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Reflections

Robert Silverberg

For the last three decades plus, I've earned my living by pushing words around — which ought to be sufficient proof that I'm capable of communicating clearly and effectively. But evidently not even a veteran word-pusher like me can be sure all the time that he's getting his meaning across. The evidence at hand is the storm I inadvertently kicked up with my "Reflections" column in the November [1986] *Amazing Stories*, which came out just before the World Science Fiction Convention in Atlanta.

That was the essay in which I took out after the increasing trend, troublesome to me, toward turning SF conventions into round-the-clock costume parties. "Somewhere in the 1970s," I wrote, "things began to change. The costume masquerade, which was once a playful two-hour Saturday night event, somehow spread to engulf the entire convention, so that the hallways and convention suites became filled with barbarian slave-girls, Darth Vader clones, creatures with hideous fanged heads, and worse. In the dealers' room it became hard to find genuine books for sale, but there were long lines of kids waiting to buy autographed glossy publicity photos of Godzilla and Mothra. No one went to the formal panels at all, but great mobs queued up for the round-the-clock showing of monster movies and horror flicks. . . . In short, the conventions were invaded by hordes and hordes of nice dumb youngsters who find reading a pretty difficult task, but who are turned on by the Hollywood sci-fi product and

enjoy dressing up in goofy costumes. It's a harmless amusement and at least keeps them off the streets. But they have made going to conventions an embarrassment for all the rest of us. . . ."

What I thought I was doing was attacking the overwhelming of the SF conventions by the adolescent admirers of the trashiest elements of the fantasy field: the kids in capes and swords, who have turned some conventions into wild circuses and made life uncomfortable for those of us who see science fiction as challenging, intellectually stimulating entertainment for thoughtful readers.

What a lot of other readers thought I was doing was launching an attack against the dedicated, imaginative, ingenious people who create the annual convention masquerade ball — including a good many of my own friends.

The first hint I had that anything was wrong came early in the convention, when one of these master costumers, a Los Angeles woman whom I've known at least twenty years, encountered me in the hall and said, "You know, the costumers are pretty upset at you. They can't understand why you jumped on them like that."

For a moment I was bewildered, until I remembered my *Amazing* piece. "Hey, I wasn't talking about you people!" I replied.

And she said, "I didn't think you were. But a lot of them do."

I kept running into costumers all weekend long — all of them puzzled at

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my "attack." They hadn't expected it from me, they said. And why should they? They all know that I love the masquerade ball and never miss it. Unlike a lot of the other professional writers, I have always taken great pleasure in the ingenuity and talent of the costumers; I make a point of attending, and I often go backstage to express my delight and even awe at the finest work. Many of the master costumers are people I've known for years. How could I now turn around and declare in a magazine editorial that the costumers are illiterate dopes whose antics are spoiling the conventions for us serious types?

A letter circulated by Caroline G. Julian of The International Costumers Guild, which is their formal organization, called for "rebuttal" of the "misconceptions and insults" I had uttered. Nancy Giese of Berkeley wrote *Amazing* to say, "I find [Silverberg's] equating costume-wearing with being a non-reader to be snobbish and illogical." Lisa Mackenzie, a young Canadian costumer, complained that "Mr. Silverberg is unappreciative of the skill and workmanship that goes into the better costumes. Even a relatively simple costume requires work and effort." Elizabeth Ann Osborne of Ohio thought I was being "unfair" and "elitist."

Plainly, I hadn't said what I meant to say.

One night during the convention the Costumers Guild sponsored a party. One of my costumer friends told me about it, implying that I would be burned in effigy there. "No," I said. "They won't have to do it in effigy. I'm going to attend." And I did, costumed as a serious-minded middle-aged science-fiction writer: suit and tie, shoes, stuff like that. The party suite was well stocked with vampires,

superheroes, and such. Some of the costumers were amazed that I'd dare to go right into their den, but those who knew me, and had assumed that some misunderstanding had occurred, realized why I had come. I spoke with a good many of them, assured them that they had never been my target, received the assurance from a number of the costumers that they were pretty sick of the crazy kids in capes too, and went away with peace restored. The next night I attended the formal masquerade, found it as delightful as ever, and went behind the scenes afterward to express my pleasure personally. I don't think there's any further problem between the International Costumers Guild and Robert Silverberg.

But — for those of you who weren't there —

My position remains unchanged. I'll just try to state it more clearly this time. As Steve Gill of Pointe Claire, Canada, put it in a letter to *Amazing*, "There is a world of difference between a kid in a cape and a serious costumer, and your comments made no distinction between the two." It looks as though he's right, and I'm sorry about that.

I find the Darth Vaders and the barbarian slave-girls and the space cadets who whoop it up in the halls of the conventions annoying and dumb — an "aberrant little sideshow," as I phrased it last time. They have as much right to attend the conventions as I do, but that doesn't mean I have to be amused by their antics, and I wish they had never started coming.

But that should in no way reflect unfavorably on the serious costumers, whose brilliant and often breathtaking art has given me much enjoyment since I attended my first convention more than thirty years ago. Their grand masquerade is always one of the

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high points of the convention, a splendid, unique event that reflects not only the technical ingenuity of the costumers but also the care and love with which they read the books we write. When I spoke approvingly of the new convention called SERCON, which forbids all costumes, I was thinking specifically of hall costumes, not the masquerade, and I regret having given any other impression. If the world conventions were to ban the masquerade, I'd be among the first to protest.

The first SERCON — at the Hotel Claremont in Berkeley, California — will have been held by the time this appears. I'll be there, and I'll report on it in due course. Maybe it'll have turned out to be a dreadfully sober-sided affair, and we'll all regret missing the fun and splendor of the masquerade. But you can bet I'm not going to miss the morlocks and yahoos in capes and swords who go careening down the corridors of the worldcons night and day. ❁

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FREEZEFRAME

by Gregory Benford
art: Terry Lee

Well, Jason, it'll take some explaining. Got a minute? Great.

Here's the invitation. It's for the weekend, and it's not just the kid's birthday party, no. You and me, we've been out of touch the last couple years, so let me run through a little flashback, okay?

Teri and me, we're world-gobblers. You've known that since you and me were roomies, right? Remember the time I took a final, went skiing all afternoon, had a heavy date, was back next day for another final — and aced them both? Yeah, you got it, fella — aced the date, too. Those were the days, huh?

Anyway, my Teri's the same — girl's got real fire in her. No Type A or anything, just *alive*. And like sheet lightning in bed.

We grab life with both hands. Always have. If you work in city government, like me, you got to keep ahead of the oppo. Otherwise you see yourself hung out to dry on the six o'clock news, and next day nobody can remember your name.

Goes double for Teri. She's in liability and claims, a real shark reef. Pressureville. So many lawyers around these days, half of them bred in those barracuda farms, those upgraded speed-curricula things. So we've got to watch our ass.

Right, watching Teri's is no trouble, I'll take all I can get. That woman really sends me. We're both in challenging careers, but she finds the time to make my day, every day, get it? Our relationship is stage center with us, even though we're putting in ten-hour days.

That's what started us thinking. We need the time to work on our marriage, really firm it up when the old schedule starts to fray us around the edges. We've been through those stress management retreats, the whole thing, and we *use* it.

So we're happy. But still, about a year ago we started to feel something was *missing*.

Yeah, you got it. The old cliché — a kid. Teri's been hearing the old bio clock tick off the years. We got the condo, two sharp cars, time-share in Maui, portfolio thick as your wrist — but it's not enough.

Teri brought it up carefully, not sure I'd like the idea of sharing all this wonderful bounty with a cranky little brat. I heard her through, real quality listening, and just between you and me, old buddy, I didn't zoom in on the idea right away.

I mean, we're fast-lane folks. Teri's happy pouring over legal programs, looking for a precedent-busting angle, zipping off to an amped workout at the gym, and then catching one of those black-and-white foreign films with

the hard-to-read subtitles. Not much room in her schedule to pencil in a feeding or the mumps. I had real trouble conceptualizing how she — much less *I* — could cope.

But she *wanted* this, I could tell from the soft watery look her eyes get. She's a real woman, y'know?

But the flip side was, no way she'd go for months of waddling around looking and feeling like a cow. Getting behind in her briefs because of morning sickness? Taking time off for the whole number? Not Teri's kind of thing.

What? Oh, sure, adoption.

Well, we did the research on that.

Let me put it this way. We both think the other's pretty damn special. Unique. And our feeling was, why raise a kid that's running on somebody else's genetic program? We're talented people, great bodies, not too hard on the eyes — why not give our kid those advantages?

You got to look at it from his point of view. He should have parents who provide the best in everything — including genes. So he had to be ours — all ours.

So you can see our problem. Balancing the tradeoffs, and nothing looks like a winner. We'd hit a roadblock.

That's where my contacts came in handy. Guy at work told me about this company, GeneInc.

The corporation was looking for a franchise backer, and the city was getting involved because of all the legal hassles. Red tape had to be cut with the AMA, the local hospitals, the usual stuff. No big deal, just takes time.

I did a little angling on the variances they needed, and in return they were real nice. We got invited to a few great parties up in the hills. Glitzy affairs, some big media people flew in to spice things up. And that's when we got the word.

Their secret is, they speed up the whole thing. It's entirely natural, no funny chemicals or anything. Purely electrical and a little hormone tinkering, straight goods.

What they do is, they take a little genetic material from Teri and me, they put it in a blender or something, they mix it and match it and batch it. There's this thing called inculcated growth pattern. Just jargon to me, but what it means is, they can *tune* the process, see. Nature does it slow and easy, but GeneInc can put the pedal to the metal. Go through the prelim stages, all in the lab.

Yeah, you got it fella, you can't see Teri pushing around a basketball belly, can you? That's why it's like GeneInc was tight-wrapped for lives like ours — lives on the go.

So she goes in one Friday, right after a big staff meeting, and with me holding her hand she has the implantation. She overnights in the clinic, watching a first-run movie. Next day she's home. We have dinner at that

great new restaurant, T. S. Eliot's — you really got to try the blackened red-fish there — and all she's got to do is take these pills every four hours.

Three weeks like that, she's growing by the minute. Eats like a horse. I tell you, we had a running tab at every pasta joint within five blocks of the apartment.

She's into the clinic every forty-eight for the treatments, smooth as a press release. Teri's clicking right along, the kid's growing ten times the normal rate.

Before I can get around to buying cigars, zip, here's a seven-pound wonder. Great little guy. Perfect — my eyes, her smile, wants to eat everything in sight. Grabs for the milk supply like a real ladies' man.

And no effects from the GeneInc speedup, not a square inch less than A-max quality. You hear all kinds of scare talk about gene-diddling, how you might end up with a kid from Zit City. Well, the Chicken Littles were wrong-o, in spades.

We figure we'd handle things from there. Maybe send out the diapers, hire a live-in if we could find a nice quiet illegal — Teri could handle the Spanish.

We had the right vector, but we were a tad short on follow-through. Teri started getting cluster headaches. Big ones, in technicolor.

So I filled in for her. Read some books on fathering, really got into it. And I'm telling you, it jigsawed my days beyond belief.

Face it, we had high-impact lives. I gave up my daily racquetball match — and you know how much of a sacrifice that was for a diehard jock like me, high-school football and all. But I did it for the kid.

Next, Teri had to drop out of her extra course in fast-lane brokering, too, which was a real trauma. I mean, we'd practically spent the projected income from that training. Factored it into our estimated taxes, even. I'd already sunk extra cash into a honey of a limited partnership. It had some sweetheart underwriting features, and we just couldn't resist it.

Man, crisis time. If she didn't get her broker's license on schedule, we'd be stretched so thin you could see through us.

She couldn't link into the course on home computer, either. Software mismatch or something, and by the time she got it downwired, she was too far behind in the course.

See what I mean? Bleaksville.

But we were committed parents. We believe in total frankness, up-front living.

So we went back to GeneInc and had a talk with one of their counselors. Wonderful woman. She takes us into a beautiful room — soft lighting, quality leather couch, and some of that classy Baroque trumpet music in the background. Just the right touch. Tasteful. Reassuring.

She listens to us and nods a lot and knows just what we're talking about. We trust her, almost like it was therapy. Which I guess it was.

And we let it all spill. The irritations. Man, I never knew a little package could scream so much. Feeding. No grandparents closer than three thousand miles, and they're keeping their distance. Got their retirement condo, walls all around it, a rule that you can't bring a kid in for longer than twenty-four hours. Not exactly Norman Rockwell, huh? So no quick fix there.

And the kid, he's always awake and wanting to play just when we're stumbling home, zombies. So you cram things in. We had trouble syncing our schedules. Lost touch with friends *and* business contacts.

See, I spend a lot of time on the horn, keeping up with people I know I'll need sometime. Or just feeling out the gossip shops for what's hot. Can't do that with a squall-bomb on my knee.

Teri had it even worse. She'd bought all the traditional mother package and was trying to pack that into her own flat-out style. Doesn't work.

Now, the usual way to handle this would be for somebody to lose big, right?

Teri drops back and punts, maybe. Stops humping so hard, lets up. So maybe a year downstream, some younger beady-eyed type shoulders her aside. She ends up targeted on permanent middle management. The desert. Oblivion. Perpetual Poughkeepsie.

Or else I lower *my* revs. Shy off the background briefings, drop off the party committee, don't sniff around for possible comers to get tight with. You know how it is.

What? No, ol' buddy, you're dead on — not my scene.

But listen, my real concern wasn't my job, it was our relationship. We really work at it. Total communication takes time. We really get into each other. That's just us.

So the lady at GeneInc listens, nods, and introduces us to their top-drawer product line. Exclusive. *Very* high tech. It blew us away.

Freeze-frame, they call it.

Look, the kid's going to be sleeping ten, twelve hours a day anyway, right? GeneInc just packs all that time into our work week. Rearranges the kid's schedule, is basically what it is.

Simple electronic stimulus to the lower centers. Basic stuff, they told me, can't damage anything. And totally under our control.

When we want him, the kid's on call. Boost up his voltage, allow some warm-up —

Sure, Jason. See, he's running at low temperature during the work day. Helps the process. So we come dragging home, have some chardonnay to unwind, catch the news. When we're ready for him, we hit a few buttons, warm him up, and there he is, bright and agreeable 'cause he's had a ton of extra sack time. Can't get tired and pesky.

I mean, the kid's at his best and we're at peak, too. Relaxed, ready for some A-plus parenting.

Well, we took the Zen pause on the idea, sure. Thought it over. Teri talked



it out with her analyst. Worked on the problem, got her doubts under control.

And we went for it. Little shakedown trouble, but nothing big. GeneInc, they've got a fix for everything.

We boost him up for weekends when we've got space. Quality time, that's what the kid gets. We've set up a regular schedule. Weekdays for us, weeknights and weekends for him.

Now GeneInc's got an add-on you wouldn't believe — Downtime Education, they call it. While he's sleeping through our days, Downtime Ed brings him up to speed on verbals, math, sensory holism, the works. Better than a real teacher, in many ways.

So we feel that — oh yeah, the invitation.

It's for his big blast. Combo first birthday party and graduation from third grade. We put him on the inside track, and he's burning it up. We couldn't be happier. Our kind of kid, for sure.

Pretty soon we'll integrate him into the GeneInc school for accelerated cases, others like him. There's a whole community of these great kids springing up, y'know. They're either in Downtime, learning up a storm, or getting online, first-class attention in FreezeFrame weekends.

I tell you, Jason, these kids are going to be the best. They'll slice and dice any Normkid competition they run into.

And us — it's like a new beginning. We get to have it all *and* we know the kid's not suffering. He'll have a high-school diploma by the time he's ten. He'll be a savvy little guy. And we'll load on all the extras, too. Emotional support, travel, the works.

We'll have him on tap when we want him. That'll stretch out his physical childhood, of course, but speed up his mental growth. Better all round, really, 'cause Teri and I totally like him.

See, we want to spread him over more of our lives, keep him for maybe thirty years. Why not have one really top-of-the-line kid, enjoy him most of your life? Efficient.

So look, I got to trot. Map's on the back of the invitation, come and enjoy. No need for a present unless you want to. Teri'll love seeing you again.

And while you're there, I can show you the GeneInc equipment. Beautiful gear, sharp lines. Brochures, too. I've got a kind of little franchise agreement with them, getting in on the ground floor of this thing.

What? Well, that's not the way I'd put it, Jason. This is a class product line.

Calling it a Tupperware party — hey, that's way out of line. We're talking quality here.

You'll see. Just drop on by. No obligation. Oh yeah, and I got some great cabernet you should try, something I picked up on the wine futures market.

My God, look at the time. See you, ol' buddy.

Have a nice day.

THE LITERARY CAREER OF GREGORY BENFORD: Current Directions . . .

Boswell tells us that Samuel Johnson once said of a dancing bear, "One is not so much surprised to see it done well, but rather to see it done at all."

Many people seem to feel the same way about scientists writing fiction. Rarely outside science fiction do scientists occasionally venture to scribble some dreams and speculations. In mainstream fiction virtually no scientists appear. When they do, often they are concerned with matters of science and politics, as C. P. Snow was.

I knew this when I started writing SF as a graduate student at the University of California. SF gives me a solid ground of associations, props and agreed-upon conventions which shorten drastically what you have to explain to a reader. (For example, faster-than-light travel, which seems implausible to a scientist, but is awfully useful in compressing fictional distance and time.)

Also, it allows you to sing of the vast perspectives science unfolds for us. Most mainstream stories seem claustrophobic and ignorant, after the reaches of SF. That's why I've never been tempted to write conventional fiction, however much I admire authors such as John Updike and William Gaddis.

I am a professor of physics at the University of California, Irvine, and spend the great bulk of my time doing research in turbulent plasmas and astrophysical matters. Most interesting objects like quasars and pulsars are enormously efficient at giving off electromagnetic radiation, and I'm interested in finding out how (the "why" always comes after the "how" in science, if then).

This means my fiction is usually grounded in my experience of the realm of research, as in my novel *Timescape*. But occasionally, I abandon the somewhat austere byways of science and write about more cozy subjects. I have two children, and my wife and I have cocked a wry eyebrow at the way children are reared in California, particularly among the fast-lane achievers. So I speculated on how this would eventually work itself out. Would it give us parenting as convenient as those quick-frozen packets you dump into boiling water and — presto! — duckling l'orange for two, with wild rice?

SF has to be about *both* science and people. It's too easy to just write stories about whether a match will stay lit in an orbiting spacecraft. (Without gravity, warm air won't rise, so the smoke could smother the flame.) Such dry fables may intrigue (and I love a good problem story as much as anyone), but they don't move the emotions much.

The proper province of SF, I've learned, is that tenuous middle ground between technology and emotion, where the future collides with the hindbrain. So I like to occasionally write a story that's not about distant vistas. Like "Freeze-frame," which treats the irreducibly human elements in change.

Every scientist has a human side, y'know. I'm not the stereotypical urban intellectual. I grew up in rural Alabama, and lived most of my teen years in Japan and Germany. I prefer surfing to syllogisms, cuisine to criticism. (And I surf often, since I live on the beach.) So though I'm usually described as a "hard SF" writer, I don't *feel* that way. I share some concerns with Hal Clement and Larry Niven, sure. But I reject any attempt to pigeonhole writers, and prefer that a reader simply come to each story fresh . . . the way the author has to.

. . . and Past Achievements

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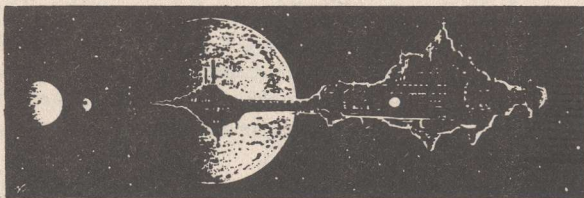
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Heart of the Comet, with David Brin. Bantam, 1986.

In Alien Flesh, a short-story collection. Tor, 1986.



FOOL'S MATE

There is a game that plays a man,
They sell it as Romance™.
The user starts by having to choose:
(A) He's a loser; (B) He's a fan;
(C) He teaches dance.

Since everybody opts for (C),
We enter a cruiser, the *Libertine Belle*,
That is re-equipped as a luxury ship
With sumptuous ballrooms on every deck
And furnaces hot as hell.

There beneath the chandeliers
You offer instruction in Tango and Mamba,
In Foxtrot, in Samba,
In the Waltz and all the latest rages —
The Stripping of Gears,
The Shaking of Spears, the Rock of Ages.

Then one evening the maître-d'
Brings a note to your table,
Which reads, "*Mein Herr*,
Or *Gnädige Frau* (as the case may be),
Leave this ship if you are able.
If not, beware
Of Programmer Z."

Who, you will wonder, is Programmer Z?
You ask your partner, as you dip,
And he or she,
On the count of three, answers in this wise:
"Ain't he the drip who built this ship?
Some Edgar Rice? Or Vincent Price?
You know the type I mean."

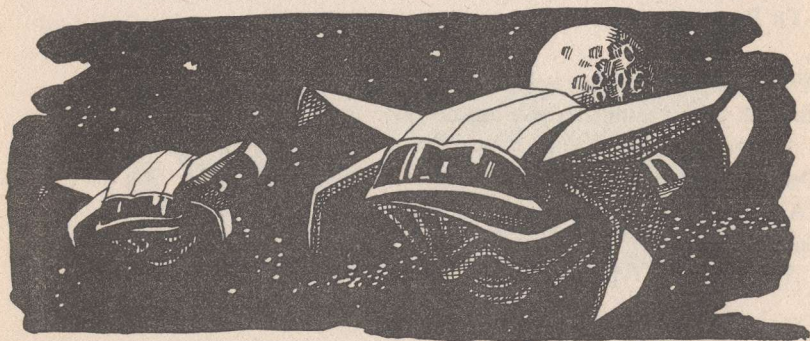
The program shifts to another scene.
You have looked at the menu
And changed your venue,
And now you're a camera high on the boom
Above the *Belle's* main hatch.

You pan to a porthole and into a room
As someone lights a match,
And by its flare you see the hair
Of the figure whom
It is your doom
To love to the end of the game.

But *only* the hair, and some underwear,
And part of a picture frame,
And under the frame in a gold cartouche
The name of your nemesis, Programmer Z.

As the flame expires you think you can see
Two cigarettes glowing, or is it three,
And then, so soft you scarcely hear it,
A sound you believe is the sound of a douche,
But when you try to zoom in near it,
The moon turn dark, and the cursor fades,
And the purser brings you a scented letter:
"You've lost again but you're getting better.
Sincerely, 20th Century Fox Arcades."

— Tom Disch



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FEAR THE LIGHT

by Edward F. Shaver
art: David E. Martin

Edward Shaver graduated from Penn State University with a degree in physics. And he has put his degree to work for several different companies, on projects ranging from large-scale solar energy to submarine sonar systems. Yet through it all, writing has been his main objective.

His works have appeared previously in The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction and on the television series Tales from the Darkside. This story marks his first appearance in Amazing® Stories.

Dr. Adrian Lenat stood in the open doorway, frowning into the stony face of the young military officer. The world beyond the stranger was bathed in the blue light of an autumn moon, and Lenat found it easy to imagine it was still nothing more than a dream.

"I have a message for you, Dr. Lenat," the officer repeated calmly, as if he were quite used to delivering messages at four o'clock on a Sunday morning. "It's from Dr. George Eisler." He paused for a moment, searching Lenat's face for a sign of recognition before he added, "Agathon was wrong."

Lenat blinked once, suddenly aware of the cold floor beneath his bare feet as he lost the comforting haze of sleep.

"Agathon . . ." Lenat repeated slowly, as if to be certain.

"Agathon was wrong," the officer echoed, nodding with satisfaction at the glimmer of recognition in the physicist's eyes.

Lenat frowned in silence as George Eisler's voice reverberated from the past, the words sharp with the defiance of youth.

"This only is denied to God . . ."

"Dr. Lenat," the officer intruded, edging across the threshold of the doorway. "The car is waiting, sir. I have orders to take you directly to Logan Airport. A military jet is ready for you there."

"A jet. . . ?" Lenat mumbled as he gave up the memory.

"Yes, sir. And I've been instructed to move as quickly as possible."

Lenat blinked again, staring out past the officer to the curb, where a long, featureless shadow was idling in the moonlight. In front of the car, two MPs sat patiently on motorcycles.

"My God," Lenat said, turning away from the doorway. "Couldn't I talk with Dr. Eisler on the phone?"

But he hurried up the stairs without waiting for an answer. He paused at the door to the bedroom, drawing a deep breath before he entered.

His wife was still in bed, but her eyes shone wide in the gloom. "What's going on, Adrian?" she asked, her tone betraying her fear of the answer.

"I'm not sure," Lenat said as he quickly stripped off his robe and began to rummage through a closet. "You remember George Eisler, don't you?" His head emerged from the shadows of the closet for a moment. "Well, he's sent me a message. I think he may need some help on a project."

"Now?" she asked, her voice a mixture of annoyance and uncertainty. "At four o'clock on Sunday morning? Adrian, this is crazy. Can't you just call him after breakfast?"

"I don't think it's going to be that easy." Lenat returned to the dim light of the bedroom, dressed in a hasty collection of mismatched clothes. "You see, there are some Army types downstairs, and I think it's very important to them that I come immediately. George was always involved in military research, and you know how the military can be when things go wrong," he finished as he plunged into the bathroom, raising a clatter as he tossed a handful of items into a shaving kit.

"But, Adrian . . ." his wife protested when he reappeared a few seconds later. "Adrian, this isn't fair. We have that barbecue planned with the Courtneys this afternoon. . . ."

"Don't worry." Lenat sat down on the edge of the bed. He ran a hand gently along her side and said, "I'll call you later this morning, and I'll probably be home for dinner. Don't cancel the barbecue, and go back to sleep." He kissed her quickly and pulled away, reaching the door before she called after him.

"At least tell me where you're going, Adrian."

He halted in his tracks, turning back toward the darkened room with an embarrassed shake of his head.

"I don't know," he said simply, and for a fleeting moment he was ready to tell the officer standing in his hallway to go to Hell. Eisler could talk with him by phone if he needed to talk, and nothing should be able to drag him from his bed in the middle of the night.

And then just as his convictions rose to a crescendo, Eisler's words reached out with an iron grip. *Agathon was wrong . . .*

"I love you," Lenat mumbled in farewell, and then he bounded down the steps, closing the front door quietly behind him.

The general was waiting at the bottom of the ladder as Lenat navigated warily to the tarmac from the cockpit of the jet. The engines of the twin-seater were still whining from their jaunt across the country, while the pre-dawn glow filled the wide desert sky with a promise of the heat to come.

"Dr. Lenat," the general nodded, offering a brisk handshake as he surveyed the slender frame of the physicist. "I'm Jackson Hastings. Dr. Eisler works under my command."



"I see," Lenat lied as he tried to coax the blood back into his legs. "And just where have you brought me, General?"

"Holloman Air Force Base, Dr. Lenat. In southern New Mexico." Hastings waited as Lenat's small overnight case was handed down from the cockpit, and then he started across the tarmac. "Dr. Eisler is working at a government facility not far from here. A short ride by helicopter."

Lenat looked up to see the helicopter sitting a short distance away, its rotors already twirling in anticipation. He fell into step beside the general, groping for a way to begin the questions that had multiplied like rabbits on the flight from Boston. But it was Hastings who plunged ahead and spared him the need for diplomacy.

"Tell me, Dr. Lenat," began the general. "Do you have any idea of how Dr. Eisler has been spending his time during the last few years?"

Lenat felt the other man's sideways glance and sensed he was about to be tested as well as educated.

"I know that George has been an acknowledged genius in subatomic particle physics since his days at MIT," Lenat answered slowly. "I would assume that his work here is an extension of that expertise. And since we are sitting in the middle of the largest weapons development establishment in the free world, I would guess that Dr. Eisler has been doing classified weapons research for the military."

Hastings arched his eyebrows, but his tone remained even as he said, "Very good. Tell me, Doctor, you wouldn't happen to have a current security clearance, would you?"

"Afraid not," Lenat shrugged.

"Well, no mind." Hastings drew a deep breath before he violated his own security procedures. "Dr. Eisler has been in charge of a series of experiments extending back over the last ten years. The purpose has been to explore the weapons applications of recent discoveries in particle physics. More specifically —"

"Quarks." Lenat smiled briefly at the sudden silence that followed his pronouncement.

"Quarks." Hastings finished slowly. "Dr. Eisler was in the middle of his latest experiment when something apparently went wrong. Exactly what, we still don't know. The research facility is designed with a secure inner chamber where the high-energy particle collisions actually take place. Dr. Eisler has holed himself up in this core area and cut off communication with the outside. His only instruction was to deliver the message to you concerning this fellow Agathon."

The general came to a halt as they neared the helicopter, raising a hand to keep his cap from flying in the wash of the rotor. "That was at twenty-two hundred hours yesterday, Dr. Lenat," he said. "Since then . . . nothing."

Lenat swallowed from a mouth suddenly dry. He no longer needed the general's penetrating stare to know that this wasn't a prank and that Eisler

wasn't going to placate him laughingly with a pitcher of Bloody Marys over breakfast.

"Tell me, Lenat." Hastings remained in his place, even though the helicopter was revving up to full power and a helmeted figure was waiting in the open hatch. "Just who the hell is Agathon? Another scientist? Someone who should be brought here to help with our problem?"

Lenat smiled faintly at the general's suggestion, though it faded quickly as he said, "You might call him a scientist, General, though he was really more of a philosopher. And I'm afraid that not even the military can get him here. He lived four centuries before the birth of Christ. He's given credit for a proverb that Dr. Eisler always found of special interest . . ."

He trailed into silence for a moment, but Hasting's unblinking stare would not permit a longer reverie.

"*This only is denied to God,*" Lenat said softly, pausing where Eisler had always paused with his flair for melodrama. "*The power to undo the past.*"

The general frowned but said nothing, motioning instead toward the hatch of the helicopter. In half a minute they were airborne; a dark shadow dashing westward over the red wash of the desert.

The helicopter circled low over a collection of squat, concrete buildings. Lenat pressed close to a window, wondering how high-energy physics could be done in such inadequate facilities. The question must have been obvious on his face because the general broke the silence.

"Most of the complex is underground, Dr. Lenat. Including a proton synchrotron more than a mile in diameter. That makes it difficult for anyone to break into a classified area, and impossible for the Russians to watch us from space."

Lenat nodded as the helicopter touched down, and he was hurried toward a pair of gleaming metal doors.

The complex was a maze of white fluorescent corridors punctuated with security checkpoints. Lenat was entirely lost by the time they'd stepped from the second stainless steel elevator, feeling they must have already walked miles under the desert. At last the general brought them to a halt before another unmarked metal door, reaching out to place his open hand against a glass plate embedded in the wall. A moment later the door whispered aside, and Hastings nodded toward the opening.

"The control room, Dr. Lenat," he said.

Lenat walked slowly across the threshold, blinking as his eyes adjusted to near darkness after the brilliance of the corridors. Three rows of consoles faced the far wall of the room, their panels flickering without supervision. The far wall itself was nothing but a huge sheet of plexiglas which opened onto the deeper shadows of the main laboratory.

"Attention!" someone barked from the shadows to his right, and Lenat turned to see a weary colonel and a ragged lieutenant lurch to their feet in

front of the first console.

"Dr. Lenat, this is Colonel Kettering." Hastings impatiently returned their salutes and moved past the rows of consoles, pressing close to the plexiglas. "Anything new, Colonel?"

"Not a word, General," Kettering replied.

Lenat joined Hastings at the glass wall, squinting as he searched for details in the shadows beyond. The main laboratory was little more than a dim, cavernous room, filled with a tangle of electronics and cables that might have seemed haphazard to anyone but another experimental physicist. At the center of the room stood the imposing cube of the target chamber, a vault of lead and steel whose single door gleamed dully in the glare of a red warning light. And beyond that door was Eisler, holding court like some recalcitrant French king.

