's dim night would later give way to dawn, a process stretching on for hours, as though all things here must

be of larger-than-human scale. It was Manuel's turn to connect power cables to the crawlers and walkers, and fire up the fusion generator. He dressed sluggishly, still halfway into sleep and its foggy shapes that ran and loomed and roared against a slate-black background, a dream he knew so well now that the meaning seemed obvious, like a fact, more real than daylight. His lungs and heart felt leaden, reviving, and he shivered as he dressed in the thin but inert layers they all wore, even inside, against the perpetual sucking cold. In the bunkroom men yawned and grunted. Some stumbled to the back and urinated loudly into the open-mouthed cyclers. Shucked of their suits, their flesh was porcelain white, rubbed red where the insulating layers bunched or wrinkled. Some showed blotchy calluses and big blue veins where pressure flaws had sucked the blood to the surface. Others had patches of glossy frostbite replacements. Not a man was without mark. Their insulating sheaths fended off the brutal facts of this world, the cold and dark and scalding chemicals of the melting mountains — but shielded imperfectly, so that the men wore their ugly mottlings with a pride, a sign of have gone beyond the warm, comfortable Settlements.

He suited and left the gathering heat of the cabin. Jupiter overhead cast blurred shadows everywhere and the moons gleamed beneath their ancient scars. He crossed the field to the fusion dome, threading among vehicles parked this way and that, dark boxy shapes on a plain glowing with a wan blue. The world lay inert beneath a rigid night and he tasted already the coppery hot, his mind racing ahead of this slow climb out of sleep. The fusion generator's mindless *whump whump whump* seemed like an eager animal greeting him. He dragged the cables to the vehicles and socketed them and watched the black ice begin to melt from the chunky treads and wheels as the kiloAmps surged through, restoring life.

When he clumped back into the embrace of the cabin it was stirring too, the heaters cracking and spitting, men swearing at clothing damp with yesterday's undiscovered ice, their breaths already fogging the windows, pipes rattling as heat came to them again, the swarming smell of frying meat layered in the air. Old Matt sat at a table, hunkered down over a steaming bowl, chewing meditatively.

"Want to try the aim again before we put it in the crawler?" Manuel said, sitting down beside him.

"No. It's good, doesn't stray. The beam spreads a little but you can't help that. You should try firing one — we used to use them for welding — without any air around at all. Electrons all rush away from each other, charge density just blows the beam apart. Like firing a shotgun. Worse, even."

Manuel nodded. He had never known Ganymede without some atmosphere, a thin whisper when he could barely walk, now a light cloak that could carry clouds, buoy up snow, drop the piercing acid rains.

Generations would pass before a human sucked in a first good lungful. Now it was still thin stuff, little better than drawing on hard vacuum, but enough for an e-beam to fork through like lightning: breaking down atoms, clutching the newborn positive ions and ejecting the unwanted electrons, neutralizing the beam charge and enabling it to propagate in a thin, deadly stream. They were used for sealing dome exteriors now, enabling a man to zip shut a break from fifty meters away, if he had a good aiming eye.

Old Matt's jaws worked steadily, without hunger: food as fuel. Manuel took a bowl of broth and a corn slab from the loaded tray that arrived. "I was kind of surprised he did that," he said.

"Who?"

"The Hiruko fellow. Thought he'd ask for more money, once he saw we wanted the beam. Next nearest one's in Fujimura."

"I only offered him the money to be polite. Always give Hiruko people a chance to be generous. They like it. That's not why he handed it over, though."

"Uh?"

"He's seen Eagle. He watches us, the ones who've been coming out here for so long nobody's kept track, even. He knows we can use it and he can't. Even though we told him about the conductivity and all. So he gave it."

They had taken two days to modify the long, magnet-ringed barrel of the e-beam projector, narrowing the darting stream down at the cost of losing some flux. Power that spattered against the invulnerable and still unanalyzed flanks of the thing would be worthless anyway; accuracy was more important than aimless force. The projector was an awkward thing with its bulky power pack and evil-looking snout, and the two of them cradled it carefully out to the crawler, lashing it to the foredeck and covering it from the soft pink snow that had begun. The boy lashed down equipment and topped off pressure heads and then looked up from the work, at a circle of silent steady faces. Some he had never seen before. He realized this was the biggest party they had ever fielded, a motley crew squatting in the open near the scruffy vehicles: worn out Agency shuttles, with plates stove in and antennas long ripped away; crawlers missing steering treads and patched up with steel belts of the wrong gauge; walkers missing whole legs, scarred and pitted and with passenger domes starred so badly nobody could see out — equipment nearly as bad as their suits themselves, which wheezed as they moved, gushing air from pop-lines that their organic sealants flowed into and filled up, only to open again on the next step, their sour suit air snapping as it gushed out and froze and fell at their feet. They watched him steadily, without comment amongst themselves. Some worked and some rested. They stayed a good distance away from the big blue-and-red Eagle which paced at the brow

of the hill, watching the plain beyond and ignoring the milling men at its back.

"Today I think three parties," Petrovich said to the Colonel. "That parallel set of valleys — Major will take the left, I the right. Simple —"

"I think not," Colonel Lopez said. "This is not a military maneuver. If it comes when we are nearby it will not attack a flank or bother with which way we are deployed. It doesn't care."

"I mean to —"

"We will proceed in parallel valleys. I will take the left. Keep pace."

Petrovich had been telling the new men what to do and it had gone to his head. He turned red but said nothing.

Major Sanchez put in, "The boy and Old Matt, they'll be slower with that e-beam on foot. I could stay with 'em, take —"

Colonel Lopez said, "They stay in the main party. There are a lot of us. We'll give the thing plenty of confusion, all us helling around. Maybe help those two make a shot."

Petrovich cut in abruptly, "Are we pruning muties out here or —"

"Of course," the Colonel said. "Of course we are. You had something else in mind?" He grinned at Major Sanchez and Petrovich swallowed his anger, seeing it was no use.

And so they set out as usual, though no one believed this was an ordinary day. The Hiruko man had checked with Central and found a report of the Aleph a good fifteen hundred kilometers from them, five days before, and since then nothing. But the odds were meaningless out here and each man who rode or walked in the clanking, rumbling column felt that this day would be long and would leave them different than they had been. None of them expected to succeed, to change the balance between men and Aleph.

Manuel watched Eagle running out ahead of them all, eager, head down as if listening to the ground, the powdery snow melting off it from the heat, its intricate articulating legs and treads scrambling and surging over black ice, shattering stubs and outcroppings as it passed, leaving a track almost as if it were a smaller version of what it hunted. Inside Eagle were heart and blood and perhaps lungs, maintained by the machines which also served to exaggerate and amplify its movements, so that in essence the soft inner zone was a fulcrum from which came the single intent focus of the thing, a concentration unlike a man or an animal but more consuming, more pure, filled with the will to endure and strain and carry on until it could overtake and strike and slay. It was not Old Matt's or his own or anybody's, never could be, for it had been launched into a space beyond humanity, so far that it could not even report back and would forever now be silent, known only by its passion and remorseless desire. The boy felt a terror then, sitting in the cab of the crawler and watching Eagle, a fear different but with a muted flavor of the coppery

hot in it. It was then that he understood what Old Matt had made in order to come this far: a thing between them and the Aleph, possessed of qualities both had but at bottom a thing strange and new, bereft of the Aleph's seasoned age and rising, deformed, from the churn of life.

The emptiness claimed them. They explored stark fresh gorges, flushed scooters and rockjaws and jackrabs, cutting out the muties and flaming them, or Eagle running them down, or the men potting at the scattering, panicky forms with their lasers and stunners. Old Matt rode on the side deck of the crawler and watched. Manuel paced alongside, worried at the placid fatigue of the old man, wanting to take a few shots with the e-beam but cautioned, when he picked it up, to save the bolts for when they alone would have a chance. Their crawler was the first, instead of the Colonel's or the Major's. In effect Old Matt led the party, peering forward at the gradually lightening ravines and peaked hills as the Sun broke over the far ridge line and cut blue shadows across the land.

An hour out, a mutie rockjaw did not scatter with its pack but instead jumped one of the new men. It tripped him and leaped onto his helmet as he fell. The man shouted and struck at it and rolled sideways to get it off. Somehow the thing pried open a helmet port. Vapor spurted from the helmet, blinding the man for a moment. Major Sanchez tore the rockjaw off and stomped it and beat it with his stunner. By the time they killed it the man had got the vent closed himself, but the insulator had broken down. His eyelids were frozen shut. That meant somebody had to lead him back to camp for treatment. It sobered a few of the new ones who had never seen a mutie turn like that before.

"Goddamn bad splice, you ask me, if just a li'l change an' the sunbitch goes for you. Some genetic drift, you ask me." The man who said this sat beside Manuel and the old man for the next few clicks, resting his weapon on the iron runners and trying to look like he was surveying the terrain ahead for game, but too jittery to keep his eyes on the horizon for long.

"Got to happen," Old Matt murmured.

"How's 'at?"

"Hiruko tunes them to spread out, go for the right chemicals, breed. Determined, single-minded little inventions. Armored against radiation. Bound to happen, now that some of the chemicals in the melt are running out. Competition. Natural selection's awful fast here."

"That keeps up, won't be safe to walk aroun' alone."

"It was us jumped them, remember."

"Huh. Huh." The man moved uneasily, as if just catching onto the idea that this was different from an amusement sim. After a few more clicks he got off and went back to find a friend near the rear of the column.

Beyond the far ridgeline an orange glow grew brighter. It was the ionized blowoff from a fusion heater. The crawler moved only a kilometer a day but the stream of gas and liquid it vented washed out gullies and

flooded the plains below. The Colonel moved the columns down a side ravine and into another system of valleys, to keep away from the mess. Rockjaws and scooters fled the floods as well, and the men spotted muties among them in the herds that poured out of the ravines and into the broad open land beyond. They ploughed forward, the excitement seizing the so that men in pursuit of the single fleeing forms they spread out, firing rapidly at the targets that dodged into the temporary shelter of craters or scrambled, panicky, into box cañons and dead-end ravines. They scrabbled frantically and mindlessly at the ice walls, dragging malformed limbs, eyes rattling in their wedge-shaped heads, shrieking and dying even as mere meters away the normal rockjaws and scooters browsed among the ponds of melt, some so dumb they did not even notice the drama, at turns both comic and tragic, that swirled around them.

The animals raged among the muties as well, running them down and crushing them beneath clanking treads. Eagle was far out in front, leading without thinking of it, following the game as the muties heard the thin cries of their fellows down the valley and began to run away, some even back toward the higher ravines where now flash floods came down, gushing out onto the plain. Foam frothed on the surface of the grimy torrent as it carried ice chunks and stones fanning out over sheets of purple ice. The men stayed ahead of the surging streams easily, loping steadily, guns at the ready, watching the shadows for the deformed shapes. Eagle never made a mistake, never ran down or clubbed a norm. Some of the animals in their high spirits did, though, and the Colonel would see it even in the midst of the on-rolling chaos — the best day they had had in a long while, rich with game and enough to make the blood sing — and would send a sharp rebuke to the offending animal, which days later would mean a day without food or sexsenso or some other punishment.

Manuel left the crawler and took part, not trying to outdistance the others, taking what clean shots he could. Old Matt stayed behind with the e-beam and so got nothing beyond a panicky stray that would have run under the crawler treads out of pure fear-blindness anyway. The old man was content to sit and watch as the crawler made its sluggish way down the broad valley, a slow bulk amid the dot-like figures of men who swarmed like bees, first on one target and then another, their excited calls and shouts coming to the boy and blending with the higher keening yelps and clicks of the animals, all the voices layering and overrunning each other until the comm rang and clamored.

Manuel waded through rivulets of the dirty water. It steamed away or gurgled into cracks. Some muties were so addled that they kept slurping at the runoff even though the hunt was storming past, the thumps and snaps of men firing clear in the air. Manuel shot a few of these. He felt a current surge and suck at his ankles and moved to his left, toward higher

ground to get out of the main channel, but it got worse, and when he paused to look up the nearest ravine, puzzled, he saw the whole sweep of water turning toward, him, gathering momentum, deepening, sheets of the evaporating grime-shot foam sliding off a rising mound of ice and rock that, as he watched it, split along a seam with a dull thunder that pulled his feet from under him and slammed his shoulder hard against a boulder, pitching him face forward into the sludge.

"Jesus Christos!" someone shouted.

The boy got to his knees, smearing the filth from his faceplate, and peered upward toward the still-rising bulge of splintering groaning rock, the cracks spreading like a black spider web out from the high ground. Boulders trumbled into the yawning jagged openings.

Old Matt called, "Manuel! Here!" amid a rising jumble of noises as the animals yipped and the men shouted and the ground surged again, throwing the boy down as he took his first step toward the crawler a full two kilometers away across the buckling ice.

"Slide!" someone shouted. "Whole mountain's coming down!" but the boy got up and began to run toward the crawler, which was at higher ground, rather than away, down the valley. Old Matt was already unlash-ing the e-beam snout and wrestling with the long manifold. Manuel leaped high to keep above the creaking, surging land, landing and jumping again as fast as he could, pushing his servos to their maximum, running to reach the old man and the weapon, not even taking time to look down the valley and check for his father, nor especially to look behind him at the sudden roar of something breaking to the surface, ripping the ice, for he knew already what he would see.

Manuel scrambled up onto the deck of the crawler. Old Matt had the e-beam projector powered-up and calibrated, his worn face intent upon the dials in the stock of the weapon, ignoring the buckling and heaving of the ground nearby. Manuel picked up the e-beam gun, hefting it, still not looking back at the source of the wrenching that he could feel through his boots, even standing on the crawler. Instead he gazed out over the plain, looking downvalley at the fleeing and now-ignored forms of the scooters and rockjaws. The frantic mindless stream swept past the men, who came loping back toward the slower crawlers and walkers, each of them un-shouldering weapons and some already taking a practice aim during the long arcs of their strides, squinting through telescopic sights. Then the boy turned.

It was huge this time. The amber flanks crushed boulders as big as men as a long rhomboid section of the Aleph surged out of the erupted ice. It wallowed, pulling buttressed ribs free of the hole it bored. Groinwork appeared, rasping and screeching against slabs of nickel-iron from an-

cient meteorites. The rust-laced layers held, resistant for a long moment, and then crumbled with a muffled boom.

The Aleph juttred abruptly into the air, turning as the boy watched, and from the highest buttressed shoulder sprouted a twisted thing, moist like a stalagmite — angular, jade-green, writhing, first a knifelike blade that refracted the pinpoint sun into a splash of colors, and then swiftly becoming something gnarled and seething, sopping the light into dark crevices, and just as suddenly the angles of it smoothed and the projection had a bloblike head, a waving stump that might be an arm, a scooped-out cavity that might be a mouth except that as it grew it consumed the head and ate the neck, turning the thing into a body that vainly, hopelessly grew short thick legs and began to make slow sluggish motions as if it were running in a thick, resistant fluid, even as its upper half was chewed and gnawed away — and abruptly, electrically, crystal facets shot through the whole of it, long tracings of embedded glinting silver that centered on the chest and fanned out into struggling, fresh-forming arms. The chest-centered web extended as the body fought, flailing, and the thin lines sank into the legs, glowing with inner light. Just then the Aleph moved, bending down toward the ground as it freed itself from the last clasp of dark ice. This movement carried the writhing extrusion out of the boy's sight.

He had seen all this in one quick glimpse, scarcely the space between two heartbeats. He blinked, and the shouting milling voices came flooding in on him again, the comm choked with hoarse orders and exclamations and a radio hiss and swearing in three languages, "Goddamn shoulda knowed it'd come up on us just when" and "*schliessen Sie mit*" and "over to the left it's goin' that way" and "Christos, safety's jammed on this thing" and "get yer butt in close it'll flatten you out Lefkowitz I'm tellin' ya" and "isn't a safety on that stunner at all you're pullin' out the reflex coil you jackass" and "that thing's bigger than the pictures for sure it musta growed" and "damned if I'm gonna get any closer" and "you Hiruko guys so hardass let's see you corner it" and "Goddamn! Lookit! Goddamn!" and "circle round on it give it a taste see how it likes a double-bore hey" and more, all blending into a babble the boy cut off sharp by punching off his comm line. He stared up at the Aleph, now fully exposed in the clear thin air, soaring above the tossed and tortured ice. It jerked free, the huge alabaster blocks of it working against each other with a deep bass groaning. Then it simply hung a full meter above the jumbled land, unmoving, supported invisibly.