"The target chamber locks from the inside?" Lenat asked after a moment's thought.

"Totally," Hastings grunted. "Not only entry but communications and data transfer can be cut off from in there. And that's exactly what our boy has done." He turned and nodded toward the colonel. "Open a channel, Kettering, and put it on the intercom. Let's see if he's ready to talk."

"Eisler," the general snapped a moment later. "Eisler, damn it, can you hear me? We did what you asked. Dr. Lenat has arrived."

The intercom hissed an empty answer for several seconds, and then Hastings tapped Lenat on the shoulder with a nod.

"George." Lenat cringed at the sound of his own voice resounding off the walls of the control room. "George, this is Adrian. You've made a glorious mess of my weekend, but I'm here."

Hastings shifted, while Kettering watched the indicator on the console that would light when Eisler activated his intercom.

"George . . ." Lenat called again.

"Glad you could make it, Adrian." The greeting came weakly from the speaker, but the Boston accent still made it sound like a Harvard taunt.

Lenat found himself staring at the metal door of the target chamber, as if that could serve as substitute for Eisler's face. "What's going on, George? This had better be important, you know, or MaryAnne will have both our hides."

"How is MaryAnne?" Eisler asked, his tone softening. "I should have stolen her from you a long time ago, Adrian."

"I wouldn't have blamed you for trying, George." Lenat glanced nervously over his shoulder at the general, but he didn't press. *Let him do it in his own time*, Lenat thought.

"How do you like the facilities?" Eisler asked. "Not bad for an unman-ageable brat from Boston."

"Very impressive, George. You've certainly found a place that appreciates your ability to spend money."

"And I've *spent* it, Adrian." The intercom hissed with the sound of a distant laugh. "It's like I've always told you: the military is the place to do your research. Budgets are mere formalities, and you never have to justify your failures. Heaven on Earth for a physicist."

"Perhaps," Lenat scolded quietly. "If you like the work. But if you're going to talk about failures, I should warn you that General Hastings is standing right behind me taking notes."

"No failures," Eisler answered, the levity bleeding from his voice.

Lenat hesitated before he asked the next question, as if some part of him were certain that nothing would ever be the same once the words escaped.

"Have you actually done it, George? Have you actually achieved de-confinement?"

"*De-confinement*," Eisler repeated with an invisible shake of his head. "You've been reading your own technical journals too long, Adrian. But you've made an excellent guess. The Army wanted to know if it was feasible to build a high-yield weapon based on quark release, a damned quark bomb. Well, Hastings . . . can you hear me?"

"I can hear you, Eisler." Hastings grunted tersely.

"Then you'll be pleased to know that the theories worked better than I promised. In fact, a quark-release weapon will be the most powerful ever devised by man. But there is a problem . . ."

Hastings looked at Lenat, but found his own perplexity reflected back from the physicist.

"Start at the beginning, George." Lenat leaned over the console, conscious of the sweat that was unobtrusively coating his palms. "Tell me what you've done in there."

Eisler remained silent for almost a minute. When he spoke again, his voice was measured, as if he were restraining the flood of words that waited to erupt.

"Have you been following the literature on quarks, Adrian?" he began. "I have, and I'd have written some interesting letters if the brass-hats had allowed, but you know the rules on classified research. I've been laughing at you guys, just the same, Adrian. The whole damned physics community has been wasting its time trying to explain why quarks *can't* be freed, too concerned with preserving their precious theories to appreciate the truth."

"And what is the truth?" Lenat prodded gently.

"Review the facts, Adrian. High-energy scattering experiments have proved that protons, neutrons, and the rest of the hadrons all possess an inner structure. They are made up of pointlike objects we call quarks. The whole universe is built out of quarks, yet none can be found free from the insides of a hadron. What does it say to you, Adrian?"

"I understand the problem of explaining the absence of free quarks, George." Lenat squirmed in his chair as he struggled to follow Eisler's chain of reasoning. "But that's the purpose of the lattice-gauge theory and some

others being developed . . .”

“No!” Eisler’s exclamation rang through the control room. “You are all missing the obvious. Think back to the late nineteenth century, Adrian. The repeated experiments by Michelson and Morley to prove the existence of an all-pervading medium in the universe they called an *ether*. They tried to shoot two perpendicular beams of light and compare the difference in velocities based on the movement of the Earth through the ether. They repeated their experiments over and over, never able to measure any velocity difference and, therefore, convinced their technique still needed to be improved. And what was the moral of the story?”

“The velocity of light is a constant,” Lenat answered absently, his thoughts already jumping ahead. “Their experiment had no meaning.”

“Exactly. They were looking for something that didn’t exist, blind to the truth that sat right in front of them. It took thirty years for Einstein to come along and discover the obvious.”

Lenat drew another long breath, wiping his hands across his face. “You’re trying to tell me we’ve been looking for something that doesn’t exist?”

“No . . . they exist.” Eisler’s voice grew stronger, as if he was crowding over his own microphone. “But not as just another stage in an endless series of chinese boxes, Adrian. They are the end; they are the foundation of reality. The specks of space-time on which the universe is painted.”

“George . . .” Lenat brought his hands to his temples, closing his eyes as he tried to concentrate.

“Don’t you see the simplicity of it all, Adrian? We can’t free a quark because there’s nothing to free. We say that a proton is comprised of three quarks, but that’s an illusion of our preceptions. The entity we call a proton is merely one characteristic wrinkle in space and time. To unravel it completely requires that you unravel space itself.” Eisler fell silent, letting the steady hiss of the intercom bore his message into Lenat’s brain. “That’s what I’ve done, Adrian. I’ve found the key to unraveling the fabric of reality itself. That’s what’s happening in here now.”

“Then damn it, Eisler,” Hastings intruded impatiently. “If you’ve succeeded in the experiment, why won’t you come out of there?”

There followed another long silence, and Lenat could almost see his friend’s teasing grin as he let them twist gently in an imaginary breeze.

“Because the experiment can’t be stopped, General.”

Hastings frowned, feeling his breath slip away while his heart jumped against his chest. He stared at Lenat, who had taken up the temporary solitude behind closed eyes.

“The process is self-perpetuating, Adrian.” Eisler’s voice had dimmed, almost losing itself in the static. “It feeds on its own residue, almost like a fusion reaction. I’ve left my notes in a file on the master computers. Maybe you can look at the equations and find the mechanism, but I don’t think it matters now.”

"I don't understnad, George." Lenat opened his eyes slowly, staring out through the plexiglas.

Eisler waited a long moment before he returned, "Yes, you do, Adrian. Agathon was wrong. *This* is the thing that God cannot do; this is the purpose for intelligent life in the universe. God cannot *die*, Adrian. He needs our help to escape."

"Jesus, he's gone mad." Hastings launched a heavy fist against the wall of glass.

Eisler ignored the general's words as he continued, "It makes sense, doesn't it, Adrian? The small spark I've started here could grow to consume all of reality. And it would, if there weren't others already born and growing."

"Others?" The question escaped from Lenat's mouth without a conscious effort.

"Others, Adrian. We are not the first intelligent life to form in this universe. You and I have debated the numbers many times, and it's only a question of how many others are out there. Watch the night skies and look for the light that shines too brightly. Call them quasars or anything you like, but they are the ultimate signpost of intelligence. They are the death heralds of God himself." He laughed again, this time deeply, as if he were giving up his last reserves of energy. "It's funny, Adrian. We are all children at heart, and we spend our lives fearing the dark. But it's not the dark we should fear at all, it's the light. I've seen it, Adrian. And I'm *afraid*. . . ."

"Damn it, he's gone mad." Hastings spread the thick fingers of both hands on the table. "Don't try to tell me that you don't agree, Lenat. All that gibberish about God. He's crazy."

Lenat settled stiffly into a molded plastic chair, staring thoughtfully at the sandwich he'd just pulled from one of the vending machines in the corridor. Much to the general's dismay he took a bite, chewing in silence while he stared at his own reflection in the formica tabletop.

"Damn you, Lenat." Hastings leaned forward on the table. "Tell me that he's crazy, and I'll give the word to break in there. We can't let this go on."

"Why not?" Lenat asked, grimacing as he returned the remainder of the sandwich to its plastic cocoon and arched it toward a trash can in the corner. "For the moment, General, I don't see that you have any choice."

"Are you saying he's *not* crazy?" The question was almost an accusation of treason.

"To begin," Lenat said slowly, "nothing he said is physically impossible. Indeed, Niels Bohr once remarked that our present physics is not crazy enough to be correct."

"But, Lenat . . ."

The physicist held up a hand to quell the protest before he continued, "And second, I have to see the equations that Eisler said were in his com-

puter files. As soon as Colonel Kettering gets them here for me, it shouldn't take long to get a rough idea of what Eisler has done. But I can tell you this, General" — Lenat nodded once, holding the officer's gaze — "George Eisler *believed* what he told us a little while ago."

Hastings released a sigh of resignation, dropping into a chair across from Lenat.

"Look," the general began. "I'm not a physicist. But I've digested enough of this business to know what Eisler was saying in there. He's telling us that he's started a chain reaction that can't be stopped. Something on the order of an uncontrolled nuclear fission process. Am I right?"

"More than that, I'm afraid." Lenat folded his hands on the table, sifting Eisler's words in his head. "The process he described is feeding on space itself. It won't run down until there is nothing left of this building, or this planet, or this solar system . . ." He arched his eyebrows, waiting for the point to register with the other man.

"But isn't there some way to verify what's happening from outside the target chamber?" Hastings asked. "Can't you do some kind of radiation measurements?"

"Not likely, General," Lenat answered. "The shielding of your target chamber is designed to absorb the specific particles and radiation we'd be looking for. And while there's probably a flood of neutrinos pouring out of there, it would take a hundred thousand gallons of chlorine and six months to track them down. No," the physicist concluded with a shake of his head, "what we need to do is plan for the worst case."

Lenat pulled a pen from his pocket and carefully flattened a paper napkin on the table. He scribbled as he spoke, pausing now and then to adjust his notes. "Now if we assume for a moment that Eisler is sane, then we have a finite amount of time to find a reversal to the reaction. I would say that our chance for success will end as soon as the walls of the core chamber are breached. The question is . . . how long? And to answer that, I'll need a little time with Eisler's notes. And once we know how much time we have, we'll need to find the cure. For that, I'm going to need some help."

Lenat dropped the pen and offered the napkin to the General.

"This is a list of names," Hastings frowned.

"The best minds in the business, General. I suggest you bring them here, whatever it takes."

"But what if it's all for nothing?" Hastings shook his head weakly. "What if he really is mad?"

Lenat drew a weary breath as he came to his feet, casting a last disapproving look at the offerings of the vending machines.

"What if he isn't, General?"

"Adrian."

Lenat dropped the pen at the sound of his name. It skittered away across

the floor of the control room, finding a hiding place amidst the papers that lay littered around him.

Kettering looked over from his seat by the console, waiting for Lenat to nod before he hit the switch on the intercom.

"I'm here, George. I'm still going through your notes, and I have some questions."

"No more time, Adrian." The voice faltered, and Lenat's name was little more than a ghost in the static. "You'll have to answer the questions yourself. I think . . . I think it's over for me."

"George, we have to get you out of there." Lenat came to his feet, moving closer to the wall of plexiglas. "It might be worth the chance."

"I don't think so, Adrian." Eisler spoke slowly, each word an effort of self-discipline. "I don't really believe there's anything that anyone can do about what I've started here. And I'm certain in what I said before. This is the *purpose*, Adrian. And yet . . ." He drifted into a temporary silence, and Lenat imagined him running a bony hand through his hair as he searched his mind. "And yet a part of me doesn't want to give up. I think that's why I brought you into this, Adrian. If there's anyone in the world who can stop it, you can. But you'll need the core chamber intact. If we open the door, it's over. You know that I'm right. Still . . . I'm sorry, Adrian. I really am. . . ."

"You've got to hang on, George." Lenat shook his head, suddenly afraid of being alone with the truth. "Just a little longer."

It was a plea and a prayer, but he had the sickening certainty that it went no farther than the wall of plastic in front of his face.

The intercom hissed on in answer, and Lenat felt his heart racing as he closed his eyes. He waited a long time before he returned to his seat and the equations that had become Eisler's epitaph.

"Gentlemen," Lenat said wearily as he rose to his feet.

The faces around the table stared back in what had become the standard mixture of fatigue and fear and disbelief. Chandler of CalTech stood by the door of the control room, still sporting the tennis shorts and sneakers that had been his uniform on arrival at the facility. Abrahms from Cornell was standing next to him, gulping coffee in Sunday church clothes. A dozen other pairs of eyes watched as Lenat rumpled through the fist of papers, each wondering when the bizarre nightmare was going to burst and give them back their everyday existence.

"I suppose we've reached a consensus," Lenat continued. "What I propose to do is give our rough calculations to the Army scientists and let them do the final work on the big computers." He glanced around the circle of scientists, searching for any sign of disagreement.

"We have to be sure, Lenat." Abrahms tossed his empty cup towards a trash can already overflowing with crumpled paper. "We haven't even discussed the consequences of what you're proposing, assuming the reaction is

stopped. We're talking about the detonation of more than a hundred megatons! And while I'm not a structural engineer, I *know* this facility is not far enough underground to contain the blast." The mathematician shook his head and cleared his throat, as if the mere thought were physically uncomfortable.

"You're probably right." Lenat nodded. "But I don't think we have the luxury of concern. Our only objective is halting the reaction in the core chamber. And if the external temperature readings are a sign, time is running out."

He paused to look over his shoulder and out through the wall of plexiglas. The laboratory surrounding the core chamber had been transformed into a bustle of activity as military technicians ferried a steady stream of new equipment into place.

"In fact, the Army might tell us that there isn't time even now to engineer the kind of detonation we need." Lenat turned back toward Abrahms and raised his eyebrows, waiting for further protest.

"Lenat!"

Hastings's harsh tone ended the discussion, and the physicist turned towards the doorway with the bundle of notes still in his hand.

"We have the final details to pass to your people, General." Lenat offered the papers, but Hastings merely turned and led the way into the corridor.

"You're *all* mad," the general accused, wheeling on the physicist when the door had closed behind them. "Kettering told me the basis of your recommendations, Lenat. Do you really expect me to take this to Washington? You want to detonate twelve thermonuclear war heads simultaneously around the core chamber? We're only a hundred and fifty feet underground, for God's sake. You'll blow a crater here a mile wide! You'll have the equivalent of a major ground strike, and all the downwind radiation effects to go with it." He stared hard at the physicist, praying for some sign of weakness amidst the lines of weariness in Lenat's face.

"I understand your concern, General." Lenat tried to wipe the fatigue from his eyes. "But it doesn't matter any more. This will be our only chance to stop the reaction. *If* the warheads are placed in perfect symmetry, *if* they can be detonated in absolute unison, and *if* the resulting shock wave is powerful enough to drive the edges of the space-time lattice back together . . . *maybe* we'll succeed." His voice grew steadily softer as he spoke, and the final word was nothing more than a whisper.

Hastings listened with the look of a condemned man, the color draining from his face. "I pray to God you know what you're doing."

"Perhaps you shouldn't bother." Lenat pushed the wad of papers into the general's hand. "If Eisler was right about everything, we might soon lose our place as the chosen children of whatever God inhabits this universe."

He drew a long breath, pausing in the doorway of the control room. "We'll need another facility for remote control, General. We'll need it

soon." Then he turned and left Hastings alone in the silent corridor.

It took the ceaseless efforts of thirty physicists, a hundred Army engineers, and several hundred technicians, but in the span of thirty-six hours the laboratory had been transformed from a place of science into the womb of a man-made Hell. At the center of all the activity, the target chamber had disappeared behind an intricate scaffolding that supported the dozen hydrogen bombs. The floor and the ceiling had both been excavated to allow the complete enclosure of the chamber. And all around were stacks of electronics whose only purpose would be fulfilled in the simultaneous triggering of all twelve weapons.

Lenat moved slowly around the edge of the room, a few remaining shards of the plexiglas wall grinding underfoot. For an instant, he caught a mental glimpse of what the bureaucracies in the Pentagon and the Capitol must have suffered to accomplish so much so quickly. They were inventing flight in a single day, going to the moon in an afternoon, dragging God from the plaster of the Sistine Chapel, and making Him the enemy.

"Dr. Lenat," Colonel Kettering intruded quietly. "It's time to leave. The rest of your colleagues are already at the remote control facility."

Lenat stirred from his reverie, nodding as he rubbed the two days of stubble on his chin. "Just looking for the one thing we might have forgotten," he mumbled. "So many parameters, so many dominoes that have to fall just so . . ."

"We have to go, Dr. Lenat," the colonel insisted evenly. "There's nothing more to be done here."

In that he was surely wrong, but Lenat decided that Eisler would have enjoyed the final spectacle his cremation was going to cause. He gave a final glance at the temporary mausoleum of his friend and then allowed the colonel to lead him out of the laboratory and into the impossibly bright sunshine of an autumn afternoon.

"The following is a special report."

The voice of the commentator jumped from the radio, almost eager with the excitement of a major disaster.

"A spokesman at the Pentagon in Washington has just released the following statement: At eight forty-two Eastern Standard Time yesterday evening, a serious explosion took place at an Army weapons development center in southern New Mexico. Initial reports that the explosion involved nuclear weapons have been confirmed, though the actual size of the detonation is still under investigation. Plans for the evacuation of Alamogordo, Las Cruces, and a number of smaller towns in southern New Mexico are already being enacted by the authorities . . ."

Lenat turned from the control console as the words of the announcer filtered across the crowded room. Then someone hit a switch, and the humming silence returned.

"The drone is over ground zero," a technician announced, drawing Lenat's gaze back to the makeshift console.

A row of television screens stared back in gray emptiness, and Lenat felt his hands curling into nervous fists as he waited for a glimpse of their handiwork.

"Give us a damned visual," Hastings grumbled, edging up beside the physicist.

The screens flickered in unison, flaring red for a moment as the cameras adjusted to the harsh light of sunrise.

Then the image settled into focus, and Lenat felt his own breath escape with a gasp. The earth below the drone had been transformed into a charred and gaping wound, while the ground itself was black and shining with the remnants of the fireball.

Lenat held his breath as the cameras panned the horizon, finding only the glassy dust that rose on the unfelt wind.

"Infrared scan complete," someone announced in his headset. "We show negative."

"Damn!" Hastings clapped his hands like a child, and his voice was sharp with relief. "You *did* it, you son of a bitch. You killed it."

"Perhaps . . ." Lenat answered absently, though he still watched the alien landscape they had created. And somehow the sounds of jubilation that rippled through the room failed to wash away his own lingering fear.

Was God so easily beaten? He shook his head as Eisler's words surfaced like an unwanted predator in his mind. "*It's not the dark we should fear . . . it's the light.*"

But there was no light here in this new corner of Hell, and the beacons that burned far away in the night skies could wait for another generation. He would live his life, watch his children grow up, and die a brittle old man in bed.

Lenat nodded at last and sank into a chair in front of the console. He closed his eyes as he thought of his wife and the comfortable house he would see again.

"It's over, damn it," Hastings growled in triumph as he laid a heavy hand on the physicist's shoulder. "It's *over* . . ."

And the general's words would ring true for a while.

But the first snows of winter had yet to come when the reconnaissance satellites discovered the burning point of light in the dark of a Russian night, and the hand of God reached out from a secret, nameless place in the heart of Siberia.

Though past master of novelization, Alan Dean Foster also produces excellent original works. So, don't miss his novels Into the Out of (Warner) and Makawe Maitai (Berkley). His newest Commonwealth novel, The Deluge Drivers, will be released by Del Rey Books in 1987.

Alan's last appearance in Amazing's pages was his story "Batrachian," which was published in our September 1985 issue.

The *Challenger* disaster notwithstanding, the space shuttle remains a marvel of modern technology and aerospace design. Unfortunately, it also remains a delivery system in search of a mission: overbuilt, overdesigned, and unnecessarily life-threatening.

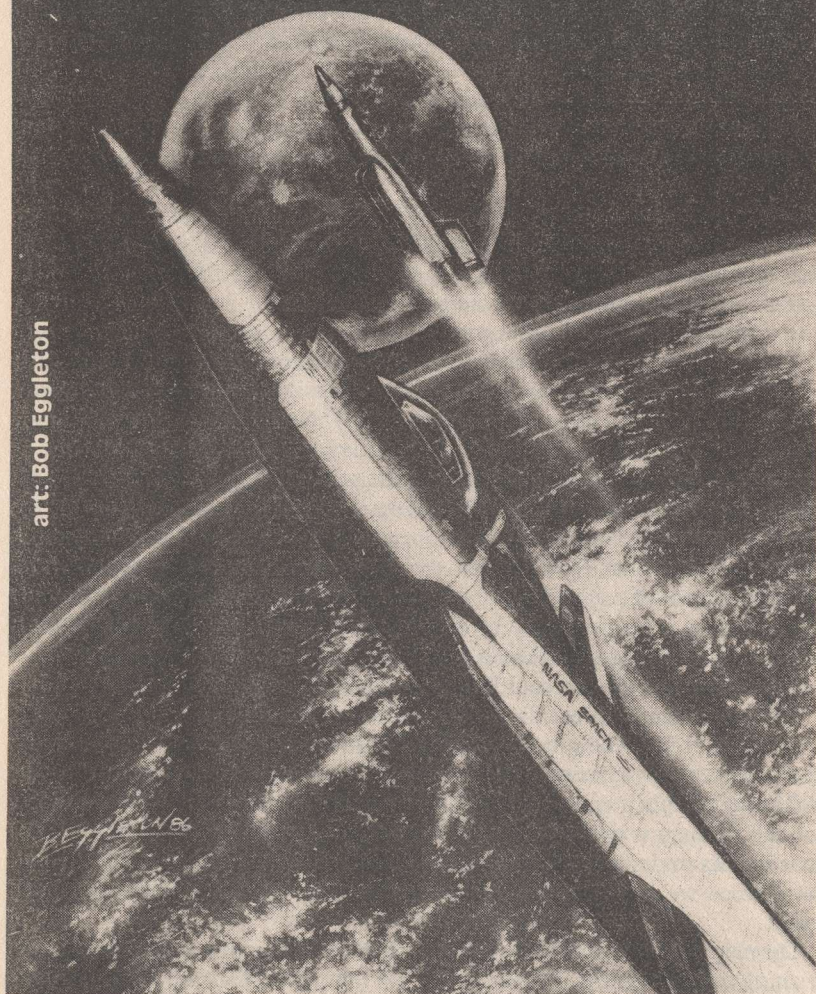
Every shuttle flight essentially entails placing a self-contained space station in orbit and then bringing it back home again. It is neither shuttle nor station. It's time we returned to the drawing boards to re-examine our options and especially to rethink proven technologies temporarily set aside.

It should be obvious to anyone that the safest and most efficient way to place heavy payloads in space is by means of large unmanned booster rockets such as the Titan-Centaur, European Ariane, or some new configuration. The argument is made that only the shuttle can place as much as 10,000 pounds of payload in orbit. This will change in 1988 when the Air Force begins accepting delivery of an upgraded Titan launcher capable of lofting a similar payload. And if still larger lifting capacity is required, the reliable Saturn-5 system could be revived and updated.

The space shuttle presents another problem inherent with its design. Any trucker will tell you one-way cargo hauls are bad business. Proceeding to a destination only to have to return home empty is commercially worse than dubious. Yet this is exactly what the shuttle does on nearly every flight. Fiscal inefficiency is as much a part of its makeup as the heat-shielding tiles that line its underside. Yet unmanned booster rockets are not the sole solution, since we are irrevocably committed to the manned development of space.

Development of a hypersonic plane capable of reaching low orbit and returning to Earth under its own power has long been discussed. Such a craft

art: Bob Eggleton



would require the development of a great deal of new technology. Nor does it address the economic problem. We would still be paying to return a large, empty vehicle to its point of origin.

There is a way to continue manned space exploration that is safer, simpler, and far more cost-effective than either the shuttle or hyperspace options. It makes use of existing, even old technology.

The answer is simple: separation of payload from people.

Extrapolating from and updating the technology which was responsible for the X-15 rocket plane offers a means of placing astronauts in low orbit at far less cost and in much greater safety than does the shuttle. The X-15 was on the verge of conquering space itself when the press of international events (i.e., the early Soviet manned space successes) compelled the powers-that-be to turn away from space plane design and back to the use of huge chemical boosters to propel tiny capsules into orbit.

Contemporary aerospace design is leagues beyond what the X-15's builders had to work with. A greatly upgraded and modernized X-15 would be a true shuttle, a space commuting aircraft (SPACA) able to reach orbit and return to Earth many more times and with much greater frequency than any shuttle.

The proposed SPACA vehicle would carry a crew of one or two in addition to two passengers. Without the need to wrestle monster payloads into orbit, the SPACA could be built smaller and cheaper. Its sole task would be to loft astronauts and mission specialists into space and return them safely.

Conventional aircraft carried the old X-15s to launch altitude. Subsequent to the termination of the rocket plane program, new aircraft have been built which can fly far faster and higher than the X-15's support craft. A modified B1-B bomber, Concorde, or other supersonic aircraft could deliver a small X-15-type SPACA to the upper edge of the atmosphere safely and regularly, much as F-16 fighters currently fire experimental anti-satellite missiles into space. Such a launch aircraft would constitute a reusable, piloted substitute for the massive, expensive, and highly explosive solid- and liquid-fuel booster systems currently employed for shuttle delivery.

Putting such vehicles in orbit would preclude the need for expensive and complex launch facilities such as those at Cape Canaveral and Vandenberg Air Force Base. The SPACA system could use many existing commercial and military airports — a great boon to NASA and especially to the military.

Once it has reached maximum delivery altitude, the SPACA vehicle will detach itself from its booster aircraft, ignite its rocket motors, and rise into orbit. There, it will rendezvous either with a space station or a concomitantly launched unmanned payload delivered by a conventional booster system. Scientists and other mission specialists will perform their work on board the space station instead of in the cramped quarters of a shuttle where they are hindered by time as well as space restrictions.

Consider all the advantages.

Safety: The SPACA utilizes a reusable conventional-type aircraft to reach the edge of space. Aircraft are powered by conventional airplane fuels which are far easier to handle than temperamental solid fuels and hundreds of thousands of pounds of liquid oxygen and hydrogen. At risk are crew and passengers totaling four and a much cheaper spacecraft. The smaller SPACA is more maneuverable in atmosphere than the bulky DC-9-sized shuttle. As it carries a much smaller load of propellants, the risk of catastrophic explosion is minimized. Strain on the entire propulsion system is far less than that to which the shuttle is subjected. Because of the planelike configuration, an effective emergency ejection system might be developed.

Cost: Designed only to deliver four humans into orbit and boosted to sub-orbital altitude by a conventional aircraft, it is reasonable to envision building ten SPACAs for every shuttle. Imagine a fleet of forty instead of four spacecraft rotating flights on a regular schedule. Should several require repair or replacement, it would not throw off delivery programs, whereas the loss of even a single shuttle out of a total fleet of four sets back the entire program.

Versatility: SPACA could be fueled and ready to launch in a matter of hours or days instead of the weeks required for the cumbersome shuttle. The SPACA could land at many sites within the U.S. instead of just at Canaveral or Edwards Air Force Base. On selected missions small payloads could be substituted for the two passengers and delivered directly into orbit. Or the SPACA could carry two satellite repair specialists at far less cost than a shuttle to fix inoperative satellites in orbit.

In the event of a space station emergency (medical, for example), a SPACA could retrieve an ill astronaut and return him to Earth for treatment in less time than it would take to set a shuttle on its launch pad.

An advanced SPACA might be equipped with jet as well as rocket engines and a modest amount of fuel. With a dual or reversible air intake, it could enter the atmosphere stern first, firing its jet engine to slow its descent. This would reduce the amount of delicate and expensive heat shielding currently required by the shuttle. Since it is not a bulky cargo carrier, the SPACA's design could be much more aerodynamic, much more planelike. SPACA equipped with an auxiliary jet could land almost anywhere, in greater safety than the shuttle.


A military SPACA could make the Air Force's high-flying Blackbird spy plane obsolete.

Since it would require so much less fuel, it is possible to envision refueling a SPACA in space from supplies delivered by unmanned boosters. Such a SPACA could then proceed to repair satellites in geosynchronous orbit 22,300 miles above the Earth, beyond the shuttle's range.

Lastly, the development of SPACA would free the shuttle fleet to execute those missions which cannot be carried out by small reusable manned craft or large unmanned boosters, such as recovering and returning to ground

inoperative satellites which cannot be repaired in space. SPACA would thereby greatly extend the life and usefulness of the existing shuttles as well as eliminate the pressure to employ shuttles on a monthly rotational basis. A shuttle could be launched only as needed instead of being expected to carry the entire burden of the current space program. As the success of the Voyager program has already proven, future NASA projects like Galileo and Ulysses do not require the use of a shuttle.

If we truly want an efficient space transportation system, a space truck, let's do as the truckers do and build a separate cab for our drivers and a trailer for our cargo. It will save time, money, and lives, and it can be done with existing technology.

Which means that if we don't do it, the Russians or the Europeans or the Japanese surely will. 



THAT'S ALL, FOLKS

Greetings to you, former foe:
How nice to hear you're on the go,
Unhurt by blast or radiation,
Sole survivor of your nation.
I am also without maim,
A healthy mind in perfect frame.
Lone survivors, you and me;
I guess you'd call it irony
That peace has come to small avail:
It's too bad we both are male.

— Richard Wilson
That's All, Folks 39

A BOMB IN THE HEAD

by David E. Cortesi

art: Janet Aulisio

For the last five years, the author has been a free-lance writer. Besides having had several nonfiction books printed, he writes a monthly column for Dr. Dobb's Journal, a computer magazine. During the last year, when the market for books about personal computers collapsed, he decided to try his hand at fiction instead. This sale, then, is his first in the fiction market.

A man with a bomb in his head has no sense of discretion. Woody's periodic roar, a great, savage *ka-blooey* bursting through the woolly murmur of the PA speakers, echoed across the marble plain of MidAmerica Transfer minutes before I saw him breasting the streams of evening commuters. His explosions had been quieter lately, so I didn't need to see the signs of distress — one arm bracing his head, the other arm hugging his own stomach in its stained sweatshirt, and the disarray of his stringy hair — to know that something on this assignment had triggered his psychosis.

He towered over me on my cart and peered down through his hair. "I have a bomb in my head," he confided. I chopped the back of his left knee, and when he knelt, I reached up and slammed a thumb into his right ear and poked my forefinger into the corner of his mouth.

"There, I've inserted the dampers. You can't go off." His face melted in relief. "Now, give. I sent you to follow a man. Did you?"

He nodded carefully. "Tidy man, black suit, hat. He went to New York," he said, his diction slightly hampered by my finger. "I followed him. I had the debit card you gave me, so I could follow him onto the train."

"You didn't ride in the same car with him?" I've spent a long time drilling my people in the rudiments of the work, but I'm never sure it will stick.

"No, no, no, I took the next car back of him. It was second class but not too crowded. I was right there on the platform when he got off. I was way back; he didn't see me and I followed him right on up."

I could picture the two of them — the impeccable clerk I hoped to stick with adultery and the scrawny hairball I'd set to following him — in the concourse of the restored Grand Central Station. Though it would make no more than a cozy alcove of MidAmerica, it was a big, busy place. "So how did he lose you?"

"He didn't. I stayed right with him, right out onto the street." He looked at me pleadingly. "Hey, I used to live in New York, did you know?"

"Yes, kid, I know. You followed the man and what happened?"

His face screwed up around my finger. I put my arms around him and he



hugged me frantically, almost lifting me off my cart.

"It's all right, Woody. Easy, kid, put me down." I hate losing stump contact with something solid. "Now come on, what did the creep do?"