"Taking its time," Old Matt said matter-of-factly, touching helmets with the boy.

"Why doesn't it *do* something," Manuel whispered.

"Doesn't have to."

"It should *run*."

"From us?"

"No, no, but . . . Before, it was always going. Moving."

"So? Just 'cause we hunt it, doesn't mean it's agreed to be hunted."

The boy had always dreamed of it in motion, ceaseless and yet stationary like a running river that changes and is still always the same. Moving, and big, and now it seemed larger by far than when he had first seen it years ago. He thumbed on his magneto detectors and saw overlaid on his viewplate the corona of arching magnetic fields, a halo around the thing that — the scientists said — supported the bulk and gave off the soft curling spatters of radio noise that hissed on the comm lines.

"Nothing to shoot at," Manuel said.

"No openings, yes. Bad range from here, anyway. Let's get closer."

They jumped down from the crawler — the driver had stopped the treads and come up to the foredeck, staring — and began to walk, taking the curious long strides possible in low gravity. Manuel cradled the e-beam projector, deliberately keeping his pace slow so the old man could keep up, never taking his eyes from the hovering presence ahead. All down the valley the teams came closer, cautiously, weapons at the ready. Along the flanks of the Aleph more extrusions worked out of the amber blocks, writhing. Manuel tried to make sense of the forms but they came too fast, being born and dying with a restless energy that played and rippled across the inert, floating immensity. They caught and swallowed and warped the sunlight that struck them. Some seemed momentarily human while others became like misshaped animals or deformed creatures or perhaps machines, all coming into being and giving forth a burst of animated life and then sinking back into the stony surface, lost.

Manuel eyed the hulk as they got closer. He switched on his comm again and heard louder static and a few scattered weak voices. To his left Petrovich and Major Sanchez approached and, looking back, the boy saw knots of figures in the valley, men walking beside others, without the random directionless talk so usual on the comm, unconsciously coming together (as threads in a spider web converge as they near the focus), drawn by the slumbering mass that hung above the shattered plain.

"Hey!" someone shouted. It began to move. Manuel started running, bringing the muzzle up but finding no true target, leaving Old Matt behind.

The hulking, shadowy form began to drift, like a thing blown by an unfelt wind. The nervous darting extrusions subsided, muddied, blurred and were gone. Manuel ran faster. He heard a laser bolt crash. The ruby-red beam glanced off an alabaster hexagonal edge and hissed into the ice. It spewed up a dirty gout of steam where it struck, leaving a near-perfect rounded hole. Manuel opened his servos and went fast, blotting out the rising clamor and shouts over the comm. There were only a few men closer than him now and he passed the one who had fired — a

Fujimura mechanic, a still-frozen arm pointing where the bolt had gone, a face with skin stretched tight by a yawning black mouth, open and soundless and studded with dark crooked teeth.

He hit the ground and gathered for a high jump to get a better look. He was watching to see which way the Aleph would go and then without any transition at all he was skidding over the ice, face down. He smacked into a boulder and stopped, his right hip numb. Something had hit him from the side and bowled him over. He stood and saw it was Eagle, churning on, oblivious to the momentary obstruction that it had brushed aside. The boy glanced at the e-beam — the system diagnostics still winked green — and set off after Eagle, panting now.

The Aleph glided downslope, angling toward the distant valley walls, not toward or away from the gathering clumps of men but at an angle that selected no advantage, and ignored the hooting, shouting specks that converged on the wrecked land beneath it. It coasted, ghostlike. Eagle reached it then and drove in without pausing. The running thing looked slight and insubstantial as it leaped at the ponderous mass above. Eagle's claws grasped at the alabaster ribbing, scratching — and a chunk came away, turning pink at the fracture points, tumbling down with Eagle and striking the ice in a tangle with it. The boy stopped. He had never seen that before, seen a mere mortal thing rip the Aleph that way. He switched to his magneto detectors and saw what Eagle must have sensed — a fitful waxing and waning of the magnetic fields as the thing glided over the irregular ground, the fields seeking a grip on the iron beneath.

Eagle gathered itself and leaped again, arching into a gap that had not been there when it left the ground but opened as Eagle flew up, a flickering weakness that the churning muscular form shot through. It snatched at a ribwork and again tore off a fragment. The fields shifted again and slapped Eagle down, driving it into the ice. But it sprang up again without a pause, this time a little too late to exploit a momentary ebbing in the fluxlines that hung in the air — and the Aleph slowed. Turned. Set off downvalley, turning an amber flank to Eagle. The boy gasped, sucking in air — he had been holding his breath — and Petrovich shouted, "Look at! Made it change its mind!" and the men ran faster.

The Aleph picked up speed and moved away from Eagle. An animal — Manuel saw it was a servo'd dog — coming from the side, made bold perhaps by Eagle's attack, leaped at the moving mass. It too cut through a flickering ebb in the flux — it was impossible to tell whether by accident or design — but halfway to the Aleph a knot of magnetic turbulence struck it in the belly. The animal doubled over and the belly blew open in a spew of tubes and rods and blood-spattered parts. It sent out a brief startled yelp in the radio spectrum and fell and sprawled loosely on the ice beneath the still-moving, silent bulk.

Eagle was after it and leaped again and again at the Aleph as the two of them sped down a low slope. This time the attacks had no effect, as if the Aleph had learned better how to defend against this new thing. The men were coming at it from all sides now. Manuel still looked for an advantage, a target in the blank amber cubes. He breathed in the hot coppery taste strongly as he loped and squinted, panting heavily, his right hip now painful where Eagle had struck him. He heard the chorus of cries and orders and shouts over the comm build and surge as the men caught the meaning of Eagle's charge and the Aleph's continuing glide, spiritlike, over the hummocked terrain. It was not burrowing into the ice to elude them, no, it was running — not away from the men, nor toward them, but clearly in reaction to the thing that men had wrought, Eagle. They began to swarm and hack at it now, firing their bolts and double-bores at whatever piece of it they fancied, whooping and yelling to each other as they ran and milled and exclaimed and reloaded and laughed in newly released, unacknowledged fear.

Another animal came at the Aleph, going *chip-chip-chip*, loud and lunging, off balance. It leaped and something caught it partway and held it for just an instant. It broke apart in the air. The men did not notice the body fall. They came in closer, their weapons booming and crashing, potting at the alabaster slabs. Deep inside the blocks a mottled green now flowed. The shots inflicted no damage.

The Aleph was nearly to the valley wall and the men fired faster, knowing they would lose it soon. Manuel still saw no target and held back, not sure it was going to be of any use at all to wait but still unwilling to expend himself pointlessly the way the others did. He looked around for Old Matt. He had forgotten the old man and expected to see him far back, tired. He was surprised when his faceplate overlay showed Old Matt's pulsing blue dot close by. He waved and the dry, sandy voice called over comm, "Up here. Follow."

Manuel hesitated, wanting to follow the swarming shouting crowd that pursued. Old Matt did not wait for him but went bounding up a hillside. Manuel ran after him. The old man moved slower, but chose his short leaps well and made good progress. The boy saw that this way took them through an easy pass, then over a ridge line and along rumpled shelves of ice. Within moments he could no longer look back and see the valley floor. The e-beam threw him off balance as he ran through a clogged narrow gully. Then the two of them were headed down again, landing in the slide cones where the dirt and gravel cushioned their falls. They plunged on, slipping on half-thawed ground, splashing across a brook of water with cakes of frozen ammonia in the shallows, then scrabbling up the bank and on. Manuel heard Old Matt's long rattling gasping over the comm. They came out at the base of a long, high cliff. It was mostly rock, streaked with rusty seams and patches of conglomerate — pebbles, ice chips, lumps of

gray metallic ore.

They stopped there. Old Matt bent over, hands on his knees, coughing: slow, dry barks from deep in his chest.

"You, you want to go on? Maybe ease up, wait for the crawler? I can —"

"No. Wait. Wait here."

The old man would say no more, just bent over and waited for the wracking cough to pass. Manuel cursed himself for giving up a chance at a shot, a last minute or two of opportunity, to come here. Probably Old Matt had meant to get a better angle on the Aleph as it neared the hills, be able to shoot down on it where it might be less protected. But they'd got mixed up in these ravines and gullies and couldn't even see the plain. The Aleph was gone from the valley now for sure, vanished, so even if he went back it would be too —

The cliff shuddered. Stones fell and dust billowed. A tremor. The cliff exploded, showering them with pebbles. The tubular snout came first, grinding stone, extending out into empty space and then flexing down. The huge body followed, snaking, carrying fragments of the rusty rock. Its skin swirled now, patchy with blurred blues and greens deep in the amber. It erupted from the cliff in a last cascade of dirt and ice, and lowered to the flat plateau, still riding an insulating meter above the land. "Je — I — how'd you know it was comin' through to here? I thought —"

Old Matt waved the question aside. "Different," he said hoarsely, still panting heavily. He pointed. "It's different now."

"You mean the colors? I don't see . . ."

One of the patches resolved, solidified, darkened. It became a hole and the hole widened and something moved in it and abruptly the boy saw that the thing coming out was Eagle. The head worked free and then the hulking shoulders. Eagle struggled against the iris-ing lip, silent, and the wide-set black eyes locked on the men, not to ask for aid but as a remorseless mute statement it chose to make even at the moment when it surely felt what the men could see — the suddenly constricting grip that folded its left shoulder, buckled the main housing and the steel manifold, breaking the spinal reinforcement, crushing Eagle's big treads that ground against the amber walls. Only near the end did Eagle's hands stretch out and flail against the side, futilely, without hope but without surrender. Manuel stepped forward. Old Matt put a hand on his shoulder. Eagle struggled on. The great neck snapped. The eyes went blank. Eagle's head lolled and Manuel again stepped forward. The opening convulsed once, twice, and on the third time with a slithering sound it swallowed Eagle's body whole.

"I — I — damn! It just —" The boy shook with rage, crying out to no one but himself. "Eagle — got in — it didn't have to — damn! To just — damn!"

The Aleph moved, coasting toward the south, still floating a blithe distance from the ground.

"Eagle got in, had time to do some damage, maybe," Old Matt said. "That's what made the colors, made it open up those spots again."

"Yeah — yeah —" the boy gasped, mind churning. "To, to kill Eagle for, for —"

"Don't you worry about that end of it. Eagle didn't. You saw the look of him right there, the last second. Looked the same as ever. Mean as he ever was and not regretting it."

"I don't see . . ."

Old Matt gestured. "It's moving off down that way. Look."

Manuel studied the massive blocky shape, working its wedge-shaped collars and buttresses against each other as it glided, soundless and unhurried. Its surface still roiled with blue-black marks that came and went and, as he watched, one irised open.

"Still not done," Old Matt said. "Let's go."

They began to run again.

Old Matt went slower now. As they loped down a ravine the boy could see the lines of strain in the old worn face. Their slick suits bunched and stretched with amplified strength and Manuel saw the power gauge on Old Matt's back register nearly two-thirds gone. They scrambled over outcroppings of layered stone — rock laid down in the first days when Ganymede's raw crust was melting and freezing and remelting under the long hammering, when Jupiter glowed with its own accreting fires, and on the moons brief waters flowed to form fast-dying, steaming seas. They had to go slow on the slippery hillsides. The Aleph steadily widened the gap between them. Manuel checked his overlay and saw they were running parallel to the main valley. The blue shotgun pattern of dots told him the main party was spreading through the neighboring arroyos and cañons.

"Funny it doesn't burrow in," he called to Old Matt. "Never saw it above ground this long before."

"I have. Twice."

"Figure it's having fun with us?"

"Doubt if it knows what we are, even."

"It knew Eagle, all right," he said with sharp pride.

The old man panted into his suit mike. "That it did. That it did."

He watched Old Matt as they loped after the serenely coasting ghost-like form. There was something in the old face now. It was neither excitement nor eagerness nor hope. Years later, when he was a man, the boy would realize finally what it had been: a blend of foreknowledge and of a certain deliberate, grim determination. Old Matt had known some-

thing unspoken, back then when he first saw Eagle, and had made of the furious burning anger in Eagle something that, fashioned, could reach farther and strike at something in the Aleph. He had known and been pulled forward by the knowing, giving himself each year to learn a little more. *He had no share, no fraction of a Settlement*, Manuel would think then. *There were children, his own from decades before, but all of them scattered to other outposts or even back Earthside. That part of him was dispersed. He had spent his time and his substance in the orbital labs or on explorer teams or at Titan and Saturn when they were just opening it up out there. So he never posted a bond or filed a term agreement and affidavit of intention, and so had no part of the land that he could nail down or lay claim to. He could live and work and earn in Sidon, at fill-in jobs. He even had a vote, but still was not a commune member and in sum had nothing of the territory other than what he sensed of it. He had known it before a foot had fallen on every hill, before centuries of brawling humanity wrote their name across it with Settlements and Centrals. But despite all that he returned again and again to the land beyond man's enclaves, still felt its emptiness and unresolved potentiality.*

Manuel called to his father, got an answer he could not understand, and ran on. Then the Aleph dove into a hillside. It did not pause or even slow, just necked into a wall of ice and through it, boring on with a grinding and a booming.

"Hell! It's going under," Manuel shouted, and slowed, but Old Matt said nothing, just kept running down the cañon. Manuel paused, panting, watching the last of the Aleph disappear into the still-splintering ice, tumbling boulders from the hillside, making the ground tremble and buck.

He heaved a sigh of defeat and slapped his side in irritation. He had lugged the e-beam this far and never fired it. He swore at his stupidity. He was starting to tire and the best chance yet, the best chance he had ever heard of, had dribbled away, with never the right angle or distance for a decent shot. Maybe he should have fired anyway. Then at least he could have said he had done something, given it a try. But even as he thought it he knew that was nonsense, that shooting not for the target but for the talking afterward about it was wrong and would make the whole thing taste cheap in his mouth for a long time after. So he just stood there and swore.

When he looked around after a minute the old man was clean gone. He checked the overlay and set out after him, feeling even more stupid than before. Old Matt's blue dot was angling around a bunch of low hills. Manuel set off and ran hard. He took long, high leaps, depending on his gyros to get him oriented right before he landed. Once he came down amongst a pack of rockjaws. They scattered in mad flight though the boy hardly saw them. In five minutes he had nearly caught up with the figure,

was only a few hundred meters behind, when a hillside broke open and the Aleph erupted from it, moving as before with constant, indifferent gliding velocity.

"Manuel!" It was his father. He looked to the north and picked out the swift figures of the main party, converging. "We guessed you were following it. Last we saw, Eagle —"

"I know. Eagle's dead."

There was talk from the men as they came loping across the broad flat land. Manuel automatically waited for his father, loping a little to the west to keep near the Aleph, which was speeding on. More than ten clicks away an ice mesa reared up in its path, sunlight catching the ruddy peaks. The Aleph might be heading for it or the mesa might just be in the way, but if the Aleph bored through it the men would have to take a long route around and Manuel knew Old Matt was not up to that. He was getting tired now, too. Over the comm he could hear panting from the running men.

"It's movin' pretty damn fast," a voice called.

Another said, "Yeah, looks to be pickin' up speed."

"Too fast, you, *los ricos* wi' your extra servos maybe you keep up wi' it but we can't —"

Petrovich shouted, "You wanting to drop out, go back get crawlers!"

Some swearing.

"You guys been jawing while this boy's been runnin' down the damn thing."

"Yeah, right."

"Uh huh just a kid."

"The old man too."

"Si' they been showin' us their heels all day."

"Come on, you bastards!"

"It's only got a click on us."

"Not gonna let that old man run you inna ground are ya? Ha?"

And the straggled-out bunches of men pulled together and began to run again in earnest, filling the comm with their harsh taunts to each other, their heavy gasping breaths as some sped out in front, spilling pellmell across the plain, their clamor and din swelling as ceramic and steel scraped and joined, propelling them on in a wedding of man, machine and movement.