The creep, it seemed, had gone only a few blocks, straight into the crush and smell of a Manhattan street market. There he'd spoken at length with a crippled flower vendor.

"Were they dickering?" Consorting with prostitutes wasn't the sin I'd contracted to prove, but it would serve. "Did he pay her?"

Woody nodded, then remembered his bomb and braced his head with both hands. "He gave her something and they went into her booth." He stopped to sniff. Tears were leaking steadily from the corners of his eyes. I knew the symptoms; he had to cry quietly for fear of jiggling his head. My man was near to being put out of action; in all likelihood, he'd spend the next week doped to the eyeballs in a public health ward before he'd be kicked back out. Before he stepped around the bend, I wanted to know what had pushed him. Something told me it was important.

"That's great, kid, great; that's what I expected. What happened when he came out?"

Woody had gotten close to the creep while he was talking to the vendor. That wasn't good technique, but in the hubbub of a market it was safe enough. He meant to drift by and wait beyond the booth, so the mark wouldn't pass him if, as seemed likely, he turned back toward Grand Central when he emerged.

But the space beyond the booth was vacant. He'd turned into it. The canvas stopped short of the ground. The bottom of the booth's walls was a row of rusty buckets that, Woody supposed, held water and bundles of flowers. He'd looked up. The winter sky was hazy, so he'd cast no shadow on the canvas. He'd leaned down and peered up past dented metal and green stems.

And had seen a murder done.

For a long time I couldn't get him off the smoothness of the creep's move, the practice it suggested. He'd eased the briefcase to the ground and come up holding a short length of pipe, its butt wrapped in a cloth. The vendor, a black woman with one arm, had bent aside, probably to unfasten her skirt. The creep's swings were apparently quick, flexible, athletic — Woody whispered "like baseball" a few dozen times until I got him off it. The pipe was dropped, the cloth went into the case, the creep was gone.

Woody was too street-wise to involve himself in a corpse. He'd wandered a while, then had taken the train back to me.

"All the way back I had to talk to the bomb. I whispered to it on the train, but I had to shout at it here."

"You did just perfect, kid, perfect," I told him. "You saw something really bad, but it wasn't *your* badness, and you handled it *just* right —" and so forth in this vein until I had him sailing at nearly his usual list and could

send him out to queue up for a meal and a bed. I felt guilty as hell. But how could I have known, when I sent him out, that my poor freak was tailing a Perfectionist?

The pneumatic railroad system, the web of great, clean, evacuated tubes that plunge on geodesic lines through the world's crust, was the last, great public work Earth attained to. After it, the best and brightest of humankind moved out to the orbital arcologies and left the rest to stew. I was one of those smug, shining people, once. I helped to police the elegant structures we built in vacuum, helped enforce the laws that let only certifiably perfect specimens emigrate up from Earth. We called the rest *scum* — a word linked to our image of the home planet as a rotten, mold-draped fruit.

Then a weightless object that massed several tonnes drifted gently across my thighs and brushed my legs away. I doubt that it was an accident. If there is such a thing as justice, I will someday meet the one who launched it. But by the time I was in charge of myself again, I had other problems. An acquired imperfection isn't the same as a genetic one — but try explaining that to the backs of peoples' heads. The only faces I saw were guarded ones that urged me to unmigrate. Wouldn't I be happier where I could, um, be with my own kind? At length I realized that any country is better than Coventry.

So I went down to Earth and, finding no place on its surface, kept going down, into the bowels of the global railways. There, in the crevices of society, among the wackos and crips and incompetents and weirds, I found a place. It wasn't much: geographically, no more than an ungrudged spot beside a shoe-shine booth on the main concourse. There I could park my cart, sell pencils, observe, and meet my people. Financially, I survived due to small retainers from divorce lawyers and private detectives who found that my people could often pass unremarked where no one else could. Socially, I took care of my people. The ones who were capable of gratitude felt it.

Now, by accident, I'd run into the vilest of the pathologies we'd inherited from the departing spacers: the flake whose concern for the race had gotten cross-wired with his own libido, the independent improver of the human gene pool. I dumped my pencils into my pack and scooted off to get my legs.

My prostheses are the finest — because the *only* — ones offered by the Illinois Public Health services. They serve to hold my shoulders high enough to let the crutches slip under them. With them, I walk slightly better than the average three-legged stool would. I use my cart when I want to get someplace fast, but without legs or a chair, you can't get high enough to see into a public phone.

Like the one in which I faced the cigar-end of Donna Bramanga, attorney-at-law. "You got my dirty snapshots, Wallace?" She wanted to know.

"What's my client's soon-to-be ex-husband doing when he skips work? I mean who?"

"He's a cripple-basher, Donna."

"He's a what?"

"A roach-rubber. A slug-stomper."

"What's that, Upstairs talk? I don't know what you're trying to tell me." But she could tell I was serious; her cigar was going like a flashlight.

"He takes the train to anywhere, heads for the seamy part of town, finds a cripple or freako, kills it, and slides home showing all his teeth in a big grin."

There was a long pause. "You know this?"

"I have an eyewitness."

"One of your wackos?"

"What's the matter, Donna? This is even better than adultery, isn't it? You'd have a divorce like a shot."

She covered her eyes. "It isn't the *divorce*, you fool, it's the *settlement*. Convicts are wards of the state; it takes their property to pay their keep, plus in jail he won't have a salary for support payments. If that turd is convicted of what you say, he's judgment-proof." She rubbed her eyes. "So do you have proof?"

"Just the witness."

"Pictures, travel records? A corpse?"

"Not with me, no. According to the national police blotter file, a corpse of the right size bearing the right damage was collected this afternoon. I'm sure I could get more, now I know his pattern."

"Oh no, thank you very much." She considered me. "I'll pay you for your time, um, plus a bonus. And I'll, um, speak to some of my friends, have 'em send you some work. Good enough? And you forget about this guy."

"Forget him?" I leaned as far toward the screen as my crutches would let me; the motors in my knees hummed. "Lady, I want him *arrested*. He's a psychopath; he's killed no telling how many."

She gave me a big cheerful smile. "Wallace, that's *fine*. You used to be a policeman, you can still do that stuff, incredible in your condition — that's *terrific*. You keep your eye on this guy for, let's say, a week. I can get a good settlement in a week. Then you can have him. Just let it ride for a week, and you can have him."

Ah. Suddenly I could see the vision in her head: the polished desk, the leather chairs. Bramanga, the judge, the creep, the wife, meeting to finalize the settlement in a sudden, uncontested divorce action. The judge looks up surprised, asks the creep if he agrees to these terms. "Oh sure," Bramanga would say around her cigar, "he agrees. Just like we talked about on the phone last night, isn't that right?" On the phone, when she would have dropped just enough of a hint to let the creep think she knew more about his field trips than she really did. But she was honest for a lawyer; she'd only

blackmail him on her client's account. Probably.

But even a little blackmail would put him off his game, and with the sudden departure of his family obligations, he might change his patterns. He'd certainly change his address. I'd never see him again.

I forced myself to smile back at her. "Okay, a week. I guess I'll need it to get him all set up anyway. But don't make me wait any longer; I want this creep." Oh, Wallace, you tiger, you.

We signed off in a crossfire of false smiles.

"Slug, it's Wallace. Let me in, please." It was dark. There was an echoing gulf behind me and loose rubble under my crutches and plastic feet. There was a brief hum above me. A camera on a servo head?

A hundred feet below there was a light. From another two hundred up and to the right, I heard a long, hysterical giggle. A cold drop smacked my forehead as I looked toward the light. Then a flat, electronic voice near my ear said, "One sec pal."

The concourse of MidAmerica Transfer is a vast, domed, cylindrical space through which millions of people pass each week. Do as many as six ever stop to consider that this polished marble drum must have a thickness, a structure? Yet it has: a tall, narrow torus of darkness furnished with structural steel, rough plaster, nests of re-bar; bounded by dripping cliffs of Illinois basement rock; banded by catwalks. Some thousands of people call it home, including my friends Slug and Snail.

There was a snick, and a dim red light came on to show me a low door. The doorway had been hacked into a metal wall. Steel jambs had been tacked down around it by someone who was no craftsman with a torch. It wasn't pretty, but I knew it was secure, the common shell of two very tender gastropods.

There was only standing room in the tiny vestibule. Beyond, the floor rose to waist height. I leaned back onto the ledge and shed my hardware, leaving legs and crutches standing to wiggle into a glossy burrow. The floor and walls were of hardened foam, the floor warm on my stumps as I knuckled over it. Spaces opened at random, there were pillows everywhere, and each niche had a different texture. It was a place for people who spent a lot of time on the floor.

I swung into the den: a mirror-ball turned inside out, a polyhedron whose inner faces were display screens. In the center Slug reclined in an inflatable chair, draped with wires. He waved the forearm he controlled; the other posed over his wracked body like a model of a derrick. I looked over his shoulder as I started the back rub that was our ritual greeting.

(16, MANDRAKE) IS THE SLUG STILL HERE? one of his network correspondents wrote on the screen.

(16, ZYZZYX) HAVEN'T SEEN HIM IN A WHILE, typed another.

LATER, FOLK, typed Slug. I could hear the apparatus clicking between his

teeth. MY MASSEUR IS HERE (GRIN RUB).

(16, MANDRAKE) LUCKY SLUGGO, responded one, and (16, BEAR) WISH I WUZ RICH, said another. More messages flowed up the screen, but Slug had switched his tongue control from the keyboard to his voice.

"Long time Wall ass," said the voice from the air. "High air pleez. Ooh fin gers."

"That's right, spoil him." Snail, a redhead gamine, rolled into the room from another tunnel, belly-down on an old skateboard, propelling herself with deft thrusts of her flippers. "That's all I hear about for days, is fingers."

"Puh tee in your hanz."

"Good," I said. "Help me catch a killer."

"Really?" asked Snail eagerly. "Not just a dumb skip-trace?"

"What do you have now?" asked Slug.

"No, a Perfectionist. Slug, all I have is his picture, his work address in the Loop, and his hours. That's all my principal gave me; it was enough to spot and follow him when he went out for lunch and a little mayhem."

"Add ress." Slug's arm waved at a keyboard.

"I'll take the picture," said Snail, and lipped it from my fingers as I held it out. By the time I'd finished typing the address, the creep's face, coarsened by digitizing, had appeared on one of the monitors overhead. Not long after, company names began to appear on another. Slug's program was skimming a Chicago business directory, selecting names with that building's address. A few minutes after each appeared, it was joined by a string of digits: an IRS employer number. Soon a burst of names began to roll up another monitor.

"Who are they?" I asked.

"Wor kers."

"That's my clever Slug," commented Snail, wiggling onto the couch beside him. "See what he's done?"

"He's tapped the IRS, and I'm leaving."

"Puh bleek rec urdz."

"You bet, we don't fool with the feds. But most of what a company files with the IRS the State wants too, and a lot of that is public record — if you know where it is. These names are from unemployment insurance files, selected by employer numbers. But where will you get pictures, lover?"

"Come you ter bad gez."

"Of course. Oh, you are so *sneaky*!" She hugged her roommate.

"I don't see it."

"You can't enter the business district at rush hour without a city commuter badge, showing you paid your transit tax. The badges have pictures; the pictures are in the computer. Some computer. We'll find it." She eyed me. "It'll be a while, sport. Meanwhile, there's more than one back around here that could use rubbing."

* * *

Snail said, "That's him!" as I yelled, "Stop!"

The parade of blocky ID photos stopped, leaving one beside the picture Bramanga had given me. Now we had a photo, a name, an employer, and a social security number. From these, we could learn anything there was to be known about the creep, except possibly why he had done what he did in New York. Or maybe that was there, too.

"Slug, just for curiosity . . ." And I reeled off from memory the network address of the Orbital Emigration Authority. "Yes, good. Select applicant status." The tongue control rattled. "Say yes; say yes; say no. Type his SSN. Uh-huh, bingo."

The creep had a standing application to emigrate Upstairs. He renewed it monthly, paying a stiff fee for each renewal. I knew those fees; we used to dangle losers on a string as long as we could, extracting fees that made a comfortable plus in our budget. "The sucker."

"Why a sucker?" Snail asked.

"See under eye color?"

"What's wrong with hazel eyes? I have hazel eyes."

"OEA would sure say you have, sweets. An applicant with a prayer of going up has eyes of blue, green, or brown. One they'll never, never let up, but don't want to let down too hard, is entered as azure, hazel, or umber instead. When you call, they shunt you to the special reps who butter you up."

"Not nice," Slug remarked.

"This guy they can mug as often as they like. But I don't see how to get him."

"Fall oh and catch with red handz."

"That's just it, Slug — red hands are more than a metaphor with this guy. He goes out for jollies from his office, but not every day. What days? I had Woody staking him for a week before he went out. And then where? On the railroad, he can go a long way in an afternoon. And while I believe Woody, no cop would — at least not enough to tail a solid citizen on his story alone."

"And if we don't catch him on his next run, somebody else dies?" Snail questioned.

"I'm afraid so. I just wish there were some way we could get him to perform at a known time and place."

Snail looked at me steadily. "I know a way."

"No," said Slug's electronic voice. "No. No dice. No way. No."

Chilly air puffed by and a flake of snow settled on my sleeve. "Pretty nice place," puffed Mister Teeth, looking around in the shadowy cement skeleton. A breeze rattled the canvas walls of vendors' booths. I looked back. His breath steamed as he drove the shopping cart — in which I reclined — up the motionless glideway from the depths of the St. Louis depot.

"You like this? I must show you the Jersey shore someday." As with most

older rail stations, the shaft of the one in St. Louis had been capped with an immense, gaunt parking structure through which all its traffic passed. Now busses and taxis looped the ground floor amid the usual street market, while the upper floors were the unheated, unsanitary roosts of the otherwise homeless. "What could you possibly like about it?"

"A tight roof, man, and no cops. Over there?" He nodded into the dimness beyond a cab rank, where I could see dark figures around the glow of a fire. "In Seattle, Phoenix, most places they come down quick if you light a fire. But here. Smell? That's been burning a while. Wonder where they got wood?"

"I don't want to know. The whole place makes me twitch. We want a booth just over there, where the people off the busses turn down the ramp. Let's find out who we have to grease, and git."

Thanks to Slug and Snail, I knew everything the public record had to say about Prentice Dillon Wellingham, psychotic killer of St. Louis, Mississippi Region, North American Union. And a bit more. Slug used the computer net for society and to feed his prisoned mind, scrupulously avoiding any hint of UDR, of the felony of Unauthorized Data Retrieval. But when Snail dealt herself in, Slug began to bend rules. Now I had a number that I could dial from any public phone. When I did, the screen would light with the last sixteen interactions that Wellington had had with any credit system, anywhere. I could see when he got on a bus or train and when he got off, when he used a public toilet, when he bought a paper. In a day I knew his route to work: two busses in St. Louis, the train to MidAmerica, surface train into Chicago.

That night Mr. Teeth and I rented a market booth he'd have to pass; at dawn we were back, a flotilla of shopping carts, to stock it with flowers. And with an impudent, phocomelic vendor with red hair and hazel eyes.

"Bouquet for your girlfriend, mister?"

"Did you see him?"

"You could tie it on that nice crutch, cheer you up."

"Did he see you?"

"Maybe. I waved at him. Buy or move on, I got my rent to earn."

That night, the flow of upward commuters was pinched between the line of booths and two bag ladies in colossal argument over the custody of a shopping cart. No: bag *persons*; Eugenia is no lady, and Blanche seems somehow beyond notions of gender.

"What did he say?"

"Violets, hey. Buncha violets!"

"Dammit, I saw his lips move."

"It wasn't nice. Hey, violets here!"

"Snail, *answer me!*"

She looked at me. "He called me some things — 'immoral scum' was one I recall — then he spit at me. But it was all real private, as if he couldn't hold it in but still didn't want to be noticed. He is a *mean* man, Wallace."

"He's as witless and as deadly as a train wreck. I will be back shortly." And I went to rob a railroad security man and call my bent cosmetologist.

With Mr. Teeth for muscle, I preempted the only working pay phone in the St. Louis depot's upper levels and settled down. Slug called at two A.M.

"Heez in a cab."

"That's fine. Call me when he gets out again."

"Heel be there then dam it."

"No, he won't." And of course, he wasn't. He left one cab, walked two blocks, took another, left it, walked, took a third.

"This should be the last leg. I'll go get ready."

"Pleez be care full pleez."

"He won't touch her, I swear."

"He does and you die Wall ass."

Brave words, bravely meant on both sides. Yet despite all my care, I nearly blew it, nearly lost our precious bait, through the simplest of errors: expecting sense from a maniac.

He came easing down the ramp, casual among the scattered strollers, people on their way home from a night out in Old Saint Loo, the city-run red-light district. From my peephole under the counter, I wondered where he would carry the pipe club, since he lacked a briefcase. Up a sleeve of his jacket? Yes, in the last steps before our booth I spotted the stiffness of the left arm. A bus pulled out in the distance and masked the brief conversation over my head. All Snail would say later was "He was very direct."

Our scenario played to plan for several seconds: the dicker, the agreement, and Snail's retreat. She was in a light chair, and needed only to tug on a line strung beside it to roll herself back to the curtained rear half of the booth. At that point the curtain was supposed to swing over her, and in the seconds it took the creep to come around the counter and lift it again, Woody would pull her another meter, out the back of the booth, out of danger. Then I'd pop the sleep grenade I'd stolen from a security man, and the lights would go out for the creep, alone and out of sight.

I think now that the plan derailed on the creep's own realization of the extent of Snail's disability: he'd expected her to walk away from the counter. Who knows what connections arced in his mind when he comprehended her truncated torso? One of his hands slapped the counter — the fingers curled, white with pressure, around the edge of the board just above my head. The other snatched at the clothesline — a few inches of the pipe slipping out

from the cuff — as if to pull the chair back. The rope jerked from under Snail's abbreviated arm, and the chair, jostled askew, stopped. The curtain lapped against it but didn't close. Tableau for the eternity of a heartbeat.

Then the creep stepped around the counter-end. Possessed, he moved with the slippery grace of a predatory animal, his head sweeping around to see if anyone was watching, one arm flicking the length of pipe out into his hand, one foot rising to push Snail's chair into the dark behind the curtain, and the other arm reaching up to draw the curtain around them. I almost froze, looking up at this performance from beside his thigh.

As he brought the curtain around, I rolled the grenade under it and began to swarm up his trunk like a monkey on a tree. Sleep gas takes effect in seconds, they say. I swear we struggled, panted, hissed curses for hours, but eventually we toppled over the chair into darkness. I recall being delighted, as my wits faded out, at the amount of effort he'd wasted in trying to kick my legs out from under me.


"Oh jeez you guys. What then what then."

"What then, Slug, is that we all went to sleep. When the booth stopped wiggling like a sack of cats, Woody and Mr. Teeth held their noses and opened the back to air it out. Then they tied up the creep, and Doctor Robert came and did what I hired him for. By the time Snail and I woke up, he was done and gone."

"And the eye browz."

"Gone, yes. It was the most benign disfigurement I could figure out: permanent depilation of his eyebrows. If he has a scrap of sanity left on the subject, he'll survive it."

But he hadn't, and didn't. Two days later Woody — hands not bracing his head but easy at his sides — brought me word that Slug's watchdog on the national blotter file had found it, an unimportant suicide in St. Louis.

"See, Woody," I told him. "Everyone has a bomb in his head. You just have to find the fuse." 

AN EXTRATERRESTRIAL, ISH

An extraterrestrial, Ish,
At a restaurant on Earth ate the fish,
 The prime rib and the veal
 Which tasted unreal —
But the menu itself was delish!

— Mike Curry

MESSIAH

by John Gregory Betancourt
art: Stephen E. Fabian

The author has been a frequent contributor to Amazing® Stories, both as a writer and as an editor. He has recently formed a literary agency with George Scithers and Darrell Schweitzer, and informs us that things are moving along quite nicely.

He has recently sold a fantasy novel, The Blind Archer, to Avon, and is in the process of completing another, The Pirates of Zelloque, portions of which have appeared in these pages as the Brothers Lammiat stories.

We slipped into realspace and found ourselves in a maelstrom.

Dazzling streaks of white light flared on the hundreds of video monitors around the room. Alarms began to ring. Several of the more delicate instruments burned out at once, throwing off showers of sparks. I was frozen for what seemed an eternity, but it couldn't have been more than a second — fast reflexes were a requirement for starship captains like me.

But despite my quickness, Luathek, my alien engineer, was faster still. He leaped into a vacant seat and strapped himself in, powering up the weapons station. His four eyestalks writhed excitedly. Around us, the other crew members touched religious medallions and whispered prayers to their god as they bent to their duties.

The computer projected its war tact grid onto my right retina the instant our computer noticed the fight. I looked it over and tripped all the defense mechanisms — an automatic response that had been drilled into me a thousand, thousand times at the Academy. A force shield rose around the *Trim Dreamer*. Her alarm claxons grew muted and distant, background noise. The control room had been sealed away from the rest of the ship, becoming an isolated world unto itself.

Throughout the *Trim Dreamer*, weapons readied themselves to fire. Hatches slid back in the hull, revealing laser turrets, atomic cannons, a hundred different weapons. You didn't mess with trader ships — even ones equipped for mining, like mine — if you wanted easy prey.

"Kel," Luathek called to me, "we have not been hit. The battle is ranging farther ahead of us."

"Hold our position," I said to the navigator.

A hologram showed me the situation: fifty kilometers ahead, another ship lay under attack, and the attackers were the gaseous energy-creatures known to sometimes inhabit stars. These aliens were smaller than the ones I'd seen

before — each perhaps ten meters long — and they glowed like paper lanterns with flames inside. They seemed to be using some sort of plasma technology: rather than attacking the ship themselves, they held back a good ten kilometers and fired bolt after bolt of sizzling energy. Most trailed off harmlessly into the void, but quite a few struck the other ship's shields. The shots that had come near my ship had been strays from the fight. But, from lectures I had heard at the Academy about contact with these creatures and from personal experience, I knew I couldn't trust the star-creatures not to attack us. They were, after all, defending their territory.

Sure enough, within a minute, several of them had turned toward us and had begun firing. The few shots that hit the *Trim Dreamer's* shields were weak, though, and didn't even approach the lower limits of our defense capacity. If this was the best they could offer, we had nothing to worry about.

The other vessel, I knew without looking, had to be the Free Trader ship *Marrow Falcon*. We'd made an agreement with the League to mine this system and process its minerals, and we were to have shared the profits and expenses. The agreement had been but reluctantly signed on their part, though. They hadn't wanted any help, but couldn't have mined Aldema Proxima's rich asteroid belts without it.

Before we'd become partners, Ulega Max and the *Falcon's* other Ship's Council members had tried to hire me as captain of their vessel, but I'd refused. I hadn't trusted them then, and I didn't trust them now. I'd never quite been able to say exactly *why*, but their seeming lack of morals made me uneasy, as if they wouldn't have minded if they strayed outside the law. I minded, though, so I'd signed on with the *Dreamer* instead — and hadn't regretted it for a moment.

I noticed two burned-out wrecks of small shuttles on the hologram. They floated, lifeless hulks, a scant kilometer from the *Falcon's* bow. A jolt of shock and anger and betrayal ran through me. I suddenly knew how Ulega Max and the other members of the *Falcon's* Ship's Council had gotten themselves into this situation: they'd ordered the mining to begin without waiting for my arrival.

I turned my attention to their ship. The *Falcon's* shields glowed redly, but seemed to be holding — though I couldn't begin to guess how long they'd stand up against the creatures' bombardment. Still, the danger wasn't as pressing as it might have been. I had time to ponder my actions carefully.

"Tech Tebwah," I said to my communications officer. "I want to talk to the captain of the *Falcon*. Try to raise him."

"Yes, sir," she said. The double-helix medallion around her throat — symbolizing Ghu, the god of Free Traders — glinted at me as she turned to the communications console for a moment, then looked back. "Sir, Ulega Max wishes to speak with you."

"I want to speak with the captain, not him."



"Captain, he says he *is* the acting captain."

I cursed and punched him up on my private viewscreen. Ulega's face, scarred from decades' exposure to nullspace power fields, seemed unnaturally serene as he smiled at me. "Ah, Captain Corrian! It's good to see you again."

"I thought you were supposed to hire a new captain before coming here."

"I did." His face hardened. "He died an hour ago, aboard the first shuttle."

"Dying," I said, "seems to be a habit among the captains you hire."

"And to think we almost hired you."

I tried to figure that out — and wound up going in circles. An insult? A compliment? I couldn't tell. At last, with a dubious shake of my head, I shrugged. I didn't like him, and certainly didn't trust him. "Your shields appear to be holding well enough. What do you propose to do?"

"I was just about to set off a round of atomics when you arrived. As our new partner, why don't *you* take care of it?"

After a moment, I nodded. Perhaps it *would* be better for me to handle the matter. He certainly lacked any subtlety.

I said, "I'll take care of it."

"Good." His smile was oily. "Do so, then we'll talk." He severed the connection.

Leaning back, I thought over my options carefully. It seemed I only had one: attack. How else could I assure the safety of our ships?

"Kel," Luathek said softly. He'd unstrapped himself and come to my side while I talked to Ulega Max. A Pavian, he looked more human than most of the races mankind found among the stars. He had a short, squat, gray-skinned body, two arms and two legs, four finger-thin eyestalks atop his tufted head, a nose like a spatula, and a small, delicate mouth.

He shifted uncomfortably now, as if reminding me of his presense. Like all Pavians, he was empathic — he shared my emotions. We'd become closer than brothers after our scout ship crash-landed on a dismal, swampy, backwater world four years before. He'd bound my wounds, set my broken bones, and kept me alive and well until rescuers arrived seven weeks later. Since that time, our lives had been as one. We'd shipped out together with Free Traders once on a short job, served as minor officers aboard a number of small freighters, and finally managed to pass the tests that qualified us for positions as officers. Luck — being in the right place at the right time — had given me the captainship of the *Trim Dreamer*, even though I wasn't born of Trader parents. I'd made sure Luathek came with me.

"What is it?" I asked him.

"The aliens — I know they have intelligences!"

"I can see that; after all, they're using complex weapons."

"No, you are not understanding me. I *know* it. Their emotions are strong . . . I feel their fear, and anger."

I remembered the Pavian's empathic abilities then, remembered how he picked up emotions from not just me, but all those around him. And sometimes, in moments of great stress or fear or need, he managed to pick up thoughts, his empathy turning to true telepathy for a short time. *Perhaps, I thought, he'd be able to communicate with any star-creatures, reason with them, work out some sort of trade agreement.* Since the Aldema Proxima system was not colonized and contact with any star-creatures infrequent, it was not surprising that such communication had never been done before, but perhaps *this time*. . . .

The war tact grid began beeping frantically.

I slipped inside and studied the projection. It showed a new group of star-creatures leaving Aldema Proxima's fringe atmosphere. Streamers of blazing hydrogen trailed out behind them like comet tails, obscuring their numbers, but I counted at least twenty. Reinforcements? Bringing up stronger weapons?

It didn't take me long to find out. Even before they cleared Aldema, the creatures began shooting at us. And this time their bolts of energy were a hundred times more powerful — blinding white spheres of pure plasma that came hurtling toward us at nearly the speed of light.

The first one struck the *Marrow Falcon*. It deflected off her force shield, but even that glancing blow set her spinning backwards in a slow end-over-end roll. Slowly the crew got her stabilized again.

The second shot sailed past and vanished in the distance — a miss.

The third shot struck my ship. Our shields flickered red and orange as they tried to scatter and diffuse the energy, but they weren't enough. A bone-jarring shock ran through the hull, strong enough to rattle my teeth. Several viewscreens suddenly showed only static — burned out.

I cursed. In my anger I almost ordered our atomic cannons to open fire, but caught myself just in time. If we drove them back, then we'd almost certainly never be able to mine this system in peace. If I didn't shoot, both our ships might be destroyed at any moment.

I decided to try to negotiate with the creatures — after all, I didn't want to fight a war with them! If possible, I wanted their help. They'd make the best possible allies in mining, since they could move through their star's atmosphere at will.

They fired another bolt of energy. It missed the *Falcon* — barely.

"Luathek," I said, slipping from the war tact grid, "talk to them. You've got to tell them not to shoot at us!" I'd give him a minute to talk. If the star-creatures were still shooting at its end, I'd open fire.

He nodded. "Yes, Kel. Immediately." A passive expression came over his face as he turned his thoughts inward, seeking whatever mental controls he used. His eyestalks coiled like snakes among the gray tufts of hair on his head.

I re-entered the war tact grid. The star-creatures seemed about to fire their

weapons again, but for some reason they stopped before doing so. With a sigh of relief I leaned back, certain that Luathek had, somehow, managed to reach them.

The Pavian showed no sign of returning to this world. His breath came slowly and regularly, and his face remained unreadable. What was he telling them? Would they listen?

Suddenly his eyes opened. He gasped, his expression one of shock and pain rather than pleasure.

"Luathek —?" I began. If the star-creatures hurt him, I swore I'd never rest until I'd killed them all. *I swore it!*

He looked at me. His eyes were strangely dark. "Ahhh — Keh-h-h —"

"What is it?" I whispered. I could almost feel the struggle going on inside him, as though he were battling the creatures for control of his body.

"Kel," he said, quite distinctly. Then: "I — am most — *sorry!*"

And something hard and heavy hit me straight between the eyes with the force of a falling meteor.

I felt a quick flash of excruciating pain, then a numbness came over me. My head was a cold lump. I couldn't feel my arms or legs — couldn't move —

Slowly, awareness of a sort returned. I saw myself walking down an endless white corridor. Somewhere ahead, I knew, Luathek waited for me. I could hear his voice calling from a great distance.

I walked for what seemed an eternity. The corridor's glowing white walls became more distinct, as my mind focused on them, made them real. And then I heard Luathek's voice clearly.

Open your mind to me, Kel.

For the longest time I just stood there, bewildered, unable to make sense of the words. They seemed to be in some alien tongue; I couldn't associate them with any pictures or actions.

Kel . . .

Luathek. I knew it was him. Shaking my head, I tried to shrug off the lethargy that had settled over my mind. I began to run.

The Pavian appeared in front of me, suddenly, hovering a foot above the floor, his arms outspread in a gesture of welcome or submission. Again he called my name, and this time the meaning of his words reached me.

I closed my eyes and let his thoughts become mine.

A roar filled my head, the sound of rushing waves on an Earthly beach. A strange feeling of power swept through my body. The endless white corridor melted away, and I could see nothing ahead but the textured blackness of space — scattered with pinpricks of light that could only be distant stars — and yet I knew this was but another phantasm conjured up by Luathek's powerful mind.

Here, I would meet the star-creatures.

A sound called to me. At first I thought it was a voice, but then I realized that within it echoed not words, but emotions . . . dizzying waves of fear and apprehension, peaks of red anger and hatred and pain. For an instant, the universe swung crazily around, and I looked through alien eyes, felt alien thoughts — and saw myself differently.

It was as if an inanimate object — something too massive to possibly move, to possibly live — wavered there before me. How could something with such densely packed molecules possibly live? How could it flow from one place to another? What made it think? Surely its mindbody could not be the same as ours?

Then I drifted apart from the awareness — and I knew. *I* was the strange creature with densely packed molecules. And then I wondered how I could move from one place to another — it seemed so impossible. . . .

Kel, a distant voice intruded. *I can feel their presences.*

Luathek? I thought.

Talk to them, Kel — I may not be able to hold them in my mind much longer than this.

I tried to reach out a second time — to hear their thoughts and make them hear mine. An odd, tingling sensation filled my mind, somehow blanking out my every will to move. It was as though I'd lost control of all voluntary muscles. I'd become an observer, locked in my body, looking out on a world I couldn't control. I hated and feared this feeling of helplessness more than anything else.

And then I realized the star-creatures had become aware of me. My perceptions took a sudden leap outward, and I knew what had happened: their minds had reached through Luathek and entered my body.

And I'd let them do it. I'd opened my mind to them.

I had none of the Pavian's mental training. On Pavo IV, his homeworld, the young were taught to master whatever telepathic and empathic powers lay within them almost from the minute of their hatching. He had discipline where I had nothing but raw instinct. My brain might short-circuit under the star-creatures' heavy-handed prodding.

Already I felt them sorting through my mind.

Now images flew uncontrolled before my eyes: my mother and father, life on my homeworld of Bernstrom's algae farms, the League's teaching machines and ability-tests, my appointment to the Academy on a scholarship, my apprenticeship to Yef Makov in space, all the planets I'd visited, all the starships I'd worked on.

And Luathek, and Ulega Max, and everyone else I'd ever known. All my memories came and went faster than I could think of them — sucked out of my mind. All the pettiness, all the pain, all the love and generosity, all the flaws, and all the beauty that make life worth living — it all passed through Luathek and entered the minds of the star-creatures.

If it had been possible, I would've wept. My insides seethed with memo-

ries of anger and passion. A great desire burned within me — to return to all the places of my youth, to recapture old loves and settle old grudges. People I hadn't seen in decades haunted me. I couldn't think. All I could do was hold my feelings back, try to regain control over all my past lives as they rushed past.

And still the star-creatures probed at me. I saw them now, a dozen beings like drops of silver hanging in the nighttime sky. They pushed and pulled at my memories, rummaging through them as though they were old clothes, stealing them.

Flash

I stood at the edge of the algae fields, looking out across the hectares of shallow lakes filled with gray-green slime. Harvesters waded across the fields, their three long, thin legs dipping into the water with giant scoops. My father stood behind me, his hand on my shoulder.

"See there," he said, pointing. "That flash of silver? That's an alien. Somehow it got down here, and now it's living off the algae. Now watch the harvesters there. Those three are going to try to kill it."

And, within me, I felt a deepening sense of horror and sadness. I almost cheered when the silver flash in the water darted out of sight, escaping the harvesters — this time.

Flash

I was in the nullspace simulation chamber of the Academy, in a captain's seat, locked in one of the computer's navigation screens. A red alarm-light blinked in the screen's upper right corner.

"Hull breached, Captain," the computer's soft voice said in my ear. "I request instructions."

And I didn't know what to do — didn't know —

The red light stopped flashing. The navigation screen collapsed, and I looked out on Instructor Roland's unsmiling face. Her black uniform with the gold bars of her rank was immaculate. She demanded perfection, even of herself. Panic rushed through me. I began to tremble.

"You're dead now, Corrian," she said. "What's even worse, you also killed one hundred and eight crew members. They're all dead because *you* panicked. Dead, Corrian, one hundred and eight people *dead* because you didn't listen to my instructions."

"But they weren't real!"

"They *were* real. You'll never gain rank until you can see even the slightest possibility of danger to your crew as real, Corrian."

I bit my lip and couldn't speak and —

Flash

This time it was different — I felt it. My body was thick and heavy, as though I waded through an ocean of molasses. I turned to speak to Luathek, who walked beside me, but as I did so, he started to turn transparent. By the time I'd recovered from my surprise, he'd completely disappeared.

My mind seemed to be fragmenting. Snatches of conversations I couldn't possibly be hearing came to me. I thought thoughts that were human but not my own, and I saw sights through human eyes that I couldn't possibly be seeing.

Two people in the weapons room, talking about the star-creatures — I was both of them at once, seeing each side of the conversation, knowing what each man would say before he opened his mouth.

I was alone in one of the shuttles, thinking. *What if Corrian sends me out there to fight them?*

I was at the communications station (Rooli Tebwah?) thinking, *Kel knows what he's doing. He won't let us die.*

And there were a hundred others, all different, all calling for my attention. I was Ulega Max and all the others on the *Falcon*. I was Rooli Tebwah and Luathek and Rast and Jawn Kessel and everyone on the *Trim Dreamer*. Their voices clawed at my mind. I could scarcely think —

But by now the universe around me had disappeared. I floated in an absolute void, lost, without sense of right or left or up or down. I fell in all directions at once.

I couldn't even hear myself screaming.

The world reconstitutes itself around me.

I am at Gwinney's Circus.

Sounds drift through the summer cold, oozing across the grass as a blue and purple tide. The Old Earth elephants are dancing above me on the high-wire . . .

Distorted memories: I recall seeing huge circuses on vidtapes, and a small one with a fascinating freak show on New Swanwick. But I know they weren't like this. This is so . . . unreal.

. . . weaving in and out of the billowing red odors of animals. I crack my whip and watch the sharp yellow sound move steadily upwards.

Ulega Max dances to my side.

"Would you like to play a game of moopsball?" he asks. The words are pale bubbles that brush my skin and send shivers up my spine.

The circus shimmers and falls away, leaving us on a gigantic moopsball field — almost a full square hectare of barren, featureless orange land. Two small pavillions, with red pennants on top, sit to my far right and left, and before them float gigantic disks of bronze.

Hundreds of oddly dressed humans wander the playing field, their movements apparently aimless, random. I recognize dozens of them from the *Trim Dreamer* . . . and others from the *Marrow Falcon* — over there Ulega Max, over here Vimister Groll and Jespar Melsif and the other members of the Ship's Council —

A dozen suns burn overhead. On each can be seen a single gigantic eye. They are our masters, I know; they will judge the game. It has always been

this way . . . and I have the feeling that this game has been played out many times before, with humans as giant puppets and event following event in an endless, meaningless cycle.

Trumpets sound. Their notes are mournful.

The lancers have taken up their arms and mounted their giant pink war-elephants. They charge across the battlefield, hooves thundering. Then the elephants on one side shimmer and change to sleek black starships, and the elephants on the other become flaming yellow stars.

Lights flare. In an instant all the starships explode, sending little bits of twisted, melted metal spinning off in all directions. And all the humans inside writhe and scream in pain, the awful sound of their cries ringing endlessly in my ears.

A message? That we should leave this star — or we'll be killed? I think that is what the vision means.

And the crewmen die, and I watch them die, and I'm powerless to stop what's happening. But I feel their pain as intensely as I've ever felt anything before. It becomes my own, and through me their suffering is eased.

I look down at my hands. They are badly burned. Blood drips from the tips of my fingers, spatters on the ground at my feet, loses itself in the orange soil. Raising my arms to the suns overhead, I let the watchers see my wounds. In a sudden hot glow of light, I am healed.

The crewmen from both ships crowd around me. There is reverence in their manner, and a sense of awe is evident on their faces. They raise their arms to me, and a hundred voices cry my name, and the name of their god:

"Kel! Kel!"

"Ghu! Ghu!"

I look at them, and it is with a strange sense of dread and foreboding that I turn to run. But they are all around me, and their hands reach out to guide my course, so I move deeper into the mob, rather than away. I am their center, and a vortex forms around me.

Above, the brilliantly shining suns leave one by one, comet tails streaming out behind them. They flow higher, grow smaller in the distance, soon vanish completely from view. Darkness like velvet fills the heavens. My people and I are alone now — we will remain that way, so long as we leave the star-creatures and their . . . world? . . . untouched. I know it more surely than I have ever known anything before. Their message has reached me.

The crewmen are all around me now, clustering like sheep, reaching out to touch my clothes. They seize my arms and legs and raise me into the air and I am screaming and the sky overhead is spinning round and round and —

I opened my eyes and found myself back aboard the *Trim Dreamer*, in the captain's seat in the control room. My head ached. I could feel my heart pounding in my chest, a wild, alien rhythm. I closed my eyes and made my heart's beating slow to a more normal speed. The Academy's courses in

yoga and mental conditioning had their uses . . . now I only wished they'd taught psychic disciplines as well.

"Luathek," I whispered.

The Pavian stood motionless near my chair, his face pale, his gaze lost in the distance. Slowly, as if responding to his name, he turned and looked up at me. Expression came into his eyes; his eyestalks writhed happily as he showed rows of sharp black teeth in an approximation of a smile.

"Kel," he said, "I could talk with them — they will let us leave in peace! Did you hear them? I tried to let you communicate through me — that is what they wished — but. . . ." His voice trailed off. He glanced around the room. "Why is everyone observing you thusly, Kel?" he asked.

"What?" I followed his gaze. Everyone had turned to stare at me, mingled joy and bewilderment on their faces.

Rooli Tebwah said softly, "It's you — Ghu's new messiah has come at last!"

"Don't be ridiculous," I snapped. "Get on with your work. I don't have time for such nonsense."

"Sir . . . I felt it! We all felt it. It came as a great vision. You stood before us, taking away all the pain of the universe. *I saw it!*"

A dozen voices echoed her words. They all left their posts and crowded around my chair, kneeling down before me, reaching out to touch the hem of my trousers — with reverence!

"Master, what must we do?" Rooli asked. "Master?"

They'd all shared my hallucinations, I realized suddenly. The visions the star-creatures used to order me away from their star had affected them, too. Only they hadn't understood: the message hadn't been directed at them, but at me. And now they believed I was some sort of . . . messiah?

"Get back to your posts," I said, a bit shakily.

They did so — instantly. And then they began to sing.

The words weren't in Basic, but in an older human tongue — English, which the Free Traders used for their religious ceremonies. It was a strange, guttural language, with odd inflections and long, rising vowels. I shivered as they sang, for somehow they'd added my name into the song.

I'd been born of ground-dirt parents, not of Free Trader stock, and I'd never understood them and their strange ways. I'd always been an outsider into the mysteries of their faith, for none but those of Trader blood could ever take part in their religious ceremonies.

"Stop it!" I shouted. "Don't sing — and don't think of me as your messiah, because I'm not!"

"Yes, Kel Corrian," Rooli said. But I could tell she hadn't truly heard what I'd said.

I rose to my feet, my legs strangely weak. I staggered. A dozen people leaped up and surged forward to help me, but I swung a fist at them and cursed, so they backed away. Still they seemed determined to make me into

their messiah.

And I wondered, then, whether I shouldn't just go along with them and let them make me into a god. Throughout history, people had done just that to found new religions. And those messiahs had lived in splendor, with thousands — *hundreds* of thousands — of servants at their beck and call. I could see it now: my followers from the *Trim Dreamer* and the *Marrow Falcon* sweeping across the universe, spreading word of their visions to all the Free Traders.

And they'd come to me, I knew, from all corners of the known universe, bringing offerings of gold and jewels and whatever else I wanted. They could carve out a vast trade empire, make me the most powerful human in the League of Planets. . . .

But, even as I thought of it, I knew I'd never let it happen. I had no desire for the life of an absolute monarch. I wanted to travel, to see the universe, to be — *myself*. I'd always been scrupulously honest in business dealings, and the thought of lying to millions of Free Traders, of saying I *was* the voice of their god, made me uneasy to say the least. I knew I'd never be able to go through with such a scheme.

Turning, I fled to the lift. I needed time to think. Behind me the singing started again, and I could hear Rooli Tebwah's high, clear voice above all the rest. Shaken, I punched the button and the doors closed. I headed down, toward the lower decks and my cabin.

It was with a measure of anger and frustration that I finally emerged from my room three hours later. I'd thought it all through and believed I'd found an answer to my problem — a way to prove I wasn't their messiah. All I needed to do was demonstrate my lack of Ghu-given powers — and I counted on Ulega Max for help. He wasn't the gullible sort; he had to think I'd somehow faked the visions.

But they were waiting for me in the hallway. Twenty people clustered around me, trying to beg favors, trying to get miracles worked. Jawn Kessel, the *Trim Dreamer*'s owner, stood among them — and he seemed as believing as the rest.

I shouted until they all grew quiet. Their eyes were very round and very large.

"I must go to the *Marrow Falcon*," I said. "Prepare my shuttle. The rest of you can help me, too."

"How?" they called. "Tell us, Master!"

"By returning to your posts. By performing your duties as if nothing had changed — at least for now. There will be important work for you later. Trust me, my friends, trust me."

And they did. They all turned and ran off, leaving me there alone. More slowly now, I walked toward the shuttle bay. I knew the *Trim Screamer* would be ready for take-off by the time I arrived.

The situation was much the same aboard the *Marrow Falcon*. When I called ahead, I received both docking clearance and a request for a minor miracle — for me to cure a slight deafness in the communication officer's left ear. Pointedly ignoring the request, I had my shuttle's pilot dock.

I'd passed through the airlock almost before the engines shut down.

A multitude waited for me in the loading bay. There must've been over a hundred of them — men and women, a sprinkling of humanoid aliens, most of the *Falcon's* crew. They knelt before me and shouted my name over and over again, an endless chant:

"Kel! Kel! Kel!"

I held up my hands, and they grew silent. Leaning forward, they strained to hear my every word. And I didn't disappoint them.

"Citizens," I said. "You have been chosen for a very important task. I will speak to each of you personally later today. Important things must be done. But first you must keep this ship running smoothly. It's important to my cause. Go about your work, and rejoice, for you serve Ghu well. Now return to your posts."

They rose to their feet and filed toward the exits. Someone began to sing — the same English song that I'd heard on the *Trim Dreamer*. Its strangeness made me shiver.

I followed them, patting some on the back, whispering encouraging words to others. Nowhere in the crowd did I spot the members of the Ship's Council. I guessed they were in some sort of emergency meeting.

Then I turned around and found myself standing toe to toe with Ulega Max. He glared at me, but said nothing until all the faithful had gone and we were alone.

His voice echoed loudly in the loading bay as he said, "I don't know how you did it, Corrian, but I don't like it." His eyes narrowed. "I want you to stay out of my mind — and off of my ship."

"Listen to me," I said. "It was all an accident. I never meant for any of this to happen."

"What did you mean, then?"

"I . . . tried to negotiate with the star-creatures."

He snorted.

"It's true," I said. "Luathek, my Pavian engineer, is empathic — and, to some small extent, telepathic. He served as a bridge between me and the aliens. Unfortunately, it seems that some of that telepathic communication spilled over into the minds of everyone around me, including both our ships' crews. They're convinced I'm some sort of messiah sent from Ghu, and I haven't been able to convince them otherwise."

"I . . . almost believed it myself," Ulega Max admitted, still watching me suspiciously. "Then I looked at you and knew no god worth his weight in air could possibly choose *you* to be his messiah. I've never believed that super-

stitious rot about Ghu and Fufu and their cosmic war, anyway. It's just old tales meant to frighten children."

"Nothing more?"

"Nothing." He shook his head. "*Nothing*."

I sighed in relief. I knew I could count on his cynical nature. "Then you'll help me stop them?"

"Of course," Ulega said. "It's for the good of my ship."

And that, I thought, is all that matters to you. I said, "Come, we've got to go to your cabin. I'll tell you my plan on the way."

"Follow me." And he turned for the nearest lift.

It began easily enough. We simply let one of his shuttle commanders — her name was Omm, and she carried herself with authority — into the audience chamber just outside Ulega's private quarters. At first sight, she fell to her knees before me and made some sort of religious gestures with her right hand while she clutched a gold double-helix medallion with her left.

"Get up," I told her.

She did so, looking happier than any Free Trader I'd ever seen before, just from obeying my simple request.

Then I said, as bluntly as I could, "I want you to go into the nearest air-lock and throw yourself into space."

She blinked. "Master?"

"You heard me. Go space yourself. I've decided I want your job. And, of course, I'll take all your money as well. I'm going to go to Duane's World and buy myself a luxury house. I hear there's good money in hydro-farming these days. There's probably enough royals on this ship to set me up for life, and then some."

She looked shocked, startled. Then she shook her head as if she hadn't heard me correctly. "I don't understand, Master."

I leaned forward, baring my teeth. "I want your money. To get it, I want you to die. Serve me by dying and giving me your life's savings. I'll work your job myself."

"But . . . you're supposed to put aside all thoughts of worldly goods. You're — you're supposed to help me make my life *better*, not order me to kill myself!"

I shrugged. "What do I care what happens to you, so long as I get your money? That's all I want."

She stammered helplessly for a minute, bewildered. Her eyes looked glassy, as though she were close to tears. I felt something twist inside me, and for an instant I shared her feelings of shock, betrayal, dismay. But I swallowed and forced myself to remain cold and aloof. It had to be done.

"You're testing me," she said at last. "That's it, isn't it?"

"Of course, that must be it," I said. "The test is over now."

Commander Omm relaxed, began to smile again.

I added, "You've failed. Sign over your money to me, and go space yourself. I can no longer use you. Just make sure I have your money before you go."

She gasped. Her mouth twisted; she tried to speak, but couldn't make a sound. Her shoulders shook. She buried her head in her hands and began to rock back and forth, back and forth. I couldn't stand hurting her so much — and yet I knew it had to be done.

"Go, you lazy *ert*!" I snapped. "Get out of here! *Obey me!*"

Slowly, she turned on her feet. Tears glistened on her cheeks. Then she looked me straight in the eye, and I saw her face grow hard with sudden resolve. "If that's all you want, you won't have it from me," she said. "You're no messiah!" She started forward, raising her fists, but Ulega Max grabbed her arms and forced them down.

"Be quiet, Commander Omm," he said. "Of course, Corrian isn't a messiah. The vision you *thought* you had was just telepathy. Nothing more. He's just a man. And what he did now was for your own good — you must believe that."

"But," she whispered, "what if I'd really killed myself?"

"We wouldn't have let that happen, would we, Corrian?"

I shook my head, breathing easier now. "Certainly not."

She sighed, and a wistful expression appeared on her face for just an instant. Somehow, I knew what she was thinking. She was imagining everything that might've been possible if only I had, in fact, been their messiah.

At last she sighed and straightened up, asking, "What needs to be done? What can I do to help?"

I grinned at her. "Just try and keep your crewmates from hitting me when I tell them all I want is their money."

Ulega Max was already at the door, ushering in the next believer. This one was a heavy-set guard — and he wore a blaster strapped to his right leg.

"Uh," I said, as he knelt before me. "May I see that weapon, please?"

He handed it to me with a sort of awe. Smiling, I tucked it into my sash. And then I told him to space himself . . . and watched his expression turn from reverence to instant hate. He leaped for my throat, but Commander Omm got to him first and pinned him to the floor, neatly and efficiently. She was a good officer.

Ulega Max began explaining everything to the guard.

From here on, I knew, it would be easy.

It took the rest of the day to convince everyone on board the *Falcon* that I wasn't a messiah, that they hadn't had a mystical vision, and that nothing had changed for them or the universe. A bit to my surprise, not one of the Free Traders agreed to go kill himself. I would've thought there'd be at least one fanatic on board . . . but perhaps not.

Then we moved to the *Trim Dreamer* and finished there in a little under

two hours. I'd had Ulega Max and Commander Omm with me the whole time, and after drinks and a suitable display of thanks on both our parts, I escorted them to my shuttle, the *Trim Screamer*.

As he headed into the airlock, Ulega turned to me. There was a thoughtful expression on his face. "Corrian," he said, "I didn't think I'd like you when we first met. I hated you when you refused the captainship I offered. I hated you more when you became our partner. Now . . . I feel a certain respect for you. I think the partnership between our vessels will work out after all."

"There's profit enough in any system for both of us," I said.

"Enough. But . . . what now?"

"We'll move on to another star system," I said. "One which isn't inhabited. This time we'll run surveys — check it out completely to make sure. I don't want to meet any more star-creatures. Next time we might not be so lucky."

"Perhaps," he said. Then he turned and followed Commander Omm into the airlock. It cycled and he was gone.

I had a good feeling inside. I'd never thought to see the day when a high Free Trader official would ever acknowledge respect for me. It wasn't their way.

With a light heart, I headed toward the control room. My crew had been suitably embarrassed by the whole affair, and I had to show them it didn't matter — that everything would soon be back to normal.

I'd see to that, like any good captain.

[The complete novel, under the title Starskimmer, has been published by TSR, Inc., for the AMAZING™ Stories interactive book line.]

THIS TOO IS SCIENCE:

that life was a tontine awarded to earth;
that the land undergoes mitosis
predicted by certain religions in earthquake-prone regions;
that ice retains a perfect memory of mammoths;
that hatred is a *cis*-product in *trans*-formation;
that nothing falls deeper than love.

— John Devin

HUMORISTS IN A STRANGE LAND

LITERARY REVIEW

by Robert Coulson

Humor, like science fiction itself, is not only in the eye of the beholder, but is plagued with different definitions, even with different systems of definition. Not to mention totally different meanings, over the years. On checking my thesaurus, the first category listed was *essence* and the second was *liquid*. I suppose that's what I get for using an 1879 thesaurus; we don't use the word as a medical term anymore. Still, the terms for different types of humor are endless: satire, parody, repartee, ridicule, whimsy, banter, pun, wordplay, farce, caricature, tall tale, black humor, Polish joke, regional humor, feghoot (which is technically a combination of the tall tale and the pun, and the only humorous term originated within science fiction), and so on, and on.

Science-fiction and fantasy humor is largely that of the satire, the parody, the farce, and the tall tale. The latter is prevalent in the fantasy folk tale, and this genre has been frequently used as a basis for modern science fiction and fantasy.

Initially, there wasn't a lot of humor in the field. Jules Verne carefully included comic characters in his books because "comic relief" — a phrase that has pretty well dropped out of authors' vocabularies — was then a standard part of adventure writing. He never stressed the humor, and most of what he used isn't considered very funny today. H. G. Wells wrote very serious fables which he hoped would educate people to what he conceived to be the problems of the age. *The Time*

Machine is indeed a satire, but not a humorous one. The early science-fiction magazines featured stories which either were attempts to educate the public in scientific matters, which was Gernsback's intent for the field, or followed the Verne formula of adventure stories with a few gadgets thrown in. Neither was particularly favorable to humor, and what existed was crude. Stanley Weinbaum, one of the top authors of the period, wrote a series about a mad scientist, Professor van Manderpootz, which strikes one today as merely silly. Humorous fantasy was being published in slick magazines and in book form, but the early science-fiction community scorned it, and very little of it was ever reprinted. Thorne Smith was getting his fantasies turned into movies with some regularity, but because they emphasized sex instead of spaceships, they weren't considered part of the field. Neither was *Alice in Wonderland*; it was a *classic*, and a juvenile as well. Juvenile books were a completely separate form of literature, and such authors as L. Frank Baum, Hugh Lofting, and Robert Lawson, humorists all, were separated from the *real* fantasy and science-fiction writers.

The first crop of reasonably competent science-fiction humorists, writing for science-fiction magazines, came along in the late 1930s and early 1940s, and included Eric Frank Russell, L. Sprague de Camp, Henry Kuttner, Fredric Brown, and Nelson Bond. (Bond is mostly forgotten now, but his stories in the science-fiction

magazines and in *Bluebook* were popular at the time.) These authors wrote both humor and serious material, as well as mysteries and westerns and anything else that would sell, but except for Brown and his mysteries, they're mostly remembered for their science-fiction humor. De Camp, of course, doesn't have to be remembered; he's still writing. Editor John W. Campbell not only modernized the science-fiction field, but with *Unknown Worlds* he also made humor respectable in fantasy and science fiction. Even mystery author Anthony Boucher wrote some very funny stories for it. Major writers began selling humor as well as serious speculations. As serious an author as "world-wrecker" Edmond Hamilton wrote "Pardon My Iron Nerves" for his otherwise serious and adventurous "Captain Future" series.

Today, science-fiction and fantasy humor is enjoying one of its best periods. Piers Anthony has a reputation for puns, de Camp is turning out his sardonic novels of what barbarians are *really* like, Robert Asprin has recreated what used to be called "*Unknown*-style" humor, and dozens of newcomers are producing more or less humorous science-fiction and fantasy novels. I've even done a couple myself, in collaboration with Gene DeWeese and his unique thought processes. Probably today's king of the humorists, certainly for quantity, is Ron Goulart, with thirty-five or so published books of completely zany adventures of future societies where the super-gadgets don't work any better than ours do, and the people can be just as ridiculous. The following books provide a few samples.

Out of My Head by Robert Bloch

Nesfa Press, Box G, MIT Branch
P.O., Cambridge, MA 02139, \$15.00
(hardcover)

This is somewhat of a sequel to the author's earlier *The Eighth Stage of Fandom*, as it's primarily a collection of material about science-fiction fans. Most of it first appeared in fanzines, though some was published professionally. Not all of it is humorous, but even in a serious tribute to August Derleth, Bloch can't resist an occasional punch line. "By this time he had built a home of his own, a very handsome home on the outskirts of the village, across the street from the local cemetery. I think he liked the idea of having fresh flowers every day."

Material includes "A Way of Life," a story in which fans reorganize the nation after a nuclear war, by means of their communication skills. Somewhat more probable when it appeared in *Fantastic Universe* in 1956 than it is today, but it's still amusing. "I Was A Teen-Age Faust" recounts, more or less fictionally, the author's involvement with fandom and the reasons for it. "Oldies but Goodies" concerns strange and wonderful happenings at science-fiction conventions. Some of them may even be true. "The Proxy Head" involves another alien invasion; this one defeated by a young squirt with a squirt-gun. "The Return of Lefty Feep" is the final (one hopes) episode in a humorous series Bloch did, mostly for *Fantastic Adventures* in the 1940s, while "Lefty Feep and I" is the background of that series. "Wilson Tucker — The Smo-o-oth Operator" is a biography done for a Worldcon program book. Bloch and Tucker were for years midwest fandom's answer to Hope and Crosby, Abbott and Costello, Laurel and Hardy, and Burke and Hare; Bloch eventually moved to California, possibly to avoid the linger-

ing aroma of some of their jokes, and this is a fair sampling of Bloch's half of their exchanges. "The Conventioneer's Prayer" and "Letter to a TAFF Winner" are warnings about some of the improbable pitfalls to be encountered in fandom's dangerous areas. There are other humorous items here, plus serious tributes to Derleth, Fritz Lang, John W. Campbell, Forrest J. Ackerman, and other notables. The material is short; there are 22 items in 193 pages. Some of it is in-group fan humor, difficult for the outsider to understand, but the vast majority of items are perfectly intelligible to any science-fiction reader. It's also the only example of "fan humor" to see book publication in years.

Little Myth Marker

by Robert Asprin

Donning, \$7.95 (trade paperback)

The sixth in Asprin's *MYTH* series, and Donning has just announced that he's signed a contract for six more. I'm not sure the series can keep on being funny for six more books, but then I didn't think it could last this long, and it has, though this book isn't as good as the first one. Incidentally, it's actually a serial; this volume begins where the last one left off. It's basically a farce; Skeeve, the more or less innocent apprentice magician, has by this time become a full partner to the sarcastic and bad-tempered Aahz, and they've acquired a coterie of friends. But like all the books in the series, it starts off with Skeeve getting into trouble. Through the series he's shown as maturing, and this time he manages to get out of trouble himself, after more or less hilarious difficulties. If anything, the plotting is tighter in this book than it was in earlier ones, but the chapter-heading quotes, which were possibly the funniest parts of the

first book, aren't nearly as good this time. Still, the involvement with dragon poker, the niece of the Mob's Fairy Godfather, and assorted trolls, cardsharps, immature dragons, bodyguards, and free-lance assassins is well worth reading.

Wizenbeak

by Alexis Gilliland

Bluejay, \$8.95 (trade paperback)

A sardonic tale of a seemingly bumbling water-wizard, who is smarter than he appears, and a mercenary captain who is very sharp indeed. In the beginning, they set out to establish a colony on a not-quite-desert area. In the course of the book, without ever having intentions other than staying alive in a world of byzantine politics, they overthrow the empire which despatched them. The book reminded me strongly of L. Sprague de Camp's novels; the humor lies in the practical responses to ridiculous situations and in the occasionally hysterical actions of the opposition, as in mistaking a man-carrying kite for a dragon. I particularly like the siege tower that's actually a wide stairway so troops can run up and over it. Probably impractical, but unique. This may well be the first of a series. If so, I might even read the second book.

The Drastic Dragon of Draco, Texas

by Elizabeth Scarborough

Bantam, \$3.50 (paperback)

Essentially, this is a historical novel of west Texas around 1880, with a dragon thrown (flown?) in. The characters, while exaggerated, are undoubtedly closer in spirit to the real pioneers than you'll find in most novels or any movies. The dragon seems to be unique; it's described as an oversized Gila monster that flies and breathes

fire — and is intelligent, if not exactly brilliant. Well, nobody in the book could be called brilliant, for that matter. Our heroine, out to make a name for herself in the Ned Buntline tradition, runs into a primitive version of J. R. Ewing, Indians, scalp-hunters, a bumbling rainmaker and his black partner, and Kukulcan the dragon, not to mention various horses and mules. Everyone is out for what he or she can get; the heroine wants fame and fortune, the entrepreneur wants most of west Texas, the rainmaker wants enough cash to move on, and the dragon wants to be worshiped. The clash of conflicting desires makes for a very entertaining book; one of the best.

Yonder Comes the Other End of Time

by Suzette Haden Elgin
Daw, \$2.95 (paperback)

Suzette is the only writer of regional humor that I know about in science fiction. Her *OZARK* trilogy is funny partly because of the language; probably not as funny to me as to most readers because I became used to a similar dialect when I was in school and large numbers of Kentucky hill people moved north to find livings. So few of the phrases are unexpected. Primarily, however, the humor lies in unexpected solutions to common problems, in a society of rural magicians. In this book, her planet Ozark people meet representatives of her other series, Coyote Jones and the Communipaths, with a mutual lack of understanding. Mainly, the Communipaths can't understand why anyone would refuse the benefits of their interstellar civilization, and the Ozarkers can't understand why anyone would accept them. Which leads to the expected but expertly handled plot of

the hicks outwitting the city slickers, which has always been a good basis for humor. The blurb bills it as magic versus technology, but since both sides are using psi powers, there's no real difference between them — which, of course, makes their reactions more amusing, as well as more human. Anyone who enjoys seeing Authority ridiculed will enjoy it.

Harlot's Ruse

by Esther M. Friesner
Popular Library/Questar, \$3.50 (paperback)

A book filled with sardonic humor from the woman's viewpoint. Megan's story is one of encounters, mostly in bed, with shepherds, minstrels, princes, dragons, heroes, demons, kings, and gods, but the emphasis is not on sex but on Megan's acerbic comments about her society and her friends and lovers. "... you may hear the priests claim that revenge belongs to the gods and should never be the property of man. Leave it to the gods to hog the best bits of life for themselves." I think I enjoyed it more because a lot of her comments were quite similar to various snide comments of Juanita's; you live with a feminist, you get to appreciate the humor. It's a lovely, funny book for anyone who enjoys an intelligently humorous commentary on life. Oh, the plot? Well, it's not important, but it's mostly about a medieval woman's attempts to stay alive, keep some control of her life, and find a true love.

The Best of L. Sprague de Camp

by L. Sprague de Camp (obviously)
Del Rey, \$3.50 (paperback)

Like the Bloch collection, not all of these are humorous, but a high percentage are. It was originally published in 1978; this is the second printing.