"Don't let the animals near it," Colonel Lopez shouted. "They'll get snapped in pieces."

A voice grunted, "Damn sure I'm not goin' 'at close either," and a chorus of agreement came.

Major Sanchez called out, "Try to turn it!" though how anyone could do that he did not say, and no one asked.

By now the boy had caught up with Old Matt and saw the leathery face

turn toward him, eyes bright, a thin dry smile on the lips, the copper of his cheek flecked with sweat. "You'll have to . . . hit it . . . on the run," the old man called out.

"How? I, I, those openings are small, I —"

"Get up close," was all Old Matt said, and then they both landed at the end of a leap and were off again, coming up alongside the smoothly gliding form. Manuel watched the crackling magnetic flux fork and dance around it, and studied it for advantage. Pockets opened and closed, but too fast for him to do anything about them. Eagle had been faster. Eagle had known the vulnerable warpings and had used them instantly, without the numbing fear that came on him now, a spreading chill that robbed nerves and muscles of vital split-seconds.

"Stay back from it, Son!" but he pressed forward as he saw a blue whirlpool-like splotch form near a tangle of arcing red magnetic field lines. He raised the snout of the beam projector and as the blue melted into greenish dabs he fired. The bolt cut a slim, impossibly straight line through the thin air, landed with a shower of orange sparks, a full three centimeters wide of the mark, and flew off to the right, harmless.

"Ah! Ah!" he spat out in self-disgust. And fired again. This came nearer but still ricocheted off in a flower of sparks, some of them glancing off the boy's arm, he was that close.

The Aleph was like a moving building to the boy and he jumped back as it turned first toward him, as if to shrug him off one of the huge shoulders, and then away, rising a meter more from the ice. It towered over him and the blue-green vortex faded. He refused to give ground. It accelerated away and the boy was after it in three fast leaps, eyes searching, Old Matt's voice in his ear. "We got to turn him more!" and the boy saw the old man was on his left, craning his neck to look at the underbelly of the thing. The grainy amber roiled with flecks and seams of washed-out colors, as if something liquid churned just inside the skin, but the ponderous blocks looked solid and hard like deep rock, too.

"One's starting over here!" Old Matt called, and lunged forward, pointing at a vortex swirl of mottled colors. A condensing magnetic knot came out of the whirlpool and struck him in the chest and he went down. It laced up his chest and around his head, a snakelike swarming tangle of interthreading ruby flux lines, arcing and licking at him. Manuel saw him slump and go on his knees. But the boy also caught the vortex colors deepening and swung the snout toward them. He fired. Missed. Thumbed the stock to recharge the capacitors. And looked for Old Matt. The magnetic knot had started to ebb, withdrawing into the Aleph. Old Matt was still down, not moving. The boy leaped forward, further under the vast weight that worked and labored, and raised the projector again and shot directly into the thing at close range, the quick yellow stream crackling as it found the entrance. The churning dark colors sopped it up.

It was swallowed, gone, the whole bolt sucked in. Manuel backed off, gasping, and the Aleph smoothly kept on. He saw he had done nothing. He dropped the projector and bent over Old Matt, who was on hands and knees and gasping, eyes closed, mouth open and salivating.

"You, can you, can I get you —"

"I'm . . . okay. Okay. Keep after it."

Manuel studied the creased tired face for a long moment and then nodded and got to his feet, sighed, picked up the projector, checked the winking diagnostics, looked up —

The Aleph was down. It was on the ice, barely moving. The aura of magnetic flux faded and flickered out as the boy watched.

He yelped in sheer exuberance. The Aleph looked even bigger on the ground, cracking the ice where its great ribwork slid and stopped, slid and stopped.

A hand clapped him on the shoulder and he turned, expecting Old Matt, but it was his father. "*Jésus Christos*," the Colonel said. "Something inside, some electromagnetic thing must have failed."

"It's crawling!" Petrovich broke in. "You got it crawling! The foot thing, see. Treads on other side too."

The long cone came down sluggishly, stolidly, stamping its blunted point into the ice. As the Aleph turned the men could see the treads bite in and push it forward, smacking and splitting the ice and rock in rhythm with the conical extrusion that struck and punched, struck and punched, leaving the delta-shaped print. Manuel felt the ground shake as the Aleph inexorably shoved itself forward, no longer serenely skating above the rough raw land that was the province of mere men and their lanky, scrambling, awkward legs. He stared. It was as massive as he had ever dreamed, and now that he saw it wounded and still struggling on with the same deliberate immemorial energy, as ruthless with itself as it had been with others, he knew it was undiminished by mere injury and still possessed the thing he sought.

Old Matt stood shakily. He merely nodded once, abrupt and final, a thin drawn smile slowly spreading until it reached the metal of him.

The men were yelling and pounding Manuel on the back and raising their stunners and lasers into the air and in his ears the human voices rang and clamored like the yips and cries of the animals, echoing on themselves and filling the air of the caked plain, seeming to reflect and reform and amplify, until the rousing volley of noise fed and built and a shot boomed, then another, now more — lasers and stunners and double-bores all raking the sides of the laboring thing that kept on, oblivious, as now bits and pieces of it began to fly off where the stronger laser bolts hit, alabaster chips spinning away into the clear air, stunners rippling the space between the milling shouting men and their target, shots steaming off the ice and vaporizing rock and splashing against the intricate groining where

colors pinwheeled still. In a moment Manuel stood alone and the fifty-odd men of the party had spread out, firing and running, circling around it.

"Stop! Cease fire!" Colonel Lopez shouted, once, then again, then a third time as his words began to have effect.

"It's still *movin'*," a man called.

"You're just chippin' away at it," Old Matt said weakly. "Do no good. Won't even slow it down."

A man shouted, "Ha! Chippin' he says! We'll see 'bout that," and he made to raise his stunner.

Colonel Lopez was on the man before he could fire, slapping the weapon down. "We'll see, eh? You on this, you follow what's good for us all, use your head, *Si*?"

"Well I don't see as —"

"It's not going fast," Major Sanchez said. "We got time to think."

"Think what? Shooting it's all we can do," a man from Hiruko said.

"Yeah," another man put in, "us all shootin', maybe we wear it down."

"No," Petrovich said. "E-beam in the dark spots, that works. Nothing else has, ever."

"Right," Old Matt said.

"Those spots, there aren't many of them," Major Sanchez said, gesturing. There were few of the deeper mottled patches now. They moved in a slow whirlpool churn, deep in the blocks and collars and buttresses of it.

"Hard to hit," a man said. Others murmured and grumbled. None of them had e-beams. They were poor agro laborers, mostly, minimum-share men, and they wanted to be able to say they had shot the thing on this day and maybe even done something important. "We could sit here forever, waitin' for a —"

"Manuel's hit it already," Major Sanchez said.

Petrovich said, "Yes, too much risk he's taken. Enough for one day. I do the next."

"I'd say I know more about projectors," Major Sanchez said mildly.

Colonel Lopez said, "Knowing projectors isn't it."

"Yes," Petrovich said. "Is hitting at right time that is important. You saw the boy."

"*Si*," Major Sanchez said.

A Fujimura Settlement man demanded, "Seems like that e-beam oughtta be shared out."

"Yeah, common property, like."

"Only one, seems like should take turns."

"Come all this way, don' get a chance 'less they give us turns at —"

"*Quiet!*" the Colonel shouted. "You're not getting anything by whining for it." He glowered at the men and some steam went out of the discussion.

Someone said quietly, "Still, we got to decide."

Petrovich said, "The boy, he has whole rest of life to hunt."

"So what?" an agro man put in. "He's earned it. Him an' the old one."

Major Sanchez said, "Could be. Dangerous, though."

Manuel had been quiet, waiting to see which way the talk would go, but now sensing what his father felt, he spoke up: "Old Matt deserves a try. It's already hurt him some."

Heads nodded, the crowd murmured agreement.

Old Matt said nothing, just took the projector and hefted it and ran the winking diagnostics through their cycle. The men watched the Aleph as it labored across the hummocked ground, making fair speed but still a long way from the jutting mesa.