Original publication dates for the stories run from 1938 to 1976, but over half were published before 1950. The volume contains fourteen stories, three poems, an article, an introduction by Poul Anderson, and an afterword by de Camp. "Hyperpilosity" involves the discovery of a cure for humanity's unfortunate lack of body hair — which, it is intimated, is what originally separated us from the animals and gave us the drive toward technology, in order to keep warm. "Language for Time Travelers" is an amusingly written article which has a serious point: that language changes, sometimes quite rapidly. In 1938, when it was published, science-fiction writers had rarely even considered the idea; it's still not particularly common in the field, though common in life. De Camp's sample time traveler is quickly judged mentally incompetent because he can't speak "normal" English, and the article leaves one with an amused contempt for stories in which the hero hops back and forth in time, talking freely with Crusaders and 24th-century diplomats. "The Command" is the first of the "Johnny Black" series of short stories about an intelligent black bear. It's thinly plotted for an adventure story, but the humor saves it. "The Merman" is about a scientist who discovers a method of breathing underwater and inadvertently tries it out in the shark tank at a nearby aquarium; nonsense, but fun, and done with a lighter touch than most farces today. "Employment" involves a method of reconstructing bodies from just a few tissue samples; of course, it has to be tried out on some of the larger extinct mammals and a few dinosaurs, with unnerving results. "The Gnarly Man" is an immortal Neanderthal and his problems with the modern world,

which includes a man-crazy anthropologist, who can't quite decide whether she wants him as a specimen or a lover. "Nothing in the Rules" involves the entering of a mermaid in a swimming meet; it would make a lovely slapstick segment for a movie. "The Hardwood Pile" is about a wood nymph who remains with her tree even after it's been sawed into boards, thereby causing various distractions at the lumber yard. There's a happy solution; a female associated with dark nights and a large amount of wood obviously has to become — a dance-hall hostess. The hero of "The Reluctant Shaman" is a modern Indian who has a batch of spirits given into his charge in the erroneous belief that he's a medicine man. "The Inspector's Teeth" is one of the early stories in the "Viagens" series about humanity's first interstellar contacts; a young reptiloid from the planet Osiris goes to college on Earth and proves to be sharper than the humans. "The Guided Man" is unsophisticated and unsure of himself in the big city, so he hires a firm of experts to guide him in crucial situations by actually taking over his body, with, of course, unexpected results, especially since one of the operators has designs on his client's girl friend. This is the sort of "society fantasy" that the slick magazines of the era were buying, though this particular story was probably too scientific and too rowdy for them. "The Emperor's Fan" is the ultimate defensive weapon, which, of course, is misused and scrambles the affairs of the empire. "Two Yards of Dragon" involves a lovesick but opportunistic young nobleman, a father who demands a dragon's hide as a bride price, a game warden who objects to dragons being killed out of season, and a rascally wizard, and ends with a

triumph for the service industries.

The more serious stories include "Judgment Day" and "A Gun for Dinosaur." The verse, "Reward of Virtue," "The Ameba," and "The Little Green Man," is all humorous.

The plots of most of the stories would qualify as farce, but the treatment, less raunchy than most modern farces, would make them something between farce and whimsy. Styles of humor change, even as does language.

Wasp

by Eric Frank Russell

Next of Kin

by Eric Frank Russell

Del Rey, \$2.95 each (paperback)

Two of Russell's best novels, just now reprinted. They were first published in the 1950s, but are still timely and still funny because they involve making fools of the authorities. Most of Russell's writing career was devoted to making pompous characters look silly, and he was very good at it. Both novels have a military background; the protagonists aren't just practical jokers, they're confounding the Enemy. In *Wasp*, this is part of a plan. The protagonist is dropped on an enemy planet with the mission of tying up as many troops, destroying as much morale, and interfering with as much production as he can. He's duly equipped with counterfeit money, instructions on how to spread rumors, etc. In *Next of Kin*, all military systems come in for some jabs. The protagonist is a scout whose ship is disabled in enemy space, and his emergency equipment comes in for nasty comments. Governments are prone to this sort of thinking; I was reminded of Farley Mowat's account of the supplies provided him by the Canadian government in *Never Cry Wolf*. Our hero is thus deprived of any

source but his wits for evading capture and, after being captured, making trouble for his captors. This is the first unabridged publication of both novels in this country, though abbreviated versions have been published previously. I didn't notice a lot of difference; if anything, *Next of Kin* was funnier as the shorter *Space Willies* because the same humor was included in less overall wordage. Admittedly, this version is more logical and detailed.

The Last Dream

by Gordon R. Dickson

Baen, \$2.95 (paperback)

Dickson is best known for his interplanetary adventures; his humor has been mostly confined to short stories. The *HOKA* series of satires and parodies co-authored with Poul Anderson was popular and collected into the book *Earthman's Burden*. *The Last Dream* is a collection of stories first published between 1953 and 1975; most but not all are humorous.

"St. Dragon and the George" is the original novelet which, in a longer version, became the novel *The Dragon and the George*. A time traveler to the age of knights and dragons winds up in the body of a dragon and must rescue not only his true love but himself from the predicament. In this case, the novel was an improvement, but the shorter version has its own charm. "The Present State of Igneos Research" is a pseudo-academic critique of the poem "Ye Prentice and Ye Dragon," which is written in mock-medieval style. Gordy doesn't seem to have a high opinion of the more pompous academics and their jargon, though the whole thing is probably much funnier to English majors than to me. "A Case History" involves an author of horror stories who calls in

a psychiatrist to cure his neurotic fears — and is thereby ruined as an author. Lots of authors make cynical comments about the reasons for their success; Dickson is one of the few who has turned the cynicism into a good story. “The Girl Who Played Wolf” is, of course, about a female werewolf — and a male werewolfhound, “one of the old breed whose ancestors were developed by the Magicians Anti-Were-Creatures Guild of Verona.” Of course, they fall madly in love, but their major problem turns out to be not the hereditary enmity of their . . . er . . . families, but the fact that werewolves believe in old-fashioned morality, and seduction under the table is not to be countenanced. “Salmanazar” involves a pair of ambitious clubwomen who resort to magic in their rivalry. With, of course, unpredictable results. “With Butter and Mustard” concerns a scientist who is mad in both senses of the word, his good-natured but half-witted assistant, and a Martian who isn’t happy with his visitors.

There are also five non-humorous stories included: “The Amulet,” “The Haunted Village,” “The Three,” “Walker Between the Planes,” and “The Last Dream,” plus an introduction by Sandra Miesel.

Retief and the Pangalactic Pageant of Pulchritude

by Keith Laumer

Baen, \$2.95 (paperback)

This book combines the novelet of the title and a short novel, “Retief’s Ransom.” Both are part of the *RETIEF* series of stories which satirize the U. S. diplomatic corps, transformed into the Terrestrial diplomatic corps for the purpose of science fiction. Laumer served for a time with the U. S. foreign service and evidently

came away with a low opinion of it. The book is typical of the series, in that Retief is the only intelligent character in it. The aliens are either good-natured boobs or villainous boobs, and Retief’s fellow diplomats are all certifiable morons. (Which, of course, may be Laumer’s opinion of humanity, and there are days when I’d agree with him.) It’s specifically pointed out that Retief’s intelligence is the reason he hasn’t advanced in his profession, which might or might not be autobiographical but is a convenient explanation for a hero who has gone through more than a dozen books without advancing his career. The novelet involves a beauty pageant being used by the villains to embarrass the Terrans. The short novel is about attempts by both Terrans and the alien Groaci to extend their sphere of influence by dominating an inoffensive third species. Retief spikes all plans, aided in the novel by an alien psi expert and hindered in both stories by his own superiors. Retief stories are satirical farces, spiked by ridicule of authority.

Black Star Rising

by Frederik Pohl

Del Rey, \$3.50 (paperback)

Kirkus Reviews called this “a sharp, stylish satire on war and patriotism,” which is a bit lavish but covers the basics. Any humor in the early pages comes from the innocence of the hero as he’s being manipulated by stronger characters in the book. The satirical aspects don’t become evident until the last half of the story, when the reader meets the aliens and their mad desire to defend their allies, even at the cost of wiping out everyone on both sides. The plot involves a nuclear war, previous to the beginning of the book, which ruined Russia, the U. S., and Europe. The Chinese moved into the

U. S. (and the Indians into Europe) to aid the survivors — and to have an outlet for surplus population — and stayed as rulers because someone had to run things and they were obviously the best equipped. However, a few Americans who fled the war in space-ships have found alien allies and have returned, prepared to enforce “America for the Americans.” To be honest, I didn’t think too highly of the book, but I’m sure that a lot of readers will thoroughly enjoy it; the easiest way to popularity is to simplify a few social questions, and Pohl has done it amusingly.

The Warlock Wandering

by Christopher Stasheff
Ace, \$3.50 (paperback)

The humor here consists of banter and puns. I seem to recall more puns in the earlier volumes of the series; this one is the fifth. It’s more of a lighthearted adventure than it is humor, but there’s a fair amount of humor included. Our hero and heroine — who turns out to be Supergirl in medieval guise — are dumped on an alien planet, so they have to defeat the baddies and get home to the kids. The hero has an additional problem in learning that his wife is smarter and more powerful than he is, but he survives it. (Why not? I did.)

The Duchess of Kneedeep

by Atanielle Annyn Noël
Avon, \$2.95 (paperback)

As far as I know, this is a first novel. It’s the adventures of a newlywed who flees in terror from her husband — neglecting, of course, to take anything with her — and her adventures in a strange society. Her two friends are a not-quite-invulnerable robot and an entertainer at Missy Rose’s House of Plenty Happy, though she makes more

during the course of the book. She manages to meet lecherous noblemen, various weird and dangerous creatures, musicians, police, drunken natives, con men — the lot. All are more or less repulsive, and most are amorous. Since the heroine isn’t too bright, her escapes are mostly due to chance and having the author on her side, but the situations are ludicrous enough. I preferred Friesner’s heroine and book, but this is fine fare for fans of the recent crop of funny movies.

A Malady of Magicks

by Craig Shaw Gardner
Ace, \$2.95 (paperback)

Another new name to me, also beginning with a humorous novel. It’s episodic, probably because parts of it have appeared as three different short stories, but the quest plot keeps it together well enough. This is a farcical fantasy, featuring foul demons, a woe-ful warrior whose magic weapon was purchased on the installment plan and his payments involve unpleasant activities, assorted chintzy noblemen, and a wizard who has become allergic to magic. Nothing is serious, and the protagonist, who is the allergic wizard’s assistant, endures more and more improbable encounters. I prefer a bit more structure to my humor, but the general public doesn’t care, and this should be very well received. Since our heroes never do reach the city they’re headed for, where the wizard may be relieved of his allergy, I assume there will be sequels forthcoming.

Anthontology

by Piers Anthony
Tor, \$3.50 (paperback)

Anthony’s *XANTH* series is, I’m told, humorous — I haven’t read it — and so popular that other books are being compared to it. *Anthontology*

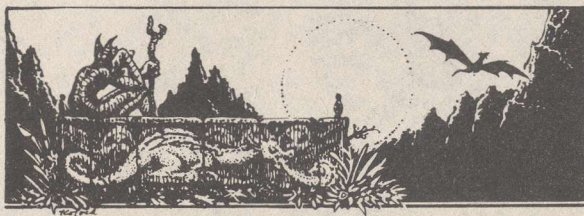
includes twenty-one of his earlier stories, most of them first published in the 1960s and 1970s. I count ten humorous ones. "Possible to Rue" is a vignette about the imagination of small boys and encyclopedia writers.

"Toaster" is simply a far-future world when household gadgets are overly complicated and impertinent. It's moderately amusing, though Ron Goulart does it better. "Within the Cloud" is an original idea, with a nice punch line which I won't give away. "The Life of the Stripe" involves a curse laid on a soldier's Pfc stripe; the straightforward explication of an outrageous idea makes it funny. "In the Jaws of Danger" and "Getting Through University" are both tales of Dr. Dillingham, the galactic dentist; this series was made into a novel, *Prostho Plus*, for Berkley in 1973. Intriguing idea, and the humor follows from the situation. "Up Schist Creek" is a combination of bawdy and scatological humor, both quite rare in science fiction. "Hard Sell" and "Hurdle" are parts of another series. The first is simply about a sales technique, turned into science fiction by having it be about Mars land rather than vacuum cleaners. Since it's no funnier than listening to a real pitch, the reader's appreciation will depend on how often he's encountered it in real life. "Hurdle" is a super-auto race which the innocent protagonist has

been trapped into entering. Once in, he has to go through with it, despite his horror of the situation.

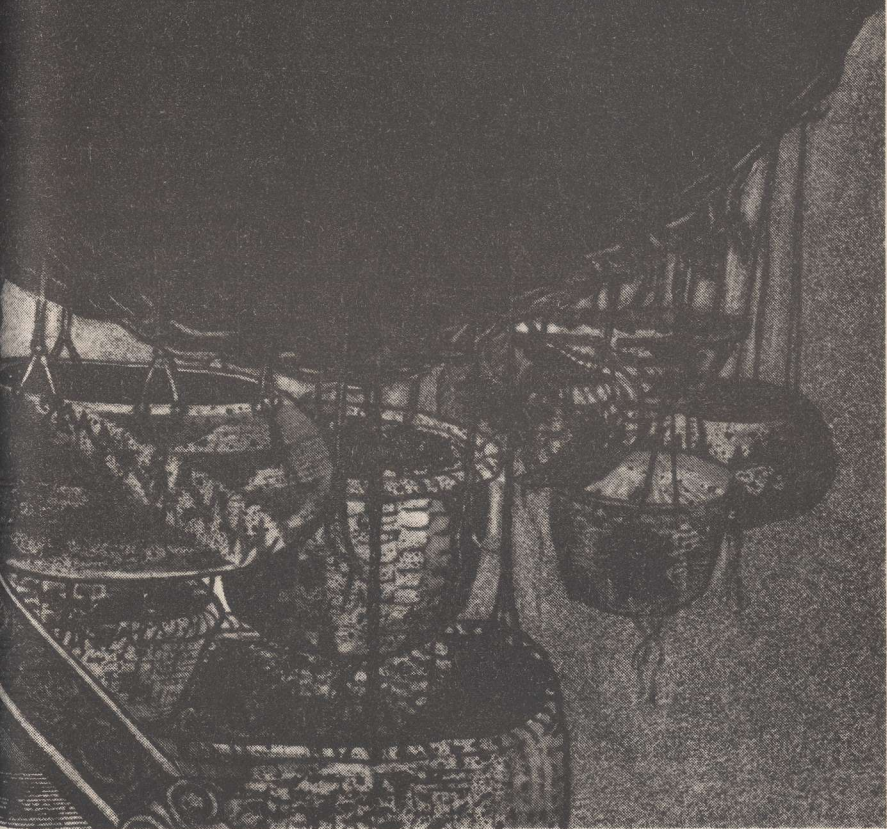
Other stories in the book include "Quinquepedalian," "Encounter," "Phog," "The Ghost Galaxies," "Beak by Beak," "In the Barn," "The Whole Truth," "The Bridge," "On the Uses of Torture," "Small Mouth, Bad Taste," "Wood You," and "Gone to the Dogs," a reversal of the human-canine relationship which has humorous aspects. Each story has an author's note; these, more than most of their type, give you a real picture of the author.

Of course, these aren't all: A letter from Lillian Stewart Carl touts the forthcoming *Shards of Honor*, by Lois McMaster Bujold; "Any article about SF humor does need to include her books." Unfortunately, this one hasn't been published yet, though it will be before this sees print. I've already reviewed Gene Wolfe's *Free Live Free for Amazing*®. R. A. Lafferty is still turning out his unique short fiction, but his best novels are currently out of print. Avram Davidson hasn't had a novel for a while. (Both these authors appeared in the July 1986 issue of *Amazing*; go buy a back issue.) Old and new authors will continue to turn out more and more of the funny stuff, so enjoy yourself.





THE FLYING MOUNTAIN
by R. Garcia y Robertson
art: John Lakey



The author is a full-time professor of history at Villanova University; his specialty is industrial technology, particularly transportation technology and weapons. He has had papers published on the topics of the history of psychology, arms technology and disarmament, and women's history.

In his spare time, he keeps himself busy by either writing fiction or designing historical, science-fiction, and fantasy simulations or, with his artist wife, tending to his two-year-old daughter.

He claims that, like everyone else, he is writing a novel.

At first the messenger was incoherent. He stammered and gestured, but spoke no sense. The messenger was, a Persian, and Persians are, after all, a most mercurial race. Ever oscillating between ecstasy and despair, their moods rotate faster than is either sober or prudent. Persians lack the solidity or dullness of the Turks, my Lord's people. From long acquaintance I have found that Persians embrace love and death with equal enthusiasm, the Turks with equal indifference. Being a woman, and neither Persian nor Turk, I speak with some authority.

It is fortunate my Lord, the Amir, is merciful, compassionate, and patient. With an indulgent smile, my Lord listened as the messenger split the morning air, calling on Allah, Mohammed, and the martyred Husayn. Between sobbing and beseeching heaven's help, the messenger babbled about flying mountains and men falling from the sky. Twisting in the courtyard dirt, he gasped that fiery flying demons were but a few breaths behind him. As he spoke, he thrashed saffron specks of dust upon my Lord's vermilion slippers.

My Lord's shadow shrouded the figure flailing before him. The Amir's presence has always been prodigious. Were he begging in a bazaar, instead of commanding a citadel, people would still pick him first from among the throng. Though he had then reached his middle years, may Allah grant him many more, he was still an enormous man. Broad shoulders and round arms ended in a grip of cold, shrunk steel. I once watched him break a man in two, not in a state of anger, but in a restrained attempt to encourage discipline.

On either side, my Lord was flanked by lesser giants, handpicked Turks in lemon silks, holding heavy hornbacked bows. These bodyguards had been humble herders, till my Lord trained them into ready killers. Yet even after years in his service, they retained much of their placid peasant natures. Told to be cruel, and they would send the trembling Persian off to Paradise. Told to be kind, and they would help him to his feet.

Despite the messenger's disgraceful display, the Amir gave neither order. There was as yet nothing noteworthy in the Persian's behavior. We all assumed that he was drunk.

The Persians are infamous in their weakness for wine. Did not their greatest poet write:

*I made a Second Marriage in my house;
Divorced old dry Reason from in my bed,
And took the Daughter of the Vine to spouse?*

The Prophet, blessed in memory, forbade the fruit of the vine to all true believers. Perhaps because submission to Allah was forced upon them, the Persians forever fail his holy prohibition.

At last my Lord could no longer contain himself. He reached down into the dust at his feet and lifted the man up by his throat. The poor Persian went limp. Yet the Amir merely held him face to face and sniffed his breath. A puzzled look eclipsed the forbearing smile. "Sober — breath of a goat, but sober."

The Amir threw back his blunt head, and commands began to bellow forth from deep in his chest. "To horse, to horse." He waved the Persian like a loose rag. "Find this man a mount, tie him to the saddle if need be. . . . He must lead us to these demons."

From where he stood in the central court, the orders echoed throughout the citadel. Men spilled out of the barracks, buckling sword belts and tugging on coats of iron. As they ran, each asked the other why they were running. Some swore it was a nomad raid, others said that the Gur-Khan of Black Cathay had come to collect his taxes. Half-naked boys, their breath puffing vapor in the crisp morning air, dragged excited horses from the stables. Squires kicked the poor stable lads aside and slammed saddles onto startled mounts. Archers stumbled over one another, counting their arrows and forming into a straggling line alongside the main gate. Dogs dashed and barked at men's heels.

I postponed the breakfast task I was avoiding and pushed through this milling mass of men and animals, making for the harem roof. From atop our enclosure one could see above the outer wall. I wanted a choice spot on the roof before all the women knew what was afoot.

As I mounted the harem stairs, I could hear the other wives and concubines chattering. The older and more devout were down on their knees, praying that infidels would not sack the citadel.

Zoe, first among the young and foolish, was wearing only a black kipchak jacket, buttoned with pearls, and a turban wrapped round her honey-colored hair. Long pale legs ran bare from crotch to embroidered slippers. She laughed and lectured as she tried on skirts. "Get off your knees and into your best dresses. Women need not fear a sack. Even infidels are men, and we all know what men are after."

Boredom and frustration are the twin curses of harem life. Though my

Lord was still a lion in bed, over the years his visits to the harem had become fewer and farther apart.

The Senior Wife showed no fear. I passed her on my way to the roof; she was sitting by the stairs, feeding sweets to children and toadies. The old tyrant had survived several sacks and had twice been carried off by Tanguts. As she never tired of telling, the Amir always brought her back. The head of one Tangut lord still rotted above the main gate, a moldering reminder of my Lord's devotion. She was the love of his youth. To me she seemed hardly worth the trouble, always too awfully full of herself to have time enough for others.

When I reached the roof, there was a warm wind blowing. The cool courtyard had held the chill of dawn, but here in the open you could taste the breath of the desert. It was one of those dry feverish breezes that set teeth on edge and loosen swords in their scabbards.

Leaning out over the landscape was Yasmi, my Lord's current favorite. A dusky-eyed local beauty who dressed the part, all gold chains and pendants. Yasmi jerked back when she heard me behind her, silver bells tinkling round her ankles. Favorites had been known to "fall" from this roof.

When she saw it was I, she leaned back again, stretching even farther over the edge. Perhaps she wanted to show she didn't fear me, or even that she trusted me. That last was hardly likely, we hadn't spoken a dozen words since she had been brought into the harem. How could I or any of the other women feel well towards her? She kept constant company with our only man. Yasmi had to fall further from favor before we could think of being friends.

"Isn't it wonderful, Willow Moon?"

Willow Moon is not the name my mother gave me, though over the seasons I have learned to answer to it. Willow Moon was put on me by my first owner, to advertise my slender limbs and perfect oval face. "What's wonderful, Yasmi?"

"The air, the view, the adventure. Will there be a battle?"

I looked away, out over the desert. Beyond the walls the world was indeed terribly beautiful. Winter rains had wet the land; now, the sun tricked the earth into thinking that spring had come. Slim green blades had broken through the tawny crust. Directly down from the walls, the plain was as desolate as ever. But by gazing outward, keeping eyes level with the rising slope of distant ground, one caught a thin sheen of green. It was as if Allah had sprinkled a living mist over the land.

Yet the changes in this particular piece of earth were all too familiar to me. Not for the first time I squinted, trying to pick some new subtlety out of the picture. "When you have seen but fifteen summers, the thought of men hacking at each other while they foul their pants in fear might seem thrilling. If there must be a battle, let us hope it is held far from here."

Yasmi leaned back upon the parapet, raw young breasts pushing against

silk, voice pitched high and eager. "Zoe says we younger ones have nothing to fear from battle or sack."

My eyes still swept the limits of our world. "Zoe is indeed young; she is also an infidel with blonde fluff where she should have brains. She prides herself because she was a peace offering from a Kipchak prince. When the Kipchaks bartered her for peace, they got the best of the bargain. A sack would mean trading our Amir's harem for the dung fires of a nomad camp. A lifetime of travel in exchange for hard work, sour milk, and goat meat has little appeal to a sensible woman."

Yasmi shrugged. "It is hard to be both fifteen summers and sensible. Don't you ever wonder about the world beyond these walls?"

Black Spring Citadel was a bleached circle of square white towers and connecting curtain walls, wound round the summit of a dun-colored dome. The hill itself sat like the dome on a mosque, looking over the high road to China. To east and west the hill forts stretched out across the dusty plain. Some were proud and famous, others had no name. The warriors within them protected the passing caravans, robbing only those that refused their fees. These men lived by neither their backs nor their brains, though they paid for their ease with a loneliness that drove the weak insane.

The land is poor beyond belief. A furnace of wind and fire in summer, with winters so cold that men bleed from buckling on their icy iron. Yet after spending half my summers and winters in Black Spring Citadel, these stark seasons seemed to run together. Especially after my sons grew too old to keep me company in the harem.

I stopped searching the sands and turned to Yasmi. "When I was twelve summers, I walked the caravan route from the Land of Chin to the slave markets of Tashkent, sleeping by perfumed orchards, silver pagodas, and in the lee of the Great Wall. I saw much of the Middle Kingdom, without whose wealth these terrible Turks and hawk-faced Persians would have aught but themselves to rob."

Our eyes met over half-veils. "I also ate camel dust through the squalid tents of the Tanguts, amid a flock of children for sale. For weeks we walked the banks of the turgid Tarim, a tedious river that winds through a dull desert before losing itself in a waste of marsh and sand. Each child that died raised the price the survivors would fetch in the Stone City." My eyes flicked from hers to the hills. "And still I burn to see more of the world than this."

Yasmi had gone straight from a neighboring village to the Amir's harem. She lowered her voice and shifted the subject. "Why are the men running?"

"A Persian has gone madder than usual and seen a flying mountain."

Yasmi's people were Persian, survivors from some lost wave of conquest. She looked sharply to see if this was some fanciful insult. Before I could soothe her, the blare of a trumpet cut between us. We turned in time to see half the garrison of Black Spring Citadel thunder out the gate and down the

hill.

Our Lord the Amir was in the van, with the dazed Persian tied to a pack mule behind him. In his wake rode a motley knot of man, dressed in dingy yellow, royal cobalt, and russet brown. Mules, spare mounts, braying camels, and yapping pi-dogs brought up the rear. Black Spring Citadel boasted as fine a lot of irregular cavalry as ever lifted their neighbor's cattle. Turks, Persians, and Kipchak mercenaries — the only thing uniform about them was their weight of weapons. Each man wore a steel cap and mail armor, along with lance, sword, mace, ax, and bow. 'Tis a wonder that they knew which to use when the time came. Our Lord wore two swords, a gold-chased scimitar that was a gift from Saif ad-Din, the Sultan's brother, and a weighty broadsword won from a Frankish knight before the walls of the holy city Jerusalem. They made a bold sight, particularly the Persians, who didn't trust the Turks and wore all their plunder on their persons.

Then Yasmi was yelling in my ear and leaning perilously forward with only me for support. Trim feet beat against the flagstones, silver rang in the wind, and her hand pointed eastward into the sky. I looked to where the girl's rings and bracelets flashed in the sun.

In these high plains the skies seem to go on forever. Despite the dry wind along the ground, the heavens swelled with thunderheads. Clouds promised rain, though often it was a false promise in this parched land. Floating over the far hills, at the base of a thunderhead, was a mountain made of silk. It wafted on the wind, a great taut body, borne aloft by nothing but evil. The silk was sewn in a vast patchwork — milk-white in places, scarlet, antique brown, and plum in others.

The Mountain did not come straight upon us; instead, it drifted downwind, dropping as it came. As the distance fell, the silken mass grew to become as tall and as broad as fifty tall men. Beneath the main body hung a series of round wicker baskets, each rested on wheels that seemed rather useless so high in the sky. The lowest basket was open, and ringed with wicker shields and great heavy sacks. Banners and streamers trailed from the bloated body, like the stingers on those big poisonous jellyfish that the Island Barbarians consider a delicacy.

From where we watched along the walls, the Amir and his horsemen looked like the twig and straw soldiers my sons made for fighting out battles on the harem floor. Leaving their pack animals in the shelter of a knoll, these tiny warriors rode directly into the Mountain's path. Already some of the Kipchaks were hanging back. They were paid to plunder caravans, not to charge magic mountains.

A few bowshots in front of the Mountain, the Amir ordered a halt. Here, he threw himself from the saddle and fell prostrate on the plain, his turbaned head turned south and west towards distant Mecca. When this moment of prayer had passed, he vaulted back onto his white charger, pausing only to rewind his turban. Properly attired, and in a state of grace, my Lord

feared neither death nor the devil.

His horse broke into a canter. The Amir rose high in his stirrups, his scimitar falling in a golden arc. The canter turned to a gallop, the gallop to a charge.

A battle roar rolled out from his barrel chest; it reached all the way to the citadel and rang round our ears. The last words were slurred by the demon wind . . . *illaha-ha-ha il Allah-la-la*. There is no god but God. For others it was a prayer; for him, a call to arms. As his heavy horse smote the earth, the men massed behind him took up the cry. In my ear, and at a higher pitch, Yasmi echoed it also. Even the infidel Kipchaks, who worshiped steppe spirits and full bellies, picked up the cry. For all men must yell something as they blunder blindly into danger.

Their yell was answered by sheets of flame erupting from the wheeled basket that hung lowest from the Mountain. Smoky tendrils snaked towards the onrushing riders. None actually fell among our men. Most went short or to the side, scattering sparks across the arid landscape. A few burst in mid-air, with a flash of summer lightning and a clap of thunder. As flames flew forth, the Mountain rose and gyrated like a mad dervish attacked by ants. Fearing that Allah cared not for the fate of infidels, the Kipchaks bolted. Despite their defection, the van surged on.

The men were now within bowshot, though none could control his mount enough to draw an arrow. A dark sphere leaped from the Mountain and rolled towards the riders. Trailing a stubby tail of fire, the black sphere danced like death itself. My Lord twisted his horse towards this new horror, raising his scimitar and swinging low in the saddle. Before he could strike, the black ball burst, throwing up a pillar of flame and spewing forth a flight of Djinn. This fountain from Hell sent our men flying every which way. Even if they had wanted to keep up the charge, they never could have convinced their horses.

With each discharge, the Mountain had leaped and whirled. In the ensuing stillness it started sinking again, drifting with the wind, banners and streamers trailing over the abandoned field. Hanging at the end of one long cable was a man dressed as a Druse. He hit the ground, landing fast and hard. The Mountain bounced a bit, as if the loss of weight caused it to climb back into the sky. Staggering to his feet, the Druse limped after the trailing cables. Catching hold of one, he looped it round a metal stake and hammered the stake into the ground. The Mountain came to the end of that cable, then hung there tugging like a huge hooked fish.

As for our heroes, there was no sign of them. Only a few of the pack animals were returning, dragging their broken tethers and cropping the tender shoots as they came.

The Druse secured several more cables. Painfully, the Mountain pulled itself down these lines. When the bottom basket touched wheels to earth, a smaller figure leaped out. Together the two of them tethered the basket to

the ground. The Mountain listed with the wind, but once an upwind cable was attached, the drunken monster righted itself.

A ragged cheer rose from our ramparts. The Mountain had held me entranced, like a bird about to be eaten. Now I tore my eyes away in time to see the Amir striding across the plain.

He had lost horse, lance, bow, broadsword, and turban, but still held tight to the gold-chased scimitar. His shoulders were hunched and his head thrust forward. A stubborn bull, stamping as he came, bent on trampling his opponents and blind to any cost.

Yasmi's voice sank to a tremble, "Such indeed is valor . . ."

And foolishness, I thought, though I said nothing that Yasmi could use against me later.

The Druse and his companion turned from their task to meet this new threat. The smaller figure scurried into the wheeled basket. Hardly bigger than a boy, he perched himself behind one of the wicker shields, holding a light Tartar bow. The Druse raised an arm and motioned for my Lord to halt.

The raging bull snorted, hefted his scimitar like a cleaver, and kept on coming. In quick succession the archer planted three arrows in his path. My Lord scattered them with one foot and strode forward.

The next shaft struck him full in the chest. It was a cane arrow from a light bow, and shattered in his mail. The archer bent down and came up with a stouter bow and heavy steel-tipped arrow. The Druse called again for the Amir to halt.

My chest constricted as if the dart were aimed at me. Yasmi clung to the parapet. Her position and protection came from the words she whispered in my husband's bed. The thrill of battle had vanished along with the color in her knuckles. If the next arrow split the Amir's armor, the girl would be just a childish concubine who had made enemies in the harem far less forgiving than I.

For the good of all, our Lord halted. The Druse came forward from the Mountain, speaking in low tones. Thank Allah he was unarmed, or the world would have had one less heretic in it. Instead of hacking him into pieces, the Amir heard the heretic out. Then rather than replying, he spun on his heel and stalked back to his citadel.

Once through the main gate, the Amir found his voice. He stormed about the central court, roaring like a wounded beast. No one dared remind him that the objects of this anger were still cowering in the hills. To the Turks he swore that if they failed him once more, they would wish themselves infidels again, following their herds through the howling wastes. Then he warned the Persians that his wrath would make the vengeance of Caliph Yazid the Evil seem like a mother's kiss. Of the Kipchaks he said nothing. They were hirelings and had not the hope of Paradise to spur them on. From his place in the van, he had not seen them melting away in the rear. Elsewise everyone

knew he would have skinned them alive and used their hides as banners to encourage the next attack.

When he could think of no one else to blame, he retired to his private chambers. There, Allah be kind, he sent for me. It was a summons I hardly expected, and an honor I would have gladly handed to my worst enemy. In the harem we took it for certain that the next woman who went to him would return with welts.

When I arrived, his face was black, clouded with anger and singed by fire. His clothes were ripped and tattered down one side, stinking of smoke and sulfur. Without speaking I opened a cedar chest and laid out fresh silks. Two great mastiffs paced at his side. In his rage he preferred the company of dogs.

No words came at first; when they finally arrived, they fell so softly I strained to catch them. "I must hold a parley. It appears that the leader of these sorcerers is Chinese. . . ."

I waited, the hounds peeked up to see if it was safe to scratch. Since I was a child, I have had a special sympathy with animals. This looked to be one of those conversations when I would learn as much from his dogs as from him.

"Well, you are Chinese." He said this with significance, as if it should be news to me. "You will know him better than I. For this parley, prepare a meal and plan an evening to impress a man of your race."

"Where and when shall this be?" His mind was still on the Mountain, above such mundane matters.

"Tonight, of course, at dusk upon that accursed Mountain."

I nodded, too alarmed to trust my mouth.

His next words came low and level, with a warning that even the hounds heard. "You are Chinese, but still my wife. Your eyes and ears are mine. Look and listen, but remain wed to me, if you value the two sons you bore me."

"Of course, my Lord." After spending half my life here in his house, how was I to forget? His words hinted at more, but this was all he would trust to me. Then he kissed me, full on the lips, which I found more strange than reassuring.

As I left, I looked down at the dogs, their beaten eyes looked back as if for the last time.

The afternoon was swept away in a storm of activity. A thousand and one things were done, from ransacking the kitchens for food to finding men bold enough to serve it aloft. It was well that the Amir's wrath went before me. I marched through the harem, handing out tasks with little regard for rank or station. Secret caches of luxuries, the loot of a dozen caravans, were plundered anew. Even my Lord's attire had to be made special for the occasion. Neither Turkish dress nor mail armor went with the meal.

At dusk it was done, despite countless complaints from old enemies and a score of new ones. When sunset prayer faded, our party rose and toiled to-

ward the Mountain. We were well weighted with food and gifts; silken lanterns bobbed above us, freshly painted with auspicious designs.

We trooped into the wheeled basket, the rusty light bathing the wicker-work like darkening blood. A smaller basket crawled down the cable to greet us. We entered and ascended, following the fading light. The Druse had given instructions for operating the smaller basket. Pulling on one line raised the basket, letting out another lowered it. As soon as we started to pull, the Mountain dipped down to meet us. Halfway up we passed bags of sand, headed the other way. When these ballast bags touched down, the Mountain bobbed back up, coming to rest in the upper air, which was still filled with sunlight.

Below us, Black Spring Citadel was a haphazard jumble of walls and towers. Above us opened the gates of heaven. Clouds towered into tall cliffs, wide bays, sweeping headlands, and deep canyons filled by purple shadow.

Through a golden haze, I surveyed a small arc of the lands claimed by the Gur-Khan of Black Cathay. Beyond the northern hills bristled black boreal woods, wandered by murderous nomads who knew not Allah and drank the blood of their horses. To the south and east stretched a blue line of peaks, the T'ian Shan, foothills climbing toward the Roof of the World. To westward the Silk Road threaded its way under the sinking sun, seeking the gates of Samarkand the Golden. Someday, I swore silently, I would find a way to follow.

The basket berthed itself beside a wicker pavilion, just beneath the Mountain's main body. The pavilion was spare and tasteful, weight and ornamentation having been ruthlessly eliminated. Within the pavilion was a single chamber, lit by a single lamp. Around that lamp a strange quartet sat waiting. Their leader was a sage, with a white wisp of a beard and thin artistic fingers. The years weighed heavily on him, for he sat supported in a light litter. He introduced himself as Lee Ko. His every gesture was economical, courteous, and, in a word, Chinese.

Next to him, like night next to day, knelt a horrible Gobi nomad. This savage bodyguard was hardly more than a boy. He wore stained felt pants and a steel cap adorned with an ivory crescent moon. His chest was covered by a curious cuirass built up from finger-breadth strips of iron. Each strip was pierced by eight small holes and lashed to the next with leather laces. The boy's taut skin was tanned and weathered to the color of those laces. Cat-green eyes, set wide apart above high cheekbones, weighed us with animal cunning. The light Tartar bow that he had bent against the Amir rested close at hand. His name meant Ironsmith in some harsh Turkic tongue.

The Druse we had seen that morning sat opposite Lee Ko. Druses are a secretive sect that inhabit the hills overlooking the Middle Sea in Syria, Lebanon, and Anti-Lebanon. They hold that the long dead Fatimid Caliph, Hakim the Blasphemer, is the incarnation of Allah. Competent killers, Druses sometimes work their way east as thugs and caravan guards. This

Druse was like none I had ever seen. He had pallid skin, and eyes as blue as the sky seen through the sockets of an empty skull.

The last of the four was an honored guest and a Persian. A gaunt and terrible Persian, with sharp lines sunk into his face, and limbs like twisted iron. He gazed past us, looking out of dark hollows divided by a hatchet nose. His attention seemed to be focused straight from some distant recess in his brain toward a point far over the horizon. Lee Ko introduced him as an ambassador from Sheik al Jabal of Alamut. The name meant nothing to me then.

This trio of madmen and murderers made strange company for so kind a sage as Lee Ko. However, there was no time to ponder the problems they presented. I was too busy translating between Chinese and Turkish, serving a lavish dinner in strange surroundings, and keeping a close eye on my Lord. The Amir was better disposed to flail among these sorcerers with a sword than to share small talk over dinner. It shamed me that he should be so discourteous, but his idea of a party was to gather a group of the younger wives round a hashish bowl and a bed of pillows.

Luckily, Lee Ko took quick charge of the conversation. While I served cold chicken, with fruit and the juices of fruit, he told illuminating anecdotes and exhibited all manner of miracles. The first of these was a thin brass globe seated on a system of weights and gears. The sun, moon, and zodiac were etched in gold and silver on bands running round its surface. A very noble work. "It is," the sage explained, "a clock which needs neither water, that freezes in winter, nor the sun, that hides at night. It always keeps the same time, and by comparing it to local time, we know how far east or west we have gone."

Neither my Lord nor I knew how a clock could tell both time and distance, but we hid our ignorance behind knowing nods.

Thinking us silent in admiration, Lee Ko displayed a pair of brass plates held in a press. "This machine is only a partial success. It is a press for writing with brass characters. The idea comes from Korea. However, our humble language has thousands of written characters. For almost all uses, the hand is faster. In the West, where languages use so few characters, I hope to find a speech suitable for my word press."

The Amir grunted his approval. Like me, he could recognize but a few lines from the Koran. The exploding ball we had seen that morning was more his idea of a miracle. Yet Lee Ko dismissed the fireworks as simple alchemy, not to be compared to a brass press that took much time to say very little.

Eventually, my Lord extended a grudging compliment on Lee Ko's mastery of the air, faint praise which I embroidered in translation. Chinese is for compliments, Turkish for commands.

The sage raised a palm in polite protest. "Flight is only a minor miracle. All my life I have strived to see each obstacle as an opportunity, two sides to the cosmic whole. I did not turn my hand to flight till my legs ceased to

carry me."

He drew a bit of feather from a fold in his robe and released it over the flame that warmed the tea urn. All except the Persian watched it waft about the chamber.

"The Silk Mountain travels on this same principle. Above us towers a sack filled with the air of black earth, which makes the Mountain lighter than that feather. By dropping ballast or releasing vapor, we may rise or fall at will."

"What is air of black earth?" My Lord's curiosity came out at last.

"In our country there is a black rock that burns. The air from this black earth is exceedingly light, though it chokes the miners who dig the rock." Lee Ko paused. "Yet every obstacle is also an opportunity. I drew off the choking vapor and used it to lighten my Mountain."

The Amir agreed that this was wise, though he knew not one vapor from another.

It was an opportune moment to bring on the next course, a nomadic dish of spiced beef and steamed noodles. A provincial offering, hardly civilized, but a specialty of our barbaric kitchens. To disguise its coarseness, I brought out wine as well, in silver buckets chilled with snow from the citadel's cisterns. I had forced open the Persians' secret stores, though they accused me of every crime since the Perfidy of the Omayyads. The rest of the forbidden sap I squeezed from the Kipchaks, holding their morning's cowardice over their heads.

My Lord let the cup pass, for he is unimaginatively devout, but I was pleased to see the heretics and infidels drink deeply. Tongues loosened while the wine went round. When the Amir asked where the Mountain would fare next, Lee Ko laughed. "Where the wind wills."

At first I thought this was polite evasion. However, Lee Ko explained that they indeed controlled only ascent and descent, all else was at the will of the winds.

The sage held high a pomegranate plucked from among the bowls before him. I had preserved all manner of fruit in dry sand covered with winter snow. He asked us to imagine it was the earth, which he said was round.

The Amir gave agreement. Though had Lee Ko said that the world was like a donkey's rear, my Lord would have nodded as gravely.

"Let this blemish be the Gobi desert," Lee Ko outlined the spot with a slender fingernail. "In winter, cold and heavy air sits over the Gobi. This air pushes the lighter and warmer airs to the south and west, creating the dry winter monsoon. Beneath a winter moon, we may sail out from the Gobi, to the Land of Chin, Bactria, Persia, and the Middle Sea."

He indicated these points on the pomegranate with deft strokes. "Come the spring and the dry monsoon dies, then the wet summer monsoon and the prevailing southwesterly winds will return us to the Gobi."

"Can such a system really work?" This was not my Lord's real response,

but what is the use of being a translator if you cannot slip in pertinent questions of your own?

Lee Ko sipped more wine and sighed. "It has problems. We may cover hundreds of leagues in a day, but the only way to alter course is to descend and wait for the wind to change. Each descent involves releasing air of black earth. To return to the sky, we must lighten ship. A couple of ascents and descents, and the trip is over. Return trips are impossible unless you can collect more air of black earth.

"I yearned to use my wings, but until this Westerner" — he indicated the Druse — "brought letters from the Sheik al Jabal, I had no sure way of returning."

At the mention of Sheik al Jabal, the Persian's vacant eyes leaped into focus. One could see his mind returning from that private place that he preferred to this one. "My master is an eager scholar, whose eyes and ears travel far and wide. Lee Ko's work prompted him to make inquiries of his own. This air of black earth is found in several parts of Persia and Arabia, usually associated with tar and naphtha deposits. If necessary, it may even be manufactured from dung or decaying plants. Lee Ko can be assured of a warm welcome, and help in returning to his homeland. My master has agents in every city between here and the Middle Sea. He is known to every official in the countryside. Wherever we land in Persia or Bactria, people will be anxious to please the Sheik al Jabal."

Lee Ko beamed with wine and innocence. "Such a learned and accommodating colleague was a gift from heaven. The Sheik al Jabal has given me the nerve I needed to visit the West. Two days ago we were in the Gobi. With the right winds, we will reach Persia in a day or two more. There we may purchase animals, convert the gondolas to wagons, and caravan to meet the Sheik al Jabal. He is already storing air of black earth, so the warm winds of summer may bear me back to the Land of Chin. Without the Sheik's network, stretching all the way to the Middle Sea" — Lee Ko again indicated the Druse — "my humble genius would be for naught."

His humble genius seemed full of holes to me. In a couple of days he had come a distance that would take months by caravan, but his safe return rested heavily on the promises of strangers. Still, men of letters are often fooled by words, particularly when false promises are penned in a fair hand.

As if reminded of other debts he owed, Lee Ko laid a frail hand on the young nomad's lap, losing his pomegranate in the process. "For launching our westward voyages, the Gobi is the key. Its stiff winds will send travelers west in the winter, who may work their way back in spring and summer. This lad is a sub-chief among the Mongols, and is eager to aid us."

I took this moment to interrupt with the next course, yearling lamb roasted in wild rice. My Lord chewed over the lamb and Lee Ko's words. "You plan to make many Silk Mountains?"

"Naturally, now caravans will travel by air, free from bandits and brig-

ands. When these valleys are spared the grazing of greedy pack animals, the desert will bloom again. Green lands will roll beneath an airborne river of gold." Lee Ko assured us that his present trip would prove in principle that all this was possible. It is likewise common that men of letters confuse principle and practicality. I knew not many merchants who would trust their treasure to the winds.

The Amir was aghast at even the idea. "Many honest warriors give their sweat and blood to guard the caravans. Must we all become farmers?" He made the last word sound like leprosy.

Lee Ko laughed. "Fear not, the golden river will water all. From the name 'Black Spring Citadel' and the dome on which it rests, I infer that there are naphtha springs nearby."

"Yes." My Lord's assent was guarded.

"Where there is naphtha, there is often air of black earth. Your castle could become a launching point for cloud caravans headed both east and west." What we would launch was another practical point that eluded Lee Ko. The region's main exports were drought and dysentery.

Conversation ceased, as my Lord fell into furious thought, for Lee Ko had said enough or perhaps too much. This morning's ill wind had risen in the southeast and continued to blow from that unseasonable quarter. The Mountain had been forced to descend, or risk being blown northwest beyond the Inland Seas into the Christian lands. Even heretics and infidels knew better than to drop in among Christians uninvited. Until the monsoon returned, the future plans of Lee Ko and his merry band of murderers were at the mercy of the Amir.

I took this as an auspicious time for the main course.

My nails ran over the strings of a dark ivory dulcimer. For a heartbeat the melody hung alone upon the air, then it was echoed in a tinkle of silver. Yasmi passed through a parted curtain — meat for the whole man, not just his belly.

Each step was precisely placed, hennaed feet arched just so, the bells striking in time to my strings. Bare arms rippled, heavy skirts twirled and swayed over trim ankles. Soft blue-black hair framed hidden cheek bones, pure olive eyes shown over her half-veil. The child fairly brimmed with raw talent, in her pretty Persian way.

She started with suggestion, pulsing and thrusting through the fabric, forcing the tempo as her feet beat faster. The tension tightened, then the first skirt came off. Bent over my dulcimer, I strove to strum to the movements, though by now the music had lost the men's attention. She whirled among them, spinning faster in the lamplight than eager eyes could follow, stripping down to her modest half-veil.

The men were even more shameless. Despite Lee Ko's age and condition, the sage showed no scholarly detachment. Sweat rolled down from the Druse's headcloth. Even the Persian showed the trace of a smile, as if Yasmi

brought back some deep dream of pleasure. My Lord was as proud as a puffed-up toad, ready to take the girl to his private chambers and thank her personally for the performance.

Only the young Mongol remained at rest. His grass-green eyes shifted from Yasmi to the others. While marking the men's actions, he peeled and ate the sage's pomegranate.

Then quick as she had come, Yasmi fled, leaving the men with fleeting images. Flashes of tight thighs and high cupped breasts, pieces they ached to form into a whole woman. I passed iced sherbet among them to help cool their fancies.

Perhaps because he had seen it all before, my Lord was the first to recover. He rose, filling the black space between deck and low ceiling. Lifting me up, he spoke from deep in his chest. "This is the one who planned tonight's feast."

My veiled head went down in proud modesty as I translated, and felt the sage's approving smile.

Night wind beat on wicker walls. "I can think of no greater gift, and from this night forward she is yours."

My Lord's words washed over me like snow melt. I stumbled to render them into Chinese. This was why he had hinted and threatened in his chambers. He planned to pass me into the enemy camp. A huge hand clamped hard on mine, lest I start to sway. Did the big fool think I would faint?

Lee Ko put up a barrage of complimentary refusals. The Druse looked as if someone had tossed an adder into his lap. Yet my Lord is immobile once his mind is set: it was take me or see the chamber spattered with blood.

Lee Ko was too refined for that.

Good-byes were few, despite fifteen years in my Lord's house. An older servant showed tears, but the bodyguards I had pressed into waiters were glad to be rid of me. My Lord was merely distracted, and Yasmi more uneasy than upset.

Outside, as they prepared to descend in the basket, Yasmi hung back, asking for a good-bye kiss. I thought, *This is my thanks for permitting her to perform.*

Warm lips brushed my cheek, scented breath whispered, "The Persian is an Assassin."

Yasmi and the basket fell away into the darkness as the Silk Mountain swayed beneath me.

The Druse descended as well, to keep watch in the gondola that was tethered to the ground. He trusted the Amir about as far as he could hike with an elephant on his back and another under each arm. The Amir returned the compliment by posting picket fires round the gondola, though there was little chance of the Mountain sailing while the wind blew to the northwest.

High above, Lee Ko told diverting tales from his homeland. I hid behind my veil and studied the Persian serpent in our midst. For the first time I no-

ticed the curved knife in his belt, the knife that kills and the knife that kills not. To keep on the good side of that dagger, merchants give up their gold, and princes pay heed to warnings in the night. From Bactria to the Middle Sea, millions of Shiites chafe under orthodoxy and the heel of the Turks. From dawn to dusk fanatic mullahs and murderous Fatimites preach the coming of the Mahdi, a second Christ to scourge this sinful world. It is among these Shiites that the Assassins spread their gospel of drugs and terror, heroes to those without hope. If they were joining with the Druse, then woe to the faithful.

Yet the Assassin said nothing more. Instead, he retired silently to a sleeping loft, leaving me with Lee Ko and the Mongol. The sage himself grew drowsy, gave many apologies, and then had the Mongol curtain off his litter. The nomad boy and I sat facing each other, wondering what would come next.

Snores issued from behind the curtain. Drifting down from the sleeping loft was the sweet scent of hashish. The Persian was now in some green paradise, ringed with mountain peaks, where dark-eyed damsels lay among the poppies. Drug-drenched brains made the Assassins fearless killers. Their own deaths meant less than nothing, just a quick return to their mountain paradise.

I studied the young Mongol as he removed his armor and prepared himself for sleep. Lee Ko thought highly of him, and as an infidel he had no reason to join with these heretics. Somehow I had to separate him from the others. Perhaps together we could talk sense into the old sage. Rising, I strolled out to the bamboo balcony that ran round the pavilion.

Black rags stole across a waning moon. The Mongol's thoughts must have matched mine, for before long the boy was beside me with a wine jar in his hand. Scent came cool and sweet from the jar, but with soft words I set it aside.

He moved closer. "You drink no wine, yet are neither Arab nor Turk?"

I let the moonlight and my unbound hair fall just so, revealing and concealing for maximum effect. "When the Holy Prophet came unto the Arabs, they were savages who ate and drank all manner of offal, and buried their infant daughters alive. His words taught them to live clean and made them masters from the Gates of Hercules to the Hindu Kush. Any woman or warrior would honor that."

He nodded. "The old sage is full of such tales from long ago, but he leaves you alone and cold in the night."

Boy warriors are still boys, and I saw that he was nervous. So I set myself down on the deck, making him feel more in command, and let the linen shift slip from my shoulder.

Without a word, he set his scimitar aside and was on the deck beside me. The Assassin and the sage were only a wicker wall away, but nomads derived their sexual etiquette from dog packs.

I slid my arms between his, avoiding the boyish grab at my breasts and pushing us together. My limbs twined round his strong young body, fingers pushing through oily hair, hips pressed hard against thighs.

Surprised, he let me show him how the Hindus do it, with each thing in its proper time. When finally he had what he wanted, I could tell it had been worth the wait.

Afterwards, we rolled ourselves together in a sleeping robe. The night air was alive with moonlight, but ran chill fingers over bare skin. I lay there, thinking that it had been a long time and that this boy's body was not soft around the middle like my Lord's. These were the only moments during that night upon the Mountain that I really enjoyed. I felt not a whit unfaithful to the husband who had marooned me there. He has a score of wives and concubines to make up for my infidelity, and if he trusted any of us beyond his sight, he wouldn't keep us locked in a harem. It is by the will of Allah that women are weak and wicked.

Yet wantonness opens the way for more mistakes. The first of these is thinking that because you have lain with a man he is special, and therefore to be trusted. A maiden's mistake one may say, but I had spent many years in a well-guarded harem, which is only one man away from being a convent.

I started to whisper my fears to the Mongol. "Your lord Lee Ko is too trusting. This Persian is not a merchant, but a Fatimite Assassin."

The boy whispered back that he kept careful watch on both the Persian and the Druse.

"That is well. They care nothing for commerce in the clouds. That scheme is a mirage, meant only to fool an old scholar who knows much about nature and nothing about business. Holy war is another matter. Since the Sultan Salah ad-Din deposed the Fatimids, the enemies of orthodoxy have been hiding in their mountain castles. If they lay hands on Lee Ko, they will wring his secrets from him. Flying Mountains, blasting powder, word presses to spread their lies — I know not which of your master's miracles is the worst."

He stroked my hair to sooth me. "Fear not, I will turn their schemes to words written on the wind."

I wanted to know where his confidence came from. "Is it true that Lee Ko found you wandering wild upon the steppe?"

"No man wanders wild who has the Yasa to guide him."

This boy spoke of men so sternly, I tried to tease him. "What is this Yasa? Another magic clock that tells location as well as time of day?"

The boy became still more serious. "The Yasa is freedom, life, everything. It is wandering free under the stars and knowing no leader but the strong."

He saw doubt cross my face. "I am descended direct from the first mating of the Gray-blue Wolf and the Tawny Doe. When I was nine summers, Tartars poisoned my father, and the tribe left my mother and I to eat roots,

leaves, mice, and marmots. Yet my mother taught me, and the Yasa was with me. I have begun to bend my tribe to my will. One day we will kill every Tartar taller than a wagon wheel, and enslave their women and children. My name means Ironsmith, and I will weld the many tribes of the Gobi into a single sword. Then I will be the Jenghis Khan."

I nuzzled his rough hand, and this pleased him. "With Lee Ko's wisdom the winter wind off the desert will carry us, sweeping the pastures free so a horse may walk without stumbling where the cities were. Now, no city is too strong, no wall too high; the Great Wall itself is nothing."

I saw my sons pushing straw soldiers across the harem floor. The Gray-blue Wolf that was his first ancestor still stalked inside him. I read this boy as easily as I had read the Amir's dogs. He was no simple, stupid nomad. The Silk Mountain hadn't sent him running in terror; instead, he was turning it to his own ends. Few women, and fewer men, could adapt so quickly. If he did only a tenth of what he planned, the cities that cluttered the plains would soon have a surprise.

The Ironsmith saw my mood, if not my thoughts. "Don't fear, you will be safe, but there is no freedom without sacrifice. Many must die if any are to live free. When I am the Jenghis Khan, you will be my second wife, and will never have to tend the flocks. You will have your own yurt, with hides and pork fat to warm you. Young women will boil your meat and feed the dung fire."

"What more could a woman want?" I snuggled up against the Jenghis Khan to be.

He purred with pleasure. I listened to his breathing become deep and regular. It was difficult not to stroke the strong sleeping body, as beautiful as a brown viper, whose colors warn of the venom within.

I looked to where the scimitar lay. It was an aged blade, beaten from black iron and razor sharp. As the boy slept, I brooded, torn between two satans. One satan sat beside me, saying that other people's troubles were not my own. The Ironsmith liked me, and along with Lee Ko he offered escape from Black Spring Citadel. Far off upon the Gobi sat the other satan. The Great Satan as Yasmi would say. From over that far horizon, the Jenghis Khan frowned down on me. I saw the Yasa falling from the sky onto countless innocents.

I looked from sword to sleeping youth. I had not the hard heart of a heroine, like Judith in the Book of the Hebrews who slew Nebuchadnezzar's general in her bed. Yet, if I acted quickly, there would be no meeting with the Assassins and no Silk Mountain in the hands of the Ironsmith's Mongols.

Slipping out of the sleeping robe, I made my way by moonlight to the small basket. The Druse had sent it up so it would be ready for the one who would relieve him. I climbed inside and unlocked the line. The descent mechanism was geared, and I was able to let myself down gingerly.

The Druse was surprised to see me, expecting that either the Persian or the Mongol had come early to relieve him. Shaking with fear and cold, I stammered that Lee Ko was gravely ill and that he was needed above at once. The Druse ran cold blue eyes over me, asking why one of the others hadn't come.

"Look, the Persian is pacing about in some unfocused stupor, raving about infidels disguised as great green lizards. The Mongol is loath to leave him alone with Lee Ko." This must have sounded in character, for the Druse prepared to ascend.

I rolled my eyes towards the Amir's watchfires and asked what if someone tried to come aboard. Feigning helplessness, I implied it would be no problem for my Lord's guards to overpower me, then swarm up the cables to the Mountain. Patiently, the Druse explained the release mechanism that would separate the Mountain from the bottom gondola and its ballast. That would mean leaving me behind, but I could see the Druse counted that as no great loss. Besides, though he distrusted the Amir, he hardly expected a direct attack. What would my Lord gain by seeing them go flying off?

Despite his churlish attitude, I marked time, letting him get safely to the pavilion, before taking action. Then I unlocked the release lever and gave it a sharp tug.

The Silk Mountain and its crew of cutthroats vanished like an evil dream into the night. I was more than glad to see them go. My Lord's simple strength and piety were no match for devils such as these. They were headed in the safest direction I could devise, north and west towards the Kipchaks and the Christian lands beyond the Caspian. They could plague the infidels with their murderous miracles.

If this setback did not stop the Ironsmith, I had done my best, whether or not it was enough. My only regrets at the time were for Lee Ko, whose genius deserved better. Still he had wanted to visit the West and examine languages for his word press. At his advanced age, any delay was foolish. I had merely hurried him on his way. I hoped he would find in this new obstacle still more opportunities.

The Amir's guards swarmed aboard, groaning in horror at what I had done. Now they were in great fear, for my Lord had given strict orders not to let the Mountain out of their sight. Some wanted to flee at once, but the braver ones were determined to go before the Amir and put the blame on me.

After nerving themselves to face the Amir, they fell to arguing over whether or not to rape me. All but one were for it. They were sure that the Amir would kill me. Women were scarce among them, and they felt it a sin that I should be wasted. One man alone refused, fearing my Lord too much. He would not even lie for the others, and they dared do nothing without complete agreement. So instead they threw a cloak over my head, to cover the Amir's honor, and marched me to his fortress.

As they dragged me back toward the darkened citadel, the guards continued to chafe that one man, calling him coward and eunuch. Lifting the cloak, I strained to study his features through the gloom. If ever I had the power, I would do this man a favor.

By the time we crossed the courtyard, everyone was awake. My captors had shouted their business to the gatekeepers, to fix my blame as firmly as they could. Most of the men were struck dumb by such insolence and immodesty. Others applauded my fall, saying that the Chinese whore would at last get her due. Veiled women lined the harem roof. I looked for Yasmi's gold bangles in the torchlight, but couldn't find them.

They led me right into my Lord's bedchamber. He was just awakened, with a white cotton robe wrapped loose about his naked bulk. As the guards recounted my misdeeds, I looked everywhere but at the Amir. The room was old and familiar. Red and white spirals swirled up the walls to merge with a vaulted blue ceiling. Along one wall, pointed arches rose and fell, enclosing windows masked by white arabesque screens. I remembered how it was to lie in his great bed and watch the morning sun cascade through alabaster carvings, spreading fire over an inlaid floor.

He heard the men out, then sent them on their way without a word. I thought we were alone, till he started to speak, then I saw someone curled in one corner of the broad bed. Whoever it was had covers pulled over her head, and was making herself very small.

He asked if I denied the charges.

For the first time since they bore me into the bedchamber, my eyes turned to meet his. "Aside from a few petty lies, they told only the truth."

The eyes that met mine narrowed. "I have seldom been so disobeyed. If you were a man, I would feed you to my dogs, a little each day to spare their appetites. You are a woman and therefore deserve worse."

Pleading would not suit the situation, since the Amir himself never asked forgiveness from aught but Allah. "My Lord, I did what I did for you. That Silk Mountain bore more kinds of death than I care to think of. You may bless the wind that blows it away."

"Willow Moon, that was for me to decide. After years as my wife, you still insist on having your way."

There was a movement behind him. We both looked and saw the covers rising up. Dragging half the bedding behind her, Yasmi planted her naked body full in the path of his fury. "Have you no care for anyone? Did I not tell you that the Persian on the Mountain was an Assassin of Alamut?"

"Enough child, I have no fear of the Assassins."

Yasmi stood her ground. "You have no fear because you have no brains. The Assassins of Alamut have murdered three Caliphs, as many Grand Wazirs, and half a dozen princes. They struck down Prince Maragha in the very presence of the Sultan of Persia. How can you be safe? What am I to do when you are gone?"

He stared at his favored bedmate, looking as though all the world had turned against him.

She stabbed a finger into his middle. "And if they let you live, it would not be as a warrior. Could I love a fat peddler, hawking the vapors from a spring of black muck?"

Shock replaced surprise, one hand went to protect his growing midriff.


I stepped up beside Yasmi, treading even firmer on the line dividing self-defense from further insubordination. "You bid me remember that I am your wife. As your wife, I must hold your life and honor above mine. For that honor I twice bore you sons, though it risked my life and brought me much pain. If I must suffer still more for saving your life, then so be it. 'Remind those who find fault that all is from Allah,' so the Holy Koran tells us."

He held up his hands. "Woman, when I want the will of Allah, I consult my mullah, not my wife. I like better the verse that says wives must obey their husband."

Still, we escaped without even a beating.

Later, for the first time in months, my Lord and I lay together. A man must show his mastery in one way if not another. I stared up at the blue tiles that arched like the sky. He asked me what I was thinking.

"This wind could carry Lee Ko into the Christian lands. I wonder what the infidels would make out of his press that prints, magic clock, and exploding powder?"

The Amir pressed a firm finger to my lips. "You have already done more wondering this night than is well for a woman. Knowing the Christians as I do, nothing much will come of such things." 

MOVING?

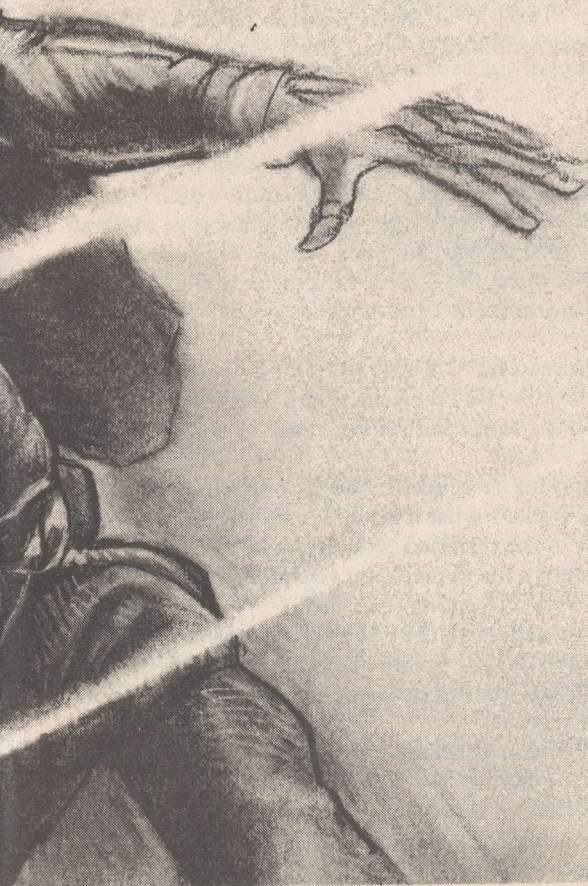
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Sgt. W. H. C. 1063750

THE MAN I'LL NEVER BE
by Doug Beason
art: Hank Jankus



The author holds a Ph.D. in physics, and he currently works as an assistant professor of physics at the U.S. Air Force Academy. Soon, however, he will be moving to Albuquerque, where he will head up the plasma physics branch of an Air Force laboratory.

The author has been married for seven years and is the proud father of a sixteen-month-old daughter.

The “born leader” is a fiction by “born followers.” Leadership is not a gift at birth: it is an award for growing up to full moral stature. It is the only award a man must win everyday. The prize is the respect of others, earned by the disciplines that generate self-respect.