"Why didn't it burrow?" Major Sanchez asked.

"Hurt," Petrovich said. "Needs time to fix self, maybe."

"Crawl away like an animal?" Colonel Lopez said. "No. It's no kind of creature at all."

But the thing did have a valiant look to it now, wounded and still keeping on with its same remorseless energy, its deep drive to be forever moving.

Old Matt started forward, moving too with a slow indomitable certainty, almost ceremonial, but hampered by the awkward bulk he carried. "I'll help him with that," Manuel called out and ran after him.

The men spread out instinctively, forming a sweeping line as their ancestors had a million years before, a good way to flush game from thickets and run it where they wanted. They overtook the lumbering Aleph easily and the ragged line wrapped around, surrounding it. The pile-driving conical thing shook the ground, stamping furiously, and the great body swayed and creaked and groaned with its gravid immemorial momentum.

"Have to get in close," the old man said.

Manuel followed, carrying the projector. He watched for the blue-green motes that flickered across the flat faces. The motes swam as though the men were seeing them projected on a screen by some interior source of brilliant light, so strong it could illuminate through rock. His mouth filled with the hot coppery taste, now laced with an oily fatigue.

The two of them walked cautiously into the shadow of it. A hexagonal segment rocked from side to side. The land shook and heaved. Manuel gravely gave the projector to Old Matt and saw the deep creases in his dark face, saw the haggard resolve there, and did not understand the thin, quiet smile.

"One good bolt will do it," the boy said, and felt absurd, giving advice. The old man nodded, still smiling, as bare meters away a great flat side like a wall hammered at the land and to the rear the cone jabbed and a fresh delta-print appeared, sunk deep in the rock, steaming.

"Watch for me," Old Matt said.

The boy flicked his eyes across the long profile of the Aleph, trying to anticipate where the next blue-green swirl would come, and for a while rested his hand on Old Matt's shoulder, as if restraining him from going closer, encased in the extended moment, sure that if they waited until the right glancing instant —

Blue-green flecks united just above, at a corner, rapidly grew, split into two larger mottled round dark openings —

"There!" Manuel shouted.

Old Matt got the snout up and fired at a forming spot. The yellow bolt lashed at the edge of it, showering gaudy orange sparks down on them.

"Get it?" Manuel cried. Old Matt shook his head. He fired again. The discharge boomed in the thin air. *Another near miss*, the boy thought, but he could not tell exactly and a green electric aura now flickered at the mouth of the opening.

The shaking struggling mountain rocked harder, shuddered, boomed, and leaned over toward them. "It's —" and the boy tried to pull Old Matt back, away, seeing the Aleph tip further, the laboring blocks struggling all along its length. Old Matt lurched away, intent, and raised the projector toward the teetering wall. The boy shouted, "Wait — get out —"

Too late. The Aleph fell. Half-turned to run, Manuel saw the spreading dark blue patch plunge toward him and at the last instant felt a spongy clasp around him as he cringed, braced hopelessly against the weight —

And was encased in a muffled silence, utterly black, even as he felt the shattering crash of the Aleph's impact through his boots that still stood on the ice, while the rest of him had entered this cottony blank emptiness. He was inside the blue portal; it had fallen on him. He reached out for support and found nothing but a slickness, a resistance that brushed his grip aside and imparted some momentum to him.

He felt his boots leave the ice. Lifted —

He called out but his comm gave nothing but a hornet's buzz of static. Ahead — he knew he moved, but could not tell how — a green glow rippled and forked into the mouths of tunnels. He was gliding down a tube. Something dark scissored regularly in the diffuse light and he saw it was a pair of legs, a human form turning in the glow, and as he came closer he saw it was Old Matt, one arm up in what might be a wave, the helmet lit only by the wan green luminescence.

As Old Matt turned the boy saw the face for an instant, uncreased and pale, smiling, looking straight at him with eyes unblinking. Old Matt said something, his lips moving slowly, silent, so the boy could try to make out the words, but a dull roar came into the tunnels then and disturbed his concentration. He was now smoothly passing by Old Matt in the glow, so he raised a hand and waved in a timeless gliding moment, and then he felt a push, a gathering acceleration, and with rushing speed fell away from

the still-turning silent form. He blinked, struggled against unseen forces, and heard random crisp noises swelling as if he were coming closer, yells, swearing —

Dark ice rushed at him and he hit solidly, painfully, rolling, pinwheeling, arms flailing, voices shouting as pandemonium burst in on him. He fetched up against a boulder, slamming his shoulder into it, purpling his vision — gasped, and for a moment could not get his hands and feet under him to get up.

He clutched against the boulder and stood. He was a dozen meters away from the Aleph and could make out the gouge in the ice where he had hit, falling straight down from a yawning green opening in a hexagonal collar. He'd left skid marks. The Aleph lay absolutely still and silent. It rested on ice that had cracked beneath it. The conical delta-puncher was cocked halfway up in the air, pointing at the horizon.

Men ran back and forth around the Aleph, hooting and jabbering and yelling to each other all sorts of claims — “Didja see ’at one I got it smack inna head” despite the fact that the Aleph had nothing you could call a head, and “Shot it three times three good uns” and “— figure it was me an’ Raul did it, see we timed our bolts so they hit together on that big rib cage up ’ere” and “damned if I did’n know it, soon’s we opened fire when it was buckin’ aroun’, the sucker just gives up, that’s all it took was some more shootin’ —” and “just wore it out is all, nobody’s run it down the way we have, kept after it steady” and so on, the boy standing dazed as this washed over him and the throbbing ache spread in his shoulder. A Hiruko man jumped up on the grey flank of it and stamped down as if to test how solid it was, and yelled “One small step for a man!” and laughed and climbed on up to the top of the buttress, toting his stunner and jabbing at the buttress with his boots. Manuel gazed around. It looked to him as if he had been dropped about a hundred meters from where he and Old Matt had been. He started walking back that way and that was when he saw the crowd. They were standing around two figures on the ground. One of them was large, an animal. The other was a man, lying face down on the ice and not moving. It was Old Matt.

Manuel stumbled forward and pushed his way through the men crowded around. A jagged tear ran down Old Matt’s suit from shoulder to hip. Somebody had slapped an instant patch on it and through the translucent gauze Manuel could see blood oozing out. The suit was raked all down one side, too, with shreds of it hanging out and insulation showing and fluids dripping. Gingerly Petrovich rolled Old Matt part-way over. There was no damage to the front of the suit. The face was leached of color and the eyes were closed. His backpack showed life functions weak but steady.



"Did he hit on something when he came out?" Manuel asked.

Major Sanchez stared at him. "Came out? It crushed him when it rolled over."

"No, we both got picked up by it. It fell over on us. The openings, they sucked us in. *Madre*. That must be how Eagle got trapped inside, too."

The men looked at him without comprehension. Colonel Lopez said, "Old Matt's been here all the time."

"No! I saw him inside. Then the thing, it spat us out again."

Petrovich shook his head rapidly. "It started rolling over, we shot. I saw. Aleph hit the old man —" he smacked two fists together — "threw like rag doll."

"No, it had us both. Inside. It must've carried me longer, that's all. I *saw* him in there."

The men stared at him again blankly. His father said, "Look son, you're shaky. Sit down, take a stim pack. I got to deal with this right now."

Manuel peered down at Old Matt and tried to remember just what the old man had looked like inside. The same, only not hurt. He was going to say something more when a man came up to him and said emphatically, "Finito!"

"Uh, what? Finite?"

"*Finito*." The man drew a finger across his neck.

"Finished?" Manuel gazed at the hulking inert mass. "I . . . guess so."

Another man broke in with, "Uh, 'at thing — it's got some systems up, but most of 'em are hopeless."

"What? What thing?" Manuel looked to where the man was gesturing. The animal lying nearby was badly mangled. He walked unsteadily over to it, halfway knowing what he would find.

Eagle's head was intact but the neck turned at a wrong angle. The strong steel-jacketed trunk was mashed and leaking pus-colored fluid. Something had shredded and ripped its treads.

"We got to get it back to camp," Manuel said.

Petrovich had followed him. "Now Eagle, it did come out — *poof*, like you. Maybe that's what you saw in there?"