— Major General Louis Metzger
Commanding General, Third Marine Division

“You nervous, son?”

“No, sir!”

“Good.” Lieutenant Colonel Krandel slapped the man on the knee and moved to the last soldier, ducking his head around the straps which held the webbed seating-pallet to the craft’s body. He steadied himself as the craft buffeted in the turbulence, then asked, “Morales . . . are you ready?”

“Yes, sir.” The corporal hesitated. “Is it true, sir? I mean, about the President . . . is he still alive? Do you really think they’ll give us permission to go?”

Krandel looked the lad in the eye. “I’ll be honest with you, son: I don’t know. The final word we have is the President is still at the airfield. The first pre-attack canister with the command sensors made it, and we can tell he’s still alive.

“As for us going, that’s not for us to decide. We’ll do what we’re told — and we’ll be ready, by God, if that’s what it takes.” Krandel patted the corporal’s leg and straightened in the cramped compartment. “It’s up to your squad, Morales. The President’s life depends on your getting in there and then getting him out. Now finish checking your men.”

“Yes, sir!” The corporal turned down the line of Marines silently sitting in their seats. “All right, one more time before we rocket: check off the man to your left. Starting with the last man on each side, sound off and slap your buddy on the leg when you’re done.”

The Marines turned and began checking their partners as Lieutenant Colonel Krandel moved to the front of the TAV. Although cramped in the tiny hold, the twenty-three Marines managed to check through their equipment without appreciably raising the noise level; with the TAV unlit, the only other noise came from the rushing air and the mother ship below them. Krandel squirmed past the sweaty bodies and, speaking words of encourage-

ment to his men, made his way to the spot he'd assigned himself. Gunnery Sergeant Bascalski nodded wordlessly as Krandel squeezed into his jump-seat. Bascalski had been a big help; although skeptical at first, the seasoned sergeant appeared to have accepted Krandel's unexpected command of the Rapid Strike Unit.

The door to the cockpit was to Krandel's right; directly facing him was the outside hatch. When they landed . . . *if they landed safely* . . . he was first out.

The anticipation filled him with uneasiness. But a thought drifted back from the Academy . . . or was it Naval Staff College? *A competent commander doesn't spook his troops.*

He had some time before they rocketed; might as well make the best of it. Besides, it would look as if he were confident everything would go as planned. He leaned back against the restraining straps and closed his eyes.

Soon, a murmuring — a few pointed whispers about his sleeping — let him know the troops had noticed his calmness, but inside he was wide awake.

"Room, Aa-ten *hut!*" The room stood as one.

General Vandervoos strode into the room, teeth clenching an unlit cigar, the quintessential Wing commander. Lieutenant Colonel Krandel kept pace one step behind him. General Vandervoos reached the podium and stared hard at the men in front of him. Finally he broke the silence, saying, "Take seats, gentlemen. This won't take long."

He shifted the cigar from side to side and nodded for the first slide. Krandel pushed a button; the lights dimmed and a desert scene, pictured from high overhead, flashed on the screen. Bordering the slide were the words COMPARTMENTAL: TS/SCI NO FORN — DOWNGRADE IAW DOD 5000.1. Vandervoos spoke around the cigar. "This, gentlemen, is Do'brai — it's an IR scan taken from BIGEYE and transmitted to the National Emergency War Center not fifteen minutes ago. If you'll notice in the lower right, there's a runway." The screen flashed again, showing a close-up. The runway was spotted with vehicles, dots that had to be people, and a single plane. "The plane is Air Force One: gentlemen, the President of the United States is being held at Do'brai against his will."

Vandervoos paused, waited for the stir to die down, and continued. "This morning — our time — Air Force One left Zweibrücken, Germany, for Egypt. In route, communication with Air Force One was terminated, and the aircraft was diverted to this field. We managed to track the flight, but were unable to regain contact with the pilot. As soon as the aircraft landed, BIGEYE saturated the area with sonic and motion sensors using over-the-horizon semiballistics. We've been able to keep in touch with what's going on to a large extent through the sensors, but until BIGEYE's polar orbit brought it overhead, we didn't have visual confirmation until fifteen min-

utes ago.

“From intercepted communiqués, we determined the plane will remain at Do’brai only for a short time. Both DIA and CIA sources confirm that high-ranking ALH guerrilla leaders are assembling at Do’brai . . . and that any not there are en route and will arrive within the next eight hours. This is the largest gathering of ALH guerrillas since the Mexican Intervention.”

He paused. “I’ll lay it out for you: the President’s been taken hostage and has twelve hours to live. As soon as the ALH junta is assembled, it will announce his impending execution — for American crimes against humanity. It will be televised from the Arab Liberated Hegemony and will be picked up by the world media” — he shook his head bitterly — “and don’t think they won’t accept the feed. They’re going to make this execution into a three-ring circus.”

He nodded to Krandel. Krandel changed the slide, throwing up an exaggerated view of Northern Africa with air routes marked in red. General Vandervoos rapped on the podium to quiet the stir. “We’ll only have one chance. The plane is refueling at Do’brai, and as soon as the last guerrilla leader is aboard — in about eight hours — Air Force One will take off for the Arab Liberated Hegemony for the execution. The reason you’re here is the National Emergency Council wants us to rescue the President, and do it within the next two hours.

“We don’t have any airpower close enough to help — and even if we did, they couldn’t do anything; after all, we can’t shoot down Air Force One, not with the President on board. And once he reaches the ALH, it’s over. The place will be swarming with so many guerrillas, it would be suicide to attempt a rescue there. The only option we’d have left is to retaliate against the ALH, and with this administration’s leanings, I wouldn’t count on even that. So this is our only chance — we have to move now.” The rumbling grew. General Vandervoos nodded to Krandel who switched off the slide projector and brought the lights back up.

The room smelled of heavy musk that came with fifty men decked out in battle gear. General Vandervoos shot a glance at Lieutenant Colonel Krandel. Krandel stood erect and studied the men; in the back, behind the Marines, slouched a row of Air Force types. As much as he loathed them, they were a necessary evil and would be the only way to pull the rescue off.

The general cleared his throat and eyed the back row. “The Air Force is preparing two of its seven TransAtmospheric Vehicles at Edwards for the flight to Do’brai. The TAVs will be cramped, but we can get two squads aboard one of them and enough fuel to get both TAVs back aboard the other.

“I know your training with the Rapid Strike Unit had you using four TAVs, but the National Emergency Council is willing to risk only two of them. We can cram everyone from Air Force One aboard the TAV carrying the fuel bladder, after it’s expended, of course, so we shouldn’t have any trouble getting everyone back.” He lowered his voice, “Personally, I think

those village idiots are still worried about what the public will think — they've still got that damned Mexican Intervention albatross hanging around their necks — so I want the rest of you to man the other TAVs as a backup, just in case they change their minds."

The general took the cigar from his mouth. "We figure they'll head for the ALH at dawn, local time. That gives us six hours to get you there, rescue the President, and get you back up in the air." He stuck the cigar in his mouth and glanced at his watch. "The TAVs are arriving at Pendleton within the half-hour; you leave here in forty-five minutes and will orbit at a pre-designated jumpoff point until final approval for the rescue comes from the White House. If the National Emergency Council can convince the Veep, you'll be in Do'brai in an hour and a half. Are there any questions?"

No one moved. Vandervoos shifted the cigar. "Look — we've got three quarters of an hour. We've tried to think of everything, but you might bring up some questions we haven't considered — it could only help us."

A hand shot up from the back; it was one of the Air Force types. "General, the Air Force has always assumed the TAVs would be abandoned and the RSU would be picked up by tactical aircraft. Are you saying that since we don't have time for any aircraft to pick us up, the TAVs are going to get back on their own?"

Vandervoos nodded. "That's right."

The Air Force officer rolled his eyes. "But the TAVs are basically ramjets — they'll get there semiballistically and will need to be air-launched from a 747. How are you planning to have them return once they get to Do'brai? Without the 747 mother ship, the TAVs can't gain enough speed on their own to ignite the ramjets."

Vandervoos looked to Lieutenant Colonel Krandel. Krandel moved forward and spoke up. "JATOs: Jet Assisted TakeOffs. While the Rapid Strike Unit is pulling off the rescue, the aircrews will be refueling from the fuel bladder on the second TAV and strapping JATO units to each craft. The units we're bringing should get enough airspeed for the ramjets to start up." He paused and grinned wirily. "Or at least that's what your flight engineers out at Edwards say."

Vandervoos nodded and looked around the room. "Next?"

A Marine stood. "General, how was Air Force One taken over? Was there anything that might have tipped us off?"

Vandervoos shrugged. "Son, you tell me, and we'll both know — it could have been anything from an on-board plant to a stowaway. Personally, I think it was an inside job, as Air Force One is protected tighter than a vestal virgin. This seems to go with our one lead: the regular stewards that go on these trips were sick, and their backups were used for the first time. But that's a moot point; the fact is that security broke down and the President's in danger. We're double-checking the backgrounds of the stewards and any others on board just to make sure — but it won't help us now. Any others?"

Another hand went up, this time more slowly. Another flyboy from the back. "Sir, can we be *sure* the President is still at Do'brai? What if this is some kind of elaborate hoax?"

General Vandervoos's eyes widened. He studied his nails before speaking and seemed to count to himself. "Young man, I couldn't begin to tell you about all the verification procedures. We're using everything from laser phase-conjugated echo checks to seismic sensors deployed by BIGEYE. With something as important as this, we're pulling out all the stops in the intelligence community: *trust us!*"

"Any other questions?" He waited for a moment, then grunted. "The Air Force will launch four pre-attack containers from Vandenberg as soon as you take off. They'll arrive at Do'brai twenty to thirty minutes before the TAVs get there. The canisters are the standard command sensor, bio-degradation, runway-clearer and sleeping gas combos. If there are no other questions, I'll leave you with Colonel Krandel. I've assigned him operational control of the mission, and he'll fill you in with the details.

"Good luck, men — and Godspeed. Our prayers are with you."

Again the room stood as Vandervoos strode out the door. Once the general left, Krandel rapped for attention and motioned to take seats. Facing the room of fifty Marines, he swept his eye down the rows. "If anyone in the Rapid Strike Unit is not a volunteer for this mission, you may go to the back of the room. This will not be reflected in any way in your records." After waiting a moment, and with no one moving, Krandel let his shoulders sag a little. "Good — I wouldn't have expected less."

He straightened a stack of papers on the podium and looked around the room. "The general alluded to the fact that only two squads — twenty-four men — could go on the mission. General Vandervoos has authorized me to make the selection. I wish that all of you could go — it would certainly make me feel better if you could. However, with the limited space on the TAVs, I had to choose those with special skills. For some of you, the ability to speak Arabic was the deciding factor."

He glanced down the list of names he held and drew in a breath. "The following personnel will report through the door to your right; the rest of you are ordered to remain in this room until the backup squad for the third TAV is chosen. No contact with anyone outside this room is authorized; we can't afford to have news of this operation leak out.

"Platoon Gunnery Sergeant Bascalski." A stocky, somber-faced Marine rose and strode out the door.

"Corporal Morales . . .

"Private Havasaid . . ."

The decision for him to go — and to be first out — was entirely his. He massaged his neck, trying to relieve the tension that had mounted at the back of his head, and thought for the twentieth time about the decision. Hell

yes, Captain Weston was angry that he'd relieved Weston of his platoon; Weston was poised to lead the platoon himself — that was part of his training. But when the decision was made to only take two TAVs, what else could Krandel do? The Rapid Strike Unit had to be split up; someone had to stay behind — Krandel didn't have much choice. What made it worse was that Weston and he were classmates, and for Weston to take those orders from someone without operational experience was the final blow.

He rolled his head to ease the tension, and jumped as an intercom set into the bulkhead crackled to life. "Attention in the hold. We have received final approval from the White House: the mission is a go. Stand by to rocket in three minutes."

A cheer ran through the compartment. Inwardly excited, Krandel kept the smile off his face and nodded to himself. He almost couldn't believe it. After all these years, he finally got a live one. And it wasn't like the White House was trigger-happy, either. After the Mexican fiasco, no politician was willing to risk American lives for *anything*. Public support for any type of military action had dwindled to nothing. This could be his only chance at combat.

The TAV began to shake. Buffeting in the winds, the 747 below them prepared for the nose-down maneuver that would release the TAV into the atmosphere. "Thirty seconds!" Krandel finished strapping himself in and sat rigid against the webbing.

The waiting was the worst. Once started, things happened too fast to worry about them. His thoughts drifted to his first parachute jumps. The first three had been night jumps, not because it was dark outside, but because his eyes were tightly shut . . .

He opened his eyes as the TAV was released from the 747. He was almost weightless; the bottom seemed to drop from below him . . . then he was squashed into his seat as the TAV jerked up and to the right. The maneuver had been honed to perfection with the early space shuttle.

The TAV took it one step further.

The TransAtmospheric Vehicle accelerated upwards as the ramjets hungrily gulped air. The craft's inertia fought the straining ramjets as the TAV tried to build up the speed for maximum efficiency. Slowly, the acceleration increased.

Krandel forced his head to one side and tried to wet his lips. The effort wasn't worth the trouble. His face drew back in a tight mask as the TAV pulled more and more gees, clawing for the upper reaches of the atmosphere until its ramjets would extinguish in the rarefied air.

This was a critical period; with a launch over California, the distance the TAV had to travel dictated a maximum velocity trajectory insertion. With the TAV's low glide ratio, unless they reached the correct insertion point, they would fall short of their destination.

Krandel was pressed harder into his seat; the air was squeezed from his

lungs. He breathed in short, laborious gasps when suddenly the pressure lifted and he floated up against the straps. His stomach flipped; he gulped, then was all right. The craft was bathed in an eerie silence; most conspicuous was the absence of the buffeting winds.

A voice broke the silence: "Twenty minutes."

Krandel jerked his head to the left and stared at the platoon sergeant. Gunnery Sergeant Bascalski looked the relic from the nineties he was. Krandel flushed involuntarily. Fifteen years his senior, Bascalski made Krandel acutely aware of his fast-burning road to Lieutenant Colonel. Try as he could, Krandel didn't have the effect over others that the sergeant had — Bascalski seemed to ooze confidence. It was the whole way Bascalski carried himself.

Bascalski's battle uniform told the story: a row of hash marks barely visible on his desert-brown camouflage — thirty years' worth — ran up his left sleeve. His field experience overwhelmed Krandel's: all Krandel could boast about was putting out fires at the Pentagon. But how could Krandel compete with someone like Bascalski, especially when it's the *only* way to get ahead nowadays in the scaled-down military?

Krandel raced through his own career: distinguished grad from Annapolis volunteers for the Marines and makes lieutenant colonel, while the rest of his classmates are still captains. And with no field experience. But that's the beauty of getting staff jobs at the Pentagon: management's the key. And if you can get sponsored by a fast-rising general, then *hold on tight* — all you have to do is hang on to his coattails.

But Krandel couldn't compete with someone like Bascalski. While Krandel was still in high school, Bascalski had led the "Fight'n Fourth" up Atcapotzalco, right before the massacre that brought the boys home. There was just no comparison.

Bascalski released his straps. Floating upward, he grabbed out at the webbing to steady himself. He held Krandel's eye. "Twenty minutes until landing, sir. Is there anything you want me to pass on to the men?"

"No, Sergeant . . . just have your squad leaders check for anyone with the willies or who's spacesick. I've done my bit. Anything more I try to do will only make them nervous."

"Very well, sir." He twisted to leave. "Colonel, these are the best men we've got, sir . . . we'll follow you to hell and back."

"Thank you, Sergeant." Krandel hesitated for a moment; he felt he needed to say something appropriate. "When we land, I want those men out of here fast. I want them so close behind me I expect to have a rifle jammed up my butt on the way out. Now get with your squad leaders — their men should be primed and ready to go."

"Yes, sir." Bascalski nodded and turned, pushing off for the rear of the craft. As he left, Krandel watched him float down the narrow line of men. Unlike Krandel's walk before the launch, Bascalski joked with the men.

Holding on to the webbing, he tightened a helmet strap. Elsewhere, he slapped an ammoclip to see if it was secure. Bascalski *belonged*, while Krandel felt he was forcing it.

No matter, in sixteen minutes the TAV would swoop down, decelerating from Mach 20 to subsonic speeds, and hopefully surprise any air defenses that might be in place.

Krandel studied the hastily scribbled plastic checklist floating from his belt. Each event was preceded by a time; times were given in plus and minus touchdown times.

He glanced at his watch. At touchdown minus fifteen minutes, the second pre-attack canister launched from Vandenberg should pop above the airfield, releasing the biological agents. The "little buggies," as the troops called them, had a genetic defect that, once exposed to air, gave them a half-life of three minutes. By the time the TAV landed, over ninety-five percent of the "little buggies" should be dead. Good thing, too, as the "little buggies" had a voracious appetite for rubber. Things like wheels, plugs, gaskets, and seals would all be "eaten" — or at least damaged beyond use — by the time they landed.

And according to plan, their silicon-coated rubber wouldn't be affected. According to plan.

Bascalski swam back to his seat and strapped in. Krandel leaned over and opened his mouth to speak when the intercom came back on.

"Ten minutes to touchdown . . . Marines, prepare for deceleration."

Krandel barely had time to lock his body back against the webbing when the TAV gave a gut-lurching jolt. He grabbed at the checklist; the third canister should have popped over the runway — the runway clearer. If it survived the landing, a miniature tanklike robot would be waiting to shoot the hell out of everything within a thousand meters by now. Railguns, FELs, eximer lasers, fuel-air vapor explosives — all kinds of nasty devices designed to clear the landing strip of any living or moving objects for a kilometer around. The tank was controlled through the command sensor dropped in the first canister and would only be activated if the President had been moved. So if the President was anywhere nearby, the tank would be dormant and they'd be landing on a "live" field.

The intercom crackled, abruptly pulling him from his thoughts. "Five minutes till landing. The door will swing open as soon as we've slowed to fifty knots. When we've reached ten knots, we want you Marines to *move*. We're turning this baby around as soon as you're off. Once refueled, we'll be ready to rotate. Those of you on the left side are to come back to this TAV; those on the right are to go to the other TAV, dividing the President's party between the TAVs."

Krandel looked down the line of men. Sergeant Bascalski was yelling over the buffeting. "He means those on the *starboard* side go to the other plane; those on the port side get back here." He shook his head and caught Kran-

del's eye. Grinning, Bascalski gave Krandel a thumbs-up. Krandel returned it; the sergeant was on top of everything. Now if only he could do as well.

The shaking grew less, and the noise seemed to abate. "This is the co-pilot. Sixty seconds to touchdown. Word just relayed from the command post verified that the President has been triangulated to the airfield. They think he'll be moved out not on Air Force One, but by a 797. It's the only one there, so you won't have any trouble finding it. Canisters two and three, the bio-degrad and the minitank, were not — repeat *not* — successful" — a groan went up among the men — "but the good news is that we think they don't know we're coming. They've been hit with the sleepy gas, and we haven't detected any activity around the plane."

Silence, then, "We're coming up on five seconds . . . four . . .

"Three . . .

"Two . . .

"One . . . and *bingo*." The craft bounced hard as it hit the runway. Krandel silently cursed the Air Force pilots; they lacked the finesse of Navy pilots who routinely greased down landings on carriers. The co-pilot continued, "We're at two hundred knots. Doors will open at fifty knots. Good luck, gentlemen." The intercom squawked off.

Krandel flipped down his IR goggles, ripped at the release locks, reached under the webbing for his rifle, and shuffled to the hatch. He stretched his legs to get out the cramps. Twenty-three men stood and made their way behind him, holding on to the straps for support. After what seemed to be an endless time, a klaxon blared out, causing Krandel to jump. Up to now he'd reacted: he hadn't had time to be nervous. Now he felt like throwing up.

A red light popped on above the hatch, and the door rotated open. In the darkness the ground rushed by, and Krandel froze. Bascalski swatted him on the butt and barked, "Ready, sir!"

Krandel swallowed. *No time to tie up now!* "Ready."

He grabbed the edges of the door; the IR goggles gave a ghostly tint to the runway. Hot air tumbled into the TAV, bringing with it a potpourri of smells: urine, JP-4, and a dry hotness of the night. He knew the sleepy gas was there — at least the remnants of it — but he couldn't detect it. It was safe for them now, but did it work?

A muffled voice came over the onrushing air. "Twenty-five knots — get ready, the plane will be right in front of you!" Any sweat on Krandel's hands evaporated directly from the pores. "Twenty . . . fifteen . . . go!"

Krandel leaped from the craft, deciding at the last moment against falling to the ground in a PLF and instead trying to keep his balance. He raced towards the lone plane, keeping low, but fanning out towards the side. He caught a glimpse from the corner of his eye of the remainder of the men scurrying to his left, surrounding the craft. To his right burned the lights of the terminal. Cars were parked near the flight line; a low hum of activity filled the background as trucks creaked in the distance. The rest of the air-

field was unaffected by the gas.

The TAV swung silently around to the left, keeping away from the plane. In the darkness his men stood out like burning ghosts; flipping up his IR goggles, Krandel assured himself that the men were undetectable.

No sound. There was no resistance from either outside or inside the plane — the lone **crack** of a gun caused him to sprawl to the ground. A solitary figure on the top of the distant terminal was yelling — barely audible over the roar of the airport — waving a rifle. The Marines kept their cool, remembering their orders not to fire. Several other shots followed, discernible only by the pinging off the concrete runway. They hadn't been detected until moments ago, or the place would have been swamped with bullets. Krandel waved a fist towards the man and pointed at Morales. Corporal Morales lifted his rifle, then brought the person down. No sound came from Morales's sonically shielded rifle.

They waited as Krandel listened for any other noises; satisfied they hadn't been detected, Krandel nodded to Bascalski, who waved the men forward. Without a word, they continued to the plane.

Guards were sprawled near the base of the stairway. Krandel flattened himself against a wheel. Bascalski huffed up and spoke in a whisper, catching his breath. "I don't think anyone else saw us."

Krandel nodded. Clutching his rifle, Bascalski acknowledged the hand signals from the squad leaders as they positioned their men. Krandel tried to keep the excitement from his voice as he whispered, "Ready?"

"Yes, sir."

"On the count of three, have Morales and his squad follow me up. You stay here with Henderson's squad and keep it clear for us."

"But, *sir*, we can't risk you —"

"That's an order, Sergeant; we're counting on you as a backup if I don't make it. Your *first* priority is to make sure the President gets back alive. Understand?" At Bascalski's nod, Krandel jerked his head towards Morales. The corporal scurried over; he motioned with his hands, then the rest of the squad followed.

Krandel drew in a breath. *This is it.* He whispered half to himself, "One, two, three." He was up the ladder, three steps at a time, and through the hatch. Scanning the compartment, he raced down the aisle, not taking care in avoiding fallen guards. As he approached the rear, the fear he kept in the back of his mind reared its head: *He's not aboard!*

Crap. Disgusted, he banged against a partition on his way back up to the front as Morales's squad only confirmed what he had suspected. Thoughts of botched rescues roared through his mind: Son Tey, Tehran, Mexico City. Why couldn't they do anything *right*? After his adrenaline rush, the empty plane left him exhausted. He trotted down the stairs and moved behind it.

Bascalski asked quietly, "Now what, Colonel?"

Krandel thought for a moment. *This is the thing you'll never find in Lee's*

Lieutenants! "Our first priority is still to bring the President back — we stay here until they show up with him."

Bascalski looked emotionless with his goggles on in the darkness. "Shouldn't we inform the War Center. . . ?"

Krandel understood what he had said: *Listen, dummy: don't blow the ball game by taking things into your own hands. There are too many things at stake. Cover your ass first!* And of course, as usual, Bascalski was right.

But Krandel hesitated. He was the commander, not Bascalski. Nor was some fat slob at the National Emergency War Center who didn't have any operational experience.

Like Krandel . . . until now.

If only he had spent less time on staffs and more time in the field — where it counted. But he knew what he had to do.

He turned to Bascalski. "The War Center can wait. Get your men who speak Arabic into those guards' uniforms. When the President arrives, the ALH shouldn't be able to tell our men from the guards in the dark. Tell them not to speak unless spoken to, and if they do, keep it at an absolute minimum. We can't afford to be discovered until we make our move."

Bascalski remained stony-faced. "The rest of the men, sir?"

"I want them on the plane — no, put only Morales's squad on the plane. Have Henderson's go with the TAVs as support. You go with him. I'm going to the flight deck. And send up someone who can speak Arabic. Now speed out!"

"Yes, sir." Bascalski whirled and was moving the men as Krandel raced back up the ladder.

Stepping over a slumped guard, Krandel creaked open the door to the flight deck. It was empty, awaiting the arrival of the flight crew. Through the cockpit Krandel could barely make out the TAVs. The second TAV had landed while they stormed the plane, and was now transferring fuel from its fuel bladder to the TAV they had arrived on. They could wait until just before daybreak without being discovered. With any luck, the President would arrive before then so they could get the hell out of there.

A creak at the door made him whirl. Corporal Morales motioned for him. As Krandel approached, Morales whispered, "We're ready, sir. Gunnery Bascalski wanted me to relay to you his men are set."

"Good. Morales . . . tell your squad to hang in there. It won't be long."

Morales nodded; looking back over his shoulder, he motioned a Marine forward. "Bascalski assigned Private Havasaid to you, sir."

"Good, let him in."

"Yes, sir." Havasaid moved onto the flight deck; Morales left as quickly as he came.

Nodding at Havasaid, Krandel motioned him to a position near the flight engineer's station. "Get relaxed, son . . . this is what they mean by the big wait." Havasaid forced a grin and turned to the door. Krandel stared out the

cockpit and tried not to think of what lay ahead.

His thoughts drifted to his family, and he was surprised this was the first time he'd thought of them.

He was lucky he could see them as much as he did. It wasn't like his classmates who were *really* away — remote tours at Adak, Rodman, or pulling duty aboard the ships. Or back at Pendleton, fuming, like Weston. With his staff jobs, at least Krandel was close to his family.

He felt a pang of regret; he was near them — but in his incessant climb up the ladder of responsibility, he was just as remote to them as his classmates were to their families. He swore he'd make it up to them, if he could just make it through this rescue.

Morales rapped lightly on the door, keeping far enough back that Krandel wouldn't accidentally harm him as he entered. "Sir, they're approaching."

Krandel tightened his grip on his rifle. "Is everyone ready?"

"Yes, sir — everyone's been briefed."

"Good . . . do your job, soldier." Morales cracked a half-grin and disappeared, leaving the door slightly ajar. Krandel started to curse himself at not spotting the approaching envoy, but stopped, realizing that it was part of being a commander. He couldn't do everything; and if he couldn't delegate responsibility to the men he'd trained, it was *his* fault, not theirs. He looked to Havasaid; the private returned his nod.

Minutes passed. He strained to hear the motorcade. Underneath his feet he felt the bumping of fuel trucks as they topped off the aircraft's tanks. The smell of JP-4 drifted onto the flight deck. Everything was going as planned. The Marines masquerading as guards were taking their job literally; acting stern and aloof, the guards didn't draw any attention to themselves. The guise fit the Marines perfectly.

A pair of voices argued outside the flight deck. Krandel flattened against the bulkhead and peered through the crack by the door. Four flight attendants pushed past the masquerading guards and filtered to the back, straightening magazines and picking up trash on their way. As they disappeared in the back, Krandel barely discerned a muffled *thud* as the attendants were struck. Morales's squad covered their tracks well.

Soon after, the voices of three men came from just outside the flight deck. Krandel slipped back from the door. They entered, laughing, absorbed in a joke. One, giggling as he hefted a bulky brown flight bag, stopped — startled — as Krandel stepped forward. Havasaid stuck his rifle in their faces. Putting a finger to his lips, Krandel motioned for the men to move towards the front. One of them — a chubby, serious-looking older man wearing four wide gold stripes on his sleeve — nodded and jerked his head for the others to follow.

Krandel nudged them and whispered to Havasaid, "Tell them if they speak out, they'll die. There's no choice in the matter; I'll shoot the captain first."

Havasaid quietly spat out the demand in a guttural sounding language. The captain nodded, and eliciting nods from the other two, Havasaid turned to Krandel. Krandel cradled his rifle in his arm. "Have them take their positions and answer all radio calls. If they answer in an unusual way, they'll die. We have the flight attendants; they will be killed soon after. Ask him if he understands."

Havasaid nodded after translating. "He says, 'Yes,' Colonel."

Krandel leaned back against the bulkhead, far enough away from the cockpit as not to be seen from the outside. "Good. We wait then. Tell the captain to get on with his work."

The crew reacted slowly, sullenly going about their pre-flight checks. The captain looked to Krandel before giving the go-ahead to go to auxiliary power. Krandel nodded and allowed the man to continue.

As the flight deck lights came on, Krandel and Havasaid stepped away from the cockpit. At first radio contact, Havasaid pressed his muzzle against the back of the captain's head. Havasaid translated, "They're bringing the President's convoy. The captain responded that they will be able to take off as soon as he is aboard."

The wait seemed to go on forever. With each minute, the chance increased that someone would be discovered; that thought gnawed at Krandel's stomach.

The captain turned on the plane's exterior lights. Coupled with the plane's strobe flicking on and off, the area was bathed in an eerie, pulsating glow. A convoy approached out of the darkness into the light; three trucks, a bus, and a staff car, flags waving from the hood, moved to the front of the plane. Krandel leaned forward and whispered, "Tell him to wave."

"They can't see inside, can they?"

"It won't hurt — and we're too close now to blow it." The captain waved a hand jerkily back and forth until Krandel growled, "That's enough." A moment later the staff car pulled around to the side. "If we could only see . . ."

Noises came from outside the flight deck; several people milled outside in the cabin. A knock came at the door. Krandel whispered, "Answer it." Holding the rifle to the captain's head, Havasaid breathed the translation. The captain's reply seemed to satisfy the voice outside the flight deck.

The noises grew louder outside the cabin. *They're bringing him in!* Krandel felt jumpy — and yet optimistic that they might pull it off. He moved toward the door —

The co-pilot started yelling shrilly, suddenly breaking the silence. Krandel was out the door even as Havasaid put a bullet through first the pilot, then the co-pilot.

Krandel didn't hear the flight engineer die.

As he sprang from the cockpit, shooting erupted down the aisle. Krandel dove at the President, bringing them both down in a tumble. Bullets flew overhead; Krandel felt a tearing pain go through his right leg. It felt as if

someone had laced a hot needle into him and wiggled it around. Another needle went through his side.

As soon as it started, the shooting stopped inside. He started to cry out, but realized in horror the President was hit. The President was still; blood ran from a cut on his cheek.

Rolling off the President, Krandel gritted his teeth to stop the pain. He searched for bullet wounds by running his hands over the President. Only one was detectable, near his thigh.

Krandel looked wildly around. Morales's squad thundered down the aisles. Morales bent down and asked, "Is he all right?"

"I don't know." Ignoring the pain, Krandel crawled over and slapped the President's face.

After a moment, his eyes widened. "What the hell —"

"It's okay, sir. Are you all right?"

The President seemed to take a moment to orient himself; he tried to move and grimaced. "My thigh . . ."

"It's all right, sir — we'll move you out of here as soon as we can."

President Montoya's eyes narrowed through the pain; he managed to get out, "Who are you?"

Krandel looked astonished that the President would even ask. "Lieutenant Colonel Krandel, U.S. Marine Corps, sir. We've come to rescue you." Krandel flushed, feeling overdramatic.

The President studied the blood welling at Krandel's side and coughed, dabbing at his own bloodied cheek. "You're in fine shape to be rescuing someone, young man."

"Yes, sir, but at least I'm alive. How do you feel?"

The President tried to move. "Not too well, I'm afraid." Krandel motioned to Morales. The corporal broke open a medikit and started wrapping the President's wound, then moved to Krandel after he finished. Sporadic gunfire continued outside.

A high-pitched whining grew louder outside the plane. One of the Marines backed in from the top of the stairs and announced, "The TAVs are in position, sir."

Krandel pulled his pants leg down from where Morales finished wrapping a hasty bandage. Morales broke out a hypodermic and cocked an eye at Krandel. Krandel hesitated, then said, "You're right: I might need it for later." Morales gave him a shot of morphine. Grimacing, Krandel asked, "How does it look outside?"

"The runway is almost clear. Henderson's squad has the area around us under control. The rest of the President's party was in a bus following the staff car. Everyone's all right, but we're missing two people that were listed on Air Force One's manifest —"

The President broke in. "That would be the two stewards. They threatened to blow up the plane with the plastique they smuggled aboard, those

bastards.”

Krandel nodded. “So now we know.” He looked up at the guard still covering the front stairs. “Is it clear?”

“We’re ready to head for the TAVs as soon as you say, sir.”

Krandel looked down the aisle. The remainder of Morales’s squad had assembled by the two exits, ready to disembark. “What about ALH reinforcements? What’s the situation around the terminal? Can the War Center give us any info?”

The radioman spoke up. “BIGEYE reports their sensors are still all operational. There’s no movement within several clicks of the airport. They say we’re safe for a quick departure.”

Krandel muttered, half to himself, “Yeah, and these are the people who said the President was already on board this plane.”

The President raised to an elbow and studied the serious-looking Marines. Their gaunt, lean faces glistened in the cabin’s light, reflecting the intensity they carried.

Krandel motioned with his head. “Morales, I’ll help the President. Half your squad will lead and get the President’s party from the bus. Have the rest cover the rear.”

“Can I help you, sir —”

Krandel waved him off. “I need you to direct your squad. I’ll take care of the President.”

Morales nodded, then began barking orders. Havasaid took the point and silently lead the way.

Emerging from the smoke-filled stuffiness of the plane, Krandel draped the President’s arm over his shoulder and made his way down the steps. His leg and side ached, but the pain grew numb from the morphine with each step; he felt a warm glow work through his body. The President stumbled once, but Krandel caught him and gave the chief executive a wordless grin. They moved away from the taxi ramp towards the two sleek TAVs, quietly running their engines at the end of the concrete apron. The President moved with effort, masking any pain he might have felt.

Krandel concentrated on each step; the euphoria of the rescue was coming to a close, and the wound and the physical strain of carrying another person began to wear at him. But through the pain, one thing gnawed at him: the President hadn’t complained once since they started — it went against his stereotyped pushover personality.

The TAVs were within a hundred meters when the shooting started up again. That’s when Krandel saw the truck. A two-and-a-half-ton carryall roared down the runway, its lights out, heading for the TAVs. Henderson’s squad encircled the TAVs, crouching and firing point-blank into the oncoming truck. The men didn’t move their ground.

The truck’s windshield shattered, broken by expertly placed bullets, but the truck lumbered on. Bullets glanced harmlessly off the tires; the truck

bore down, weaved, and slammed into the starboard TAV, igniting the craft in an eruption of flames. Thick, black smoke rolled out from the inferno. A few men staggered away, holding a hand over their eyes.

The President froze, halting their progress. Krandel jerked him forward and yelled over the roar. "We've got to get you out of here. The other ship can take us." He speeded the pace. Morales took off to the burning TAV. As they circumvented the smoking craft, the heat from the debacle almost overwhelmed them. Krandel kept his face away from the fire and pulled the President along, finally reaching the surviving TAV and shoving the President aboard. The rest of the President's entourage were herded on as Krandel limped up to a Marine just coming from the other TAV. "How many were on it when it blew?"

The Marine dully shook his head; his face was covered with oily smudges. A group of men appeared behind him and started for the surviving TAV; a good twenty Marines congregated outside. Spotting Morales, Krandel managed to collar the corporal. "How many were on the TAV?"

Morales coughed and spit to the side. "Just the pilots, sir. The rest of the men either were on the protection line or were covering the rear."

Krandel's stomach churned; the acidity in his gut tore at his insides. "Get the pilot out here."

"Yes, sir."

A moment later, a thin nomex-suited officer jumped from the craft. "You wanted me, sir? I'm Major Gould. We don't have much time —"

"Shut up, Major. Listen, we've got twenty-three Marines and twenty-one other people in the President's party. What's the max amount of people this craft can carry?"

"Well, if we throw out the seats and ditch some of the extra equipment —"

Krandel interrupted angrily. "We leave in three minutes, Major — we don't have time! How many can we stuff on board and still get out of here?"

The pilot wet his lips. "I'd say thirty-two — maybe thirty-five if they were skinny, Colonel. It will take an hour to get rid of enough weight to get all your men in. And even with thirty-two, none of your men can carry anything with them: no guns, helmets — anything."

Krandel decided instantly. "Then some of us stay. We've got to get this baby in the air before any more reinforcements arrive. Major, prepare to leave in two minutes. *Move!*" He shoved the pilot towards the hatch and looked wildly around. Taking a quick head count, he said, "We're two short. Get Gunnery Bascalski, and have him get eleven Marines to go on this TAV. Married men — the youngest and skinniest we've got — go first."

Morales spoke quietly, "Bascalski and Henderson bought it with the explosion, sir. And we're going to have trouble getting the Marines to go back on this TAV unless everyone goes. They won't bug out on their buddies."

Krandel's knees wobbled. Bascalski *dead*? He wavered. *A competent commander doesn't spook his troops!* He had to put on a good show. Drawing in a

breath, he managed to get out, "Correction: you screen them, Morales. We've got to get as many out of here as possible, or the third TAV won't be able to carry all of us back."

Morales's brows jumped. "Do you really think the President would risk another TAV to rescue us, sir?"

Krandel shot a glance at the TAV. *Hell, no! Not if he acts the way he said he would when he was elected.* "Yes, he will, Morales. Now get to it — have those staying assemble on the other side of the runway."

Morales turned away and barked out the order.

Krandel gingerly pulled himself into the TAV; the morphine didn't mask all his pain. Moving down the cramped aisle, he came to the President and placed a hand on his shoulder. "It will only be a little longer, sir. You'll be taking off in a few moments."

The President studied Krandel, then forced a nod. He turned back to his side and closed his eyes, seemingly oblivious to what was going on. Krandel felt a surge of emotion well up inside him, but quickly clamped it down.

Angrily, Krandel limped to the hatch. The last of the eleven Marines who were going back entered the TAV. They tossed their rifles to those on the runway and sullenly found a seat in the crowded TAV. Some had to position themselves on the floor to find room.

Krandel stood at the hatch. This was it. He spoke up over the growing roar of the engines and said, "Men . . ." He choked, then turned to the President. Hesitating, he turned and lowered himself slowly down to the runway.

The hatch swung shut; through the cockpit, Major Gould held a thumbs-up to him. Krandel returned it, then slowly saluted. He shuffled to the edge of the runway, the pain in his side and leg growing steadily.

The Marines gathered the weapons of the eleven on board the TAV around them. They moved to a shallow depression to the south as the TAV's engines began to climb in decibels. With a sudden explosion, blue fire exploded from the JATOs as the units ignited and the craft rolled down the runway. The roar washed over the Marines. They covered their ears from the white noise.

The TAV lifted and clawed into the sky; the craft seemed to crawl forward, upward with a sagging gait. It barely seemed to move, but grew perceptibly smaller in the distance. As it flew from sight, it made a sudden nose dive, picked up speed, then shot up into the sky as the ramjets kicked in. Within a moment the pop of the ramjets igniting reached them.

The sky was just starting to show a tinge of red along the horizon. In the desert silence, the burning TAV smoldered at the runway's middle, belching white smoke along with the black. The dry air smelled sweet. Strange . . . Krandel hadn't noticed it before, but the place was almost serene.

They prepared their spot in the depression and sat with their backs to each other, watching through the dawn, keeping an eye out for the troops they knew would come.

Through the growing pain, Krandel finally felt a part of them. The unspoken camaraderie bound them together. They sat, alert, to finish their job, and still kept the hope that their brothers would be back and would not forget them.

The President groaned when shaken awake. "Sir, we're over the worst of it. Our ETA into Reagan International is twenty minutes."

The President shook his head. The whole trip — the capture, the rescue, those God-awful gees when the ramjets had lit, and now this weightlessness — seemed a nightmare . . . except for those Marines.

"We have contact with the National Emergency War Center if you want to speak with them."

"Yes . . . put them on."

The Marine swam to the cockpit and came back, unrolling a line of wire and a pair of headphones as he held to the webbing. The President fumbled with the set and secured it to his head.

The Vice-President was on, apologizing. "The rescue was our *only* option . . . and we thought it wouldn't hurt you in the polls. After all, none of your party was harmed, and I don't think we upset the ALH —"

The President cut in. "Do you know we had to leave eleven Marines behind?"

The VP sounded puzzled. "Of course, but we've been in contact with the ALH, and they've assured us that once they've found them, the Marines will be unharmed. And most importantly, they've promised not to reveal the rescue operation to the press if we keep this, uh, *misunderstanding* quiet —"

The President coughed. Holding his side, he spoke dryly. "Just like the ALH promised to treat me well, no doubt. I may be a pacifist, Percy, but I'm no fool.

"Have the Air Force launch the remaining TAVs. Get our Marines out of there."

The silence was deafening. The VP came back slowly. "I must have misunderstood —"

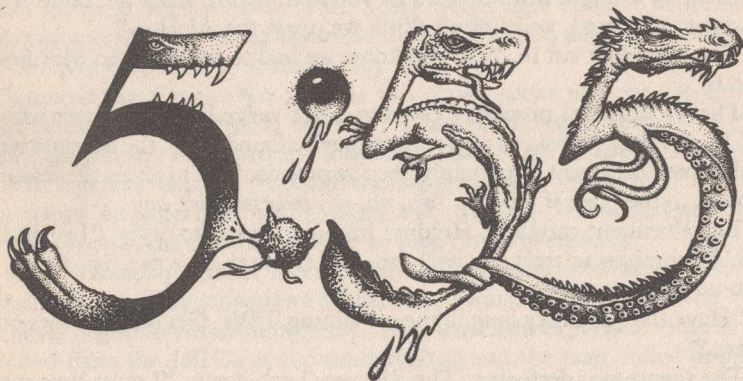
"You heard me: *Get our boys home!*" The President relaxed, tearing off the headphones. His thigh ached, but he was alive. He studied the men around him. Across the aisle a young Marine slept with his mouth open, confident that the pilots would bring him safely home.

And they did.

All of them.

THE HOMEWORK HORROR

by Greg Cox
art: Bob Walters



The author wants to thank the whole gang at Clarion West for their advice, encouragement, and occasional chainsaws. This is Greg's first post-Clarion story.

His "Next Year in Brigadoon" appeared in our September 1984 issue.

Danny giggled as he did his homework.

Marjorie Schweiker shook her head. Sometimes she just didn't understand her son. What was so funny about second-grade math? Across from her, on the other side of a bright red kitchen table, little Danny had his nose just a few inches away from a sheet of problems. A full mug of Nestle's Chocolate sat ignored beside a huge rubber eraser. He looked so cute, Marjorie thought, with that "I'm-concentrating-so-hard" expression on his face. Then Danny put down his pencil, but only long enough to count up and down on his fingers. "Take that, number five!" he muttered, then giggled again.

"Having some fun, eh kiddo?" Marjorie asked.

Danny shrugged without looking up.

"You know, when I was your age I hated math. All those numbers seemed like really boring. Not that I'm complaining about you working so hard on your schoolwork; that's neat. I'm proud of you, just confused."

Danny put down his pencil again. "Nothing confusing to me, Mom. Numbers aren't boring, not if you understand who they are."

"Who they are?"

"Yeah," Danny said. "All the problems are like stories, and the numbers are the people."

"Uh, right. Whatever you say." Marjorie got up and gave the kid a friendly hair-mussing on her way to the living room of their duplex apartment. "Just keep up the good work, sport." Crossing the carpet, she cleared off a space on the couch and reached for the *TV Guide*.

Numbers are people? Marjorie Schweiker glanced back at the kitchen and sighed. Served her right for trying to figure out a nine-year-old.

Danny leaned back, carefully balancing the chair on its two rear legs. A big gulp of chocolate milk went down his throat. Somehow, he realized, he had failed to convince his mother.

It was true, though. Numbers had personalities just like people. Except for zero, of course, which was nothing. Big numbers were always stronger than little numbers, just like odd numbers were more emotional than the even ones. There were nine different characters in all, each special in their own way.

One was the smallest and kind of dull; he couldn't do very much. Two was a friendly number, but weak also. Three was an okay guy, but unpredictable and not too smart (kind of like the big kids at recess). Four was very wise and very mellow. And then there was five.

Danny skipped quickly to the next number.

Six was one of the good guys, but not quite grown-up yet. Poor six! He was always going to be outclassed by his big brother seven, the greatest number of them all. Seven was a real hero, who managed to combine the best qualities of both odd and even numbers. You could always trust seven.

Not like five, Danny thought despite himself.

Then there were eight and nine, the rulers of the number line. The king and his counselor. Eight was a mysterious genius, and second only to the aloof and powerful number nine. Nine belonged with the good guys, but he was also what Danny's mother called "an authority figure" and naturally a little scary.

All in all, Danny liked most of the numbers. Except five.

You could tell, he thought, just by looking at five that she was the bad one in the bunch. There she sat in the middle of the number line, within striking distance of either end, coiled up on her bottom curve like a cobra about to attack. Danny had no doubts at all. Five was evil.

The red metal chair fell forward and Danny reached for his pencil. He looked at his assignment: rows of light purple numbers covering a field of white paper. There was only one more problem left to solve, one more battle between the numbers. One more chance to add, subtract, multiply, and divide wicked old five into non-existence.

Danny grinned bloodthirstily. This had been a good night. He'd slaughtered five so many times that he almost felt guilty about it.

A little while later, Danny carried the rolled-up problem sheet to his mother on the couch. She turned away from the TV set.

"I'm all finished, Mom. You want to check my answers?"

"Sure, kiddo. Let me see."

Usually it took his mom a couple of minutes to proofread his homework, so Danny figured he had time to go get a comic book from his room. He didn't think he would have to do any of the problems over. Mom almost never found any mistakes in his mathwork, only in his spelling. Still, she liked to check everything, so he let her.

But when he came back to the room, Danny saw that his mother was frowning.

"Sorry," she said, "but you must not have been concentrating as hard as I thought. All your answers are wrong."

Danny couldn't believe it. "All of them?"

"Yep. You'd better get back to the table and look at these again. And leave the comic book here."

Once in the kitchen again, Danny stared at the pairs of tiny violet numbers. He didn't recognize any of them. This was the same sheet he had given to his mom, those were his answers written in pencil, but the problems themselves were different than he remembered. It was as if all the numbers had moved across the page when nobody was looking, rearranging themselves into new combinations. But that didn't make sense. Numbers were too well-behaved to pull stunts like that. Most numbers were, at least.

It was weird.

As much as he enjoyed playing with numbers, Danny resented having to do the same homework twice, sort of. He scowled and angrily blew all the

air out of his cheeks, rustling the top of the paper, and put his eraser to work destroying all the old answers. Then, when the last grey line was gone, he started counting on his fingers again.

After the first ten problems, he was trembling.

The new answers were what freaked him out: 55, 505, 50005, 50. And so on. Immediately, he re-checked all his calculations, looking for mistakes and not finding any. Had he carried the one over here? Yes. Did eight minus three really equal that? Yes. What was one plus four again?

Help, he thought. Number five has taken over my homework.

Danny tried to finish the page, as quickly as possible.

Five — just five — was the answer to the *next* ten problems.

Danny felt close to tears. “Mom?” he called. “Can I quit for awhile? Please! I’ll do the rest in the morning, I promise.”

“Oh, okay,” replied his mother’s voice. “Guess we don’t want you to burn out at age nine. Take a break.”

Uncharacteristically quiet, Danny crept out of the kitchen, looking over his shoulder all the time at the thin sheet of paper that was now *The Scene of The Crime*. No matter how hungry he got, Danny vowed, he wasn’t going to enter the kitchen again until breakfast. This time of year it got dark early, and he wasn’t going to chance being caught alone with haunted homework after nightfall. Evil things, like five, did their best work after dark.

He wished he hadn’t thought of that, because now he couldn’t help wondering what was going to happen next. Maybe five was only teasing him now, and the worst stuff came later. Danny sat down in the hall and punched the floor with his fist. No fair, he thought. Why me?

He knew why. Five was mad at him because of all the times Danny had calculated her to death. He had enjoyed it too much and now five was getting even. But how mad was five?

“Stop it,” Danny said to himself. He did not want to think about it anymore. He would watch TV instead. The hallway led to the stairs, and the stairs went to the second floor where Danny’s bedroom was. He ran the entire route and shut the door behind him, then locked it with a short length of brass-plated chain. Only after Danny ensured that the door was secure did he kick away some of the general clutter and drop to his knees in front of his own black-and-white TV set. Because Mom was around, he turned on the educational channel. Hopefully, there was still time to catch the tail end of “Sesame Street.”

Too late. The closing credits were already rolling over a frozen close-up of Big Bird. Danny heard an invisible announcer speaking: “— thiss episssode was brought to you by the number five and the letters D-I-E —”

Danny’s arm snapped forward and switched off the television. Hugging himself, the little boy backed away from the now-empty screen. The announcer’s voice, he thought, it was different! Colder than usual, and hissing, sort of. Like a cobra.

Now he was truly scared, scared for his life. Five was out to get him for real. But what could he do? Who would protect him? Mom didn't understand; she hadn't believed him before. Dad lived on the other side of the country now, but, even if he were here, Danny didn't think he could explain the danger to his father. Grown-ups just laughed at monsters like five. Even when they were real.

There were no other children he could call. Danny was new in town and school had only started about a week ago. All his best friends were still imaginary.

Still, maybe if he just stayed near Mom . . .

Danny headed for the living room, only to meet his mother on the stairs. She was wearing her jacket and slipping on a pair of winter gloves. "Ah, there you are," she said. "I just wanted to tell you that I was stepping out for a sec. I've got to run down the road and pay some bills before the Post Office closes. Try not to burn the building down while I'm gone."

Danny worked hard to control his fear. He did not want to be left alone. Not now.

"Mom, wait! Let me go with you."

She shook her head. "Sorry, kid, but I'm in a hurry. Let me do this trip on my own, okay? It'll be faster that way." Danny's mother untangled her purse from the stairway railing and headed for the front door. His face must have given away some of his distress, because she paused on the porch to say a little more. "Hey, it's no big deal. I'll be real quick. You'll just have to manage by yourself for a few minutes. At most, five."

The door clicked shut, trapping Danny indoors and away from his mother.

Alone for five minutes. Five. Danny hated the sound of that. He gazed up at the wooden cuckoo clock over the door. The time was 5:50. In five minutes, probably just before Mom got back, it would be 5:55. The very moment when that horrible, revenge-crazed number would be strongest.

This was it, Danny thought. His last stand. If only he could just last till six o'clock, he would be safe. Six was a good number and kind towards helpless little boys who didn't mean any harm.

Suddenly, a loud crash came from below, like a metal chair hitting the floor. The noise sounded like it came from the kitchen, where Danny had left his homework unwatched and unguarded. *Something* was moving down there.

Danny moved too. He ran back into his room, then threw himself against the door to close it. Frantic, he fumbled with the brass chain, terrified that something awful would push the door open before he finished locking it out. "Something awful?" Ha ha ha, Danny thought. Deep down inside, he already knew what was downstairs. His imagination brought him a vivid picture of the number five, as tall as Danny or bigger, rising up from the flat whiteness of the math paper, knocking over a chair in the process.

Even after the chain was safely in place between the door and the adjoining wall, he pressed himself tightly against the door. His ears strained to catch any new noises from the rest of the apartment. At first he didn't hear anything, then . . . there! What was that? Danny was sure he heard a sound at the bottom of the stairs, a low unbroken whistling, a long steady hiss that grew louder every second as it came up the stairs, getting closer and closer to the bedroom door.

Something scratched at the other side of the wood.

Danny jumped backwards. He looked around desperately. What did you fight an angry number with? His plastic clock-radio, a gift from Danny's last (and maybe *final*) birthday, sat on top of an aluminum toy chest. The lighted, green figures on its digital display read 5:53 P.M.

Two more minutes to go before the horror struck. Danny closed his eyes and tried to summon up reinforcements. Not nine or eight, the undisputed masters of the numbers. They would not concern themselves with the problems of a mere human boy. No, Danny clenched his fists and tried to picture seven in his mind. Seven, the Sir Lancelot of arithmetic! Only he could save the day, Danny thought.

But even his own imagination seemed to have turned against him. With both eyes tightly shut, Danny could see the shape of seven — two straight lines joined at an angle — but he could not hold it still. The figure kept spinning in his mind, turning head-over-heels like a pinwheel, and finally came to a stop *on its side*. That wasn't right at all. Danny could not see a seven anymore, only the letter V.

"Oh no!" he gasped. Instantly, Danny opened his eyes and pushed the picture out of his head. That was a close call, he thought. Danny knew about Roman numerals.

Seven was not going to be able to help him. He was on his own this time. Oh Mom, he mourned silently, why did you have to leave?

Then, through the crack between the door and the wall, five slid into the room. Danny saw her and let out a small cry. Five looked like a shadow on the white, painted surface of his bedroom walls, but darker than an ordinary shadow: a deep menacing purple that was almost black. Five was long and thin, with a jagged outline, and resembled a heavy, twisted cable smashed flat. She hissed as she moved.

Five circled Danny, gliding from wall to wall to wall. Standing in the center of a litter-strewn carpet, Danny spun around on his toes and tried to keep the huge numerical invader in sight.

It was 5:54.

Danny's heel slipped on a scrap of paper and he almost fell. Without thinking, he glanced down at the floor. Something golden and glittery caught his eye; he recognized it right away. It was a foil star affixed by glue to one of his old report cards. Danny remembered the star. His first grade teacher had placed it there, under a column labeled "Math Skills."

Five moved closer. Danny bent quickly and plucked the crumpled report card from the carpet. A new confidence filled him. "See this star!" he shouted. "It means that I'm an A-One math whiz. You can't scare me. You're just another number and I can make numbers do anything I want."

Five backed off, sliding onto the wall farthest from her intended victim. Danny kept the card between him and the vengeful number, brandishing it at arm's length like the hero in a vampire movie holds his cross. Light from a bulb overhead reflected off the sparkling star, and golden beams danced around the room. Five stayed in the shadows and kept her distance.

Until 5:55.

At that moment, as soon as the numbers on the digital clock changed over, five slid down the wall and onto the floor. Before Danny could move, five's curved tail hooked around his feet and pulled shut. Barbed-wire teeth stabbed him through his socks. Danny's body jerked. He dropped the report card. The radiator suddenly clicked on and newborn air currents blew the card, complete with its shiny little sticker, all the way across the room.

Five tightened her grip, grinding Danny's ankles together painfully. Even as he cried out, though, he refused to surrender. He could still see his golden star. Five was not in charge here, Danny knew, not as long as he could still remember how to add.

With his small right hand, Danny grabbed the giant five by her single vertical bar, then stood up, partially dragging the hissing number from the plane of the floor. He reached for the clock-radio with his other hand. It was still slightly too far away. Without letting go of five, Danny stretched his arm until a few fingers just grazed the clock's plastic face. He held his breath and tried to visualize a plus sign between the five and the clock.

For a second, he really saw it: two crossed bars of intangible light hanging before his eyes. Then a momentary flash of green to the left of his head attracted him. Danny turned and saw the numbers of the digital clock jump instantly from 5:55 to 6:00 P.M.

Five's jagged tail loosened and pulled away, and Danny kicked his feet apart. He felt five's thin neck shrink between his fingers. Downstairs, the cuckoo clock released the first of a half-dozen enthusiastic chirps.

Danny gave his clock a friendly pat. "Way to go, little six. You did good!" The glowing green number flickered once, as if to agree.

Marjorie Schweiker heard all the cuckooing as she came onto the porch outside her apartment. That's odd, she thought. Had she really been away that long? Oh well, it probably didn't matter. That was the problem with people today. Slaves of the clock.

Marjorie unlocked the front door and stepped inside. "Danny?" she called. "You survive after all?"

"I guess so," came the answer from up the stairway. A moment later, she saw her boy tramping down the steps. He was breathing hard, she noticed,

and limping slightly. One hand stayed behind his back and a sharpened pencil hung from a belt-loop at his side, like a sword dangling upon the waist of some heroic warrior of old. Plus, there was something stuck in the middle of his forehead. A tiny paper star, it looked like.

"What in the world are you playing now," she asked. "What's that sticker on your forehead for — and how did you tear up the cuffs of your pants?"

But Danny would not stop to explain anything. "In a minute, Mom," he said and hurried past her. He kept his hand hidden away, but Marjorie caught a glimpse of something dark and wiry twisting about in her son's fist.

"Wait!" she said and started after him, though Danny had already disappeared into the kitchen. Marjorie made it halfway there, but was stopped cold by an angry sibilant scream, followed by a barrage of pounding noises.

"What the —?" she began.

HISSS — WHACK, WHACK!

The noises stopped. Danny emerged from the kitchen with pencil in hand. There was a weary-but-triumphant smile on his face.

"I finished off my homework, Mom."

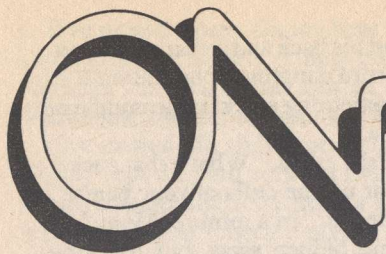
And with that, he thrust his No. 2 pencil into his belt and marched up the stairs to bed.

Today, arithmetic. Tomorrow, spelling tests.

CASSANDRA IN WONDERLAND

What was it at first, Cassandra?
A shudder as you watched a mouse
Stand upright beside its noon shadow
Or saw birds plunge on the right hand of the sun
Under layer upon layer of light,
All with the weight of the sea?
Was it now you began to fear drowning,
Cold fingers clasping stone comfort
And feet grasping ground for safety
Like another Daphne?
Did you perceive even then
How your eyes would flow, mind flood
With each color white can become?
Had you foreseen the madness
In which you kept excessive sense,
The ocean night where you could hide
From an intolerable love of the light?

— Ace G. Pilkington



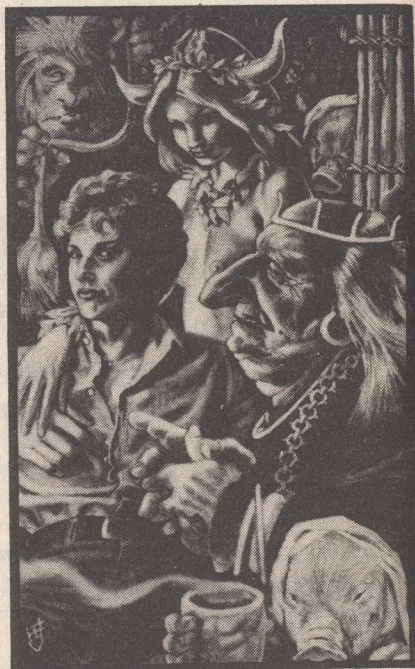
Exhibit

Hank Jankus

Hank Jankus comes from a rather artistic family. His great-grandfather (on his mother's side of the family) was a fresco painter and a decorator, whereas his grandfather (on his father's side) worked as a decorative metal worker. The former was from Italy, and he decorated the Capitol Building in Topeka, Kansas. The latter built the first all-metal-bodied car chassis in the U.S. With such creative energies in his family, it's not at all surprising that Hank decided to become an artist, too.

Hank received his formal art training at the Kansas City Art Institute, but, like many, he had to leave before graduating so that he could earn a living. Currently, he does so by managing his own advertising agency, Jankus & Associates, Inc.

Since hearing his first fairy tale as a young boy, Hank has been attracted to the fantasy and science-fiction fields. From fairy tales, he went on to read the pulp magazines, comic books, and the then hard-to-find hardbound collections. His only regret now as a fan of fantasy and SF is that he didn't hold on to the old issues of *Amazing® Stories* and *Fantastic Stories*; he tossed them while in the Marine Corps.



"Peer Gynt and the Mountain King"

"Janice and the Cateran"



Hank Jankus

Hank prefers working in the media of pastel, pencil, and pen and ink because he finds them to be the means by which to produce great illustrative art in the shortest time period. As he does more color artwork, though, he finds himself experimenting with different media.

Hank is currently preparing black-and-white illustrations for an upcoming *Amazing* anthology entitled *The Wonder Years*. He is also illustrating a collection of Howard Waldrop short stories. For his friend Hildur Ek, who has written a collection of Swedish folktales, Hank is doing the illustrations for that book.

Though his artwork is exhibited at most SF and fantasy conventions, Hank is very pleased to have his artwork appear in *The Pool of the Black One*, a Conan the Barbarian book written by Robert E. Howard and published by Donald Grant.

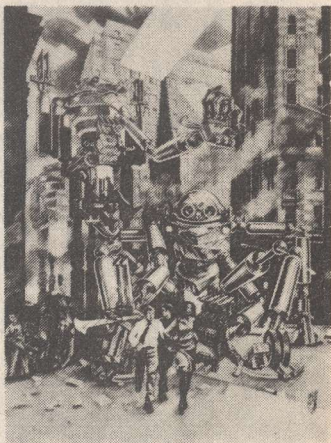


"Prester John," 1986



"Raymond Chandler . . . pulling the strings," 1983

Those who are interested in commissions or purchases, or in finding out more about Hank's artwork, can contact him at his advertising agency. Write to: Jankus & Associates, Inc., 2812 West 47th Street, Kansas City, KS 66103.



"Oh What a Beautiful Morning," 1982

THE HEIRS OF EARTH

by Paul J. McAuley

art: Hank Jankus





The author is a cell biologist currently working in Oxford, England. And when he's not busy with his scientific tasks, he's busy with his literary endeavors. Not only has he sold short stories to Amazing® Stories, but he has sold some to Interzone and The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction, as well.

This particular story is chronologically the farthest-flung of a series of stories which share a common future history. Two other stories of this series have appeared in Amazing Stories: "The Airs of Earth" (January 1986) and "Among the Stones" (January 1987).

Who knows if life is death,
and death is considered life in the world below?

— Euripedes

The thopter trailed a black thread of smoke as it began to spiral out of the sky, and the other bodyguards who had remained faithful to their contract finally abandoned the flight and fled in broken formation. The half-dozen craft of the turncoats were already settling toward the burning wreckage of their erstwhile employer's aircar when the thopter hit; the flare as its catalfission battery blew briefly bleached the sky.

Jon Westerly, already a kilometer away, barely glanced up as he limped headlong down the narrow track, knocking aside billows of ghostweed with upraised arms as he went. His blue tunic was soaked with sweat, and his left pants leg soaked with blood; it stuck and unstuck to his thigh with each step.

Then he tripped and fell, scrambling up in an instant and gasping hoarsely as he looked and listened for signs of pursuit. The sky was empty now, and he heard nothing but the sleepy hum of insects, but he went on as quickly as he could, following the track as it climbed a slope of crumbling rubble. At the summit, beside a rusty girder that thrust up like an admonitory finger, he stopped at last.

For a while he could do nothing but breathe hard, bent double and clasp his knees. A gaunt man of about sixty with a slight potbelly, his thinness caused not by illness but by years of living in zero gravity. His long grey hair was caught in a net of gold threads at his shoulder, and he pushed this out of the way when at last he could straighten.

Two plumes of smoke rose from the ghostweed that blanketed the ruined city. Had he really run so far? Beyond, the silver gleam of the Witnesses' radio telescope array limned the western horizon; a handful of motley craft were dwindling in that direction. Westerly nodded to himself, a