Manuel shook his head.

Petrovich said, "Not good chance for this one."

"Animal like this, you can save it if you don't let the cold get into it or the systems lose minimum power." Manuel wasn't talking to Petrovich. He stared at the crushed Eagle and didn't seem to notice when other men came up and said something, marveling at the damage and how long Eagle had lived in there. Major Sanchez said, "Look at it, all that time, and being carried along and all."

"Where's a crawler?" Manuel said abruptly. He went over to his father. "We need two, three crawlers."

The Colonel said, "I sent Fuentes back. Already radioed them."

"He, he's bleeding in there." Manuel stood and watched the bright red seep out of Old Matt. Without a pressure dome there was nothing any of them could do but stand there and watch it.

Petrovich said, "No leaks, I checked. But don't like his temperature."

"He's bleeding."

"Not so bad."

"Not so bad, *Goddamn*. He hasn't got much in him. He's worn out already."

"Shock is worst. Worse than bleeding." Petrovich said it flatly, not coloring the facts with the sound of his voice.

Manuel paced restlessly between the two clusters of men. The bulk of the Aleph loomed over them like a ridge of rock thrust up from the ice. Motionless, it seemed a piece of the broken terrain. Manuel looked at it for a moment, not thinking of anything but merely trying to take in the enormity of the great bulk now still and dead, free at last of its duty. He tried to think of what had happened but could not. There was a deadness in him. Then the harsh sounds of the men yelling and scrambling over the Aleph brought him back from the empty part of him and he went to his father. "Which way the crawlers coming?"

"They have to go around through some ravines," the Colonel said. He showed his son the route on the map overlay.

"That'll take too long."

"Two hours, I'd say. Petrovich thinks —"

"I'll carry him. Go up over this ridgeline here. Meet them down where the cañon necks. Cut the time in half."

"Carry him? Son, you're tired out. I can't —"

"Let's ask Petrovich if it'll hurt him."

"You'll do as I . . ." Colonel Lopez paused, looking at his son for a moment while the boy gazed off at the crumpled form of the old man. Then he went and asked and Petrovich thought about it and said maybe so, if Manuel took it easy, no jumps, just climbing the ridge and then coming down the far side easy, nothing fast —

"Good. Good," Manuel said.

Major Sanchez got him a power reserve pack from one of the Hiruko men who had a spare. The man argued for a while about giving it up until he saw the scowls around him. The boy did not think badly of the man; without that reserve the march back would be a long labor of sweat and ache. He ignored everyone and concentrated on slinging a harness to carry the body in his arms. He secured it against jolts with a strap around his neck. His father watched and knew with a mild surprise that it would do no good to say anything. In that moment of letting go of his son he passed into a new time, and began to accumulate a sadness and an anger fueled by loss that he would not feel consciously for months to come.

Manuel picked up the old man carefully. He glanced at the circle of faces without recognition, saying nothing in reply to the advice and warnings, already turned inward and preparing himself, and then turned and set off at a steady pace, taking each step with a rolling gait to cushion the body. He stopped once, a kilometer away, to look back and get his bearings. It seemed he was gazing back over a great distance. The men were shrunken dots, random specks milling about the flanks of an enormous carcass.

He started up the slopes of loose gravel and rock shelves. As he rose and could see further he realized how far they had run. He did not think about what had happened but just kept on, concentrating on the gently swaying loose-limbed body. Once Old Matt opened his eyes and looked up at the black sky for a time, and then shifted himself minutely, the eyes gazing out at Manuel, liquid and glistening in the pale yellow sunlight.

Manuel tramped stolidly along the rocky ridgeline. He watched clouds boiling up from the south where a fusion aura glowed, yellowing the vapors. The banks of moisture roiled and tumbled over each other and grew blue-bellied. They soared over the ridge, rising, and then a rain came down, bringing a false dusk that made the boy go slower so as to be sure of his footing. The first hour passed. The body creaked in his arms. He covered sixteen clicks on the level ridge and then started down, which was the hardest part. The gravel and moist soil gave suddenly and unpredictably, making him lurch to keep the swaying body from feeling the full shock. Old Matt's eyes opened momentarily and then the face descended into a kind of collapsed sleep.

It was into the third hour and he could not feel his arms any more. He went on through the gathering dull dusk, across a slumbering landscape lit by breaks in the clouds, hearing in his helmet the regular *ping ping* of the directional signal the crawler sent. He angled downward to meet it. Innumerable times he slipped and caught himself and slipped again, starting small slides and avoiding the rattling showers of gravel that cascaded down. Through the streaming gloom the spaced signals came to him like a constant calling of a mindless thing, the only presence besides the crunch of his boots on snapping ice.

He found the lead crawler making good time down a stream bed. It stopped and he put the body through the lock. Two crawlers and a walker passed by in the sleeting darkness, going on to the main party. By the time he cycled through the body was hooked into the small medical monitor. He sat with three men and watched the diagnostics flicker and resolve. "He's holdin' on," one of the men said. "Have to get him back to camp to do any fixin' up, though."

So the crawler reversed and backed out of the valley until it could turn around without risking getting stuck in the ponds and melting ice. The falling rain carried energy stored in it by a fusion reactor robot south-

ward, and in recondensing now released the heat, spreading change across the face of the land.

It was a long ride back. Manuel found the men studying him and realized he had exhausted himself. His suit was on the red marker at the bottom of the dial. He sat in a sling chair and let the swaying lull him but did not sleep. Hailstones clattered on the hull. The men here had dropped out of the main party, mostly from fatigue, and did not ask much about what had happened. He was glad of that.

They covered the last distance into camp as the rain and hail lifted and the sun cut through the remaining pink fog that hugged the gullies and ice arroyos. The crawler speeded up then, growling, toward the *bip bip bip* of the ranging beacon that seemed to Manuel like one long calling, each pulse lingering in his mind until the next joined it and blended in, a hollow ringing as formless and remorseless as the fog. A dozen men waited in a little clump as they came into camp. A medical tech had come out from Sidon on Colonel Lopez's orders. He was a thin man with uncertain, always-moving green eyes. The men helped bring Old Matt inside, carefully turning the stretcher to get it through the crawler lock without jarring. When they got his suit off the walnut-brown body lay inert, nearly hairless, seeming smaller than the boy remembered.

The medical machinery and the tech did things to the body, patching and splicing in replacements, cleaning and disinfecting where suit fluids might have gotten into the body cavity, working on the main problems and leaving the rest for later.

"God, lookit him," the med tech exclaimed.

Manuel asked, "Exhaustion? The wound doesn't look so deep."

"Exhausted, sure," the med tech said. "Shock pretty bad too. But mostly it's the cardiovascular. Seized up somehow. Lot of neural damage, too. Can't figure how that happened. Just wore out, maybe. Doesn't respond to the usual stuff."

Manuel asked quietly, "How many functions can you save?"

"Most. For sure, most."

"Replace the rest?"

"I'd say prob'ly. Some of the organs died, though. Liver, kidneys, some smaller stuff. And the small blood vessels — they've broken down all through him. Costs a lot to replace that."

"How much?"

"Dunno. I don't see many cases like this, guys this old. Most of 'em are in Hiruko."

"They'll have to take him there?"

"Prob'ly. Those blood vessels, it's not the parts, it's the labor. Lotta bench time."

Old Matt opened his eyes then. He looked out as though from far back in a hidden place and his eyes moved slowly over the faces of the men

gathered around. His face was dry and chalky but the eyes seemed to brim with a moist fullness. He opened his mouth but no sound came out. Then he closed it without his face showing any expression of concern.

"Some kind of control function is out," the med tech said. "Not surprising, with a spine injury."

"Can you fix it?"

"Look, I told you. Funny neural damage in there. That's not field-type work."

Manuel nodded numbly.

They let the medmonitor work on the body then, humming and sloshing and snuffling and clacking to itself. Manuel sat up watching it and then slumped over on his side and slept for a few hours. He woke when the main party hauled into camp and some men called into the cabin for help getting Eagle off the deck of a crawler. Manuel went outside and saw his father and the others dismounting, all pale and with that careful slow-moving way of men working in suits that are drained of power. He joined the gang of men on the nearest crawler. They go the lip of a fork lift under one end of Eagle and worked it onto a makeshift ramp and pushed Eagle down, aided by the slippery ice that the hail had left on the ramp. They hooked it to the crawler and towed it over to the outside medical and hydraulic station for the animals.

Eagle lifted its head and tried to turn it. Steel screeched and sparks jumped. The great head crashed to the side, dangling. It shuffled its hands and its treads clashed and jammed against each other. It struggled deep inside itself, Manuel could see that, and after a moment it shuddered and the hands relaxed and it went still again. He thought he could see a slight regular motion, as if from lungs laboring far down in there.

The med tech came out, looking harassed by the men who'd come piling into the cabin, men with pulled muscles and sprains and a few broken bones. He ran a series check on the crushed and mangled thing. He cut away Petrovich's clumsy patches and sealed on new ones, stopped fluid loss and gave voltage boosts to the internal systems that still had life. Then he shook his head. "Can't work miracles," he muttered.

"You can goddman try," Manuel said harshly.

"I done what I can. Got no equipment for more. Not outside stuff, anyway."

"I could take it back to Sidon."

"Don't think you should move it, not any more."

"You going to just let it lie there?"

"Look, that's deep internal injuries there. Either the living part's going to pull through or not. Only way to help it is to pry open the shell and take it out and keep it alive until you get it to Hiruko. They know this kind of work. I don't. So I say we just leave it rest, see if it pulls through."

"How long?"

"Day, two days."

"Then?"

"Take it to Hiruko if it looks strong enough." The med tech's mouth twisted in irritation. "Look, I got men to work on. Animals come last, you know that."

"This's no animal."

"Yeah, okay, you read the regs, kid. You just read the regs." The man went back inside, fidgeting at his tools. He was having to deal with more injuries than he'd ever seen before on just a little pruning jaunt and he didn't like it.

Inside the sprawling cabin the men were eating or boozing or else lying across their bunks half-undressed, already sunk into sleep, mouths open, some of them snorting, faces dark with week-old beards and dirt. The boy sat a while, not saying much to anybody or listening to the wandering tired talk around him. Old Matt lay still and his diagnostics held steady. The boy fell asleep again but when he woke, tangled in his bunk with a blanket wrapped around his head and nothing on the lower half of him, he felt no lifting of the slow fatigue and ache in his arms and legs.

He went out then to look at Eagle. It was near noon in the long Ganymede day and the sun had burned through the layers of mist that formed high up, where the new atmosphere was boiling out into pure dead vacuum. The dot of a sun cast sharp shadows among the men and women who were coming in now — pipefitters and agro hands from Sidon and further-away Settlements, miners from one-dome places yet unnamed, contract laborers, women widowed years before — all with a debt real or imagined that had now been paid. They came in walkers or on foot, following the same incessant *bip bip bip* and coming into the big clearing where Eagle lay facing outward, toward the distant line of slumped and folded ice hills. There must have been a hundred of them sitting in amongst the vehicles when Manuel came out. He watched them as they went up to the big crushed thing and started at the caved-in carapace, never daring to reach out and touch it, speaking to each other in low voices that didn't carry on comm line, making their own private ritual of it. They asked to go inside and see Old Matt, too, but Petrovich wouldn't let them. They asked about Manuel but nobody among them recognized the boy, they had only heard of him, so Manuel stayed close to Eagle and they did not bother him.

Eagle was holding steady. Every few hours it would lift its head and wrench the neck around painfully, each turn of angle like a ratchet jumping forward a notch. The black eyes peered out at the gathering people and gave no sign of its inner torment. It studied the far hills, not with the ferocity it had shown before, but as if it wanted to be sure the broad stretching wastes were still there, still lying beyond the ring of human faces. Manuel watched it then, sensing its adamant refusal to

compromise, to give any sign of what lay wounded inside. Eagle was not of man and could not be reconciled with man, but was out of Earth and knew that, too. It had done its job, a task in the end self-imposed, and was now free. It died at noon.



An expanded version of this novel will appear shortly from Timescape Books in hardcover.



CYBORG SADIE

Well, wouldn't you feel strange too
with jaws that clack like a rebuilt typewriter,
a stomach bloated with ore samples,
a belly button that feeds out results
on paper thin as a tapeworm,
and a module
shaped like a commode handle on your hip?
Of course you would.
Yet for Sadie the "strangeness" is not that of otherness
or painful alienation;
but that of particle physics,
that which keeps strange particles from breaking up,
which keeps the string and glue blinding.
You see, Sadie has rebored herself upstairs,
done some inspirational retrofitting,
and even adjusted the pilot light.
Sadie now enjoys being,
well almost,
a self-made man.

— Robert Frazier

If you have ever looked at *Amazing's* masthead (which usually appears at the end of Bob Silverberg's "Opinion" column), and wondered why there are so many assistant editors, the answer is: George Scithers. George is an editor who believes very strongly in responding to *everyone* who sends us a manuscript. He also believes in doing this in a timely fashion i.e. *Fast!* To accomplish this, he has assembled an army of assistant editors — The Zoo. George is our mentor. He oversees everything that goes on in *Amazing*; he is very particular about the way things are done, and that attention to detail has made his reputation as one of the top editors in the field.

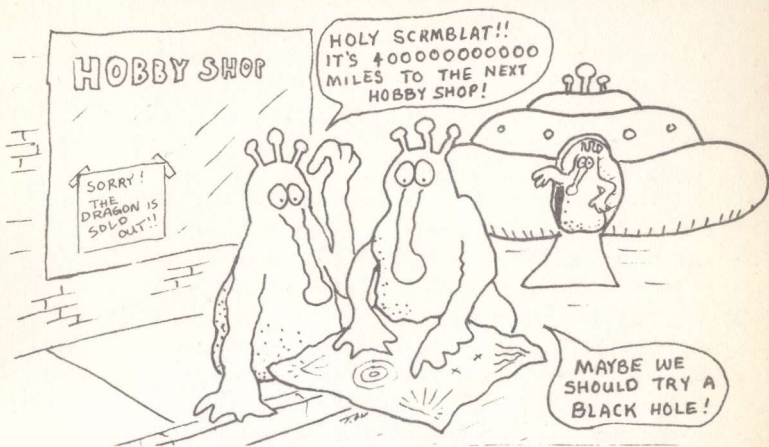
But enough of the zookeeper, and on to the Zoo. The Zoo is a heterogeneous bunch — and that is a gross understatement. All of us come from vastly different backgrounds; all of us have vastly different goals. Darrell Schweitzer, who has been with George since the *Asimov's* days, is an accomplished author whose name you have probably seen, if not elsewhere, then on the pages of *Amazing*. George often turns to Darrell for an opinion when he is on the fence about a story. Meg Phillips, too, has been around for past magazines. She is a SF fan, and takes off from being a mother once in a while to be an editor. John Sevcik is a playwright, and another old-timer. When I made my debut with The Zoo back in the *Asimov's* days, John told me that my greatest qualification was that I had worked at Gino's. Apparently, Zoo members have to put in their time. Dainis Bisenieks is

a newer addition to The Zoo. He is a former English teacher who pulled up stakes, moved to Philadelphia, got married, and now spends his time deflating authors' egos. Dainis is renowned (at least among us) for his rejection letters, which are often witty (with some of the worst puns ever) and always to the point. Henry Lazarus is the official Zoo dentist. No, he doesn't pull our teeth — or even drill them. It's just that he's part of The Zoo and happens to be a dentist as well. Henry appears every once in a while (often toting child on back), reads some manuscripts, and offers some piece of wisdom. I joined The Zoo shortly after graduating from college. At the time, I intended to become a famous writer. Then I became a magazine production manager. Now I do all that stuff here.

The next question is, of course, what do we all do? Handling manuscripts is probably the largest project. We get a bundle of manuscripts every day. We log them in, we read every one (some of them are *l o n g*), and we respond to each with a typewritten letter. As well as doing that, we also have to deal with already-bought manuscripts. That means, copyediting, proofreading, proofreading, and proofreading. Then there's the job of laying out an issue, and then putting it together, and . . .

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—Stephen R. Donaldson
Author of THE ONE TREE



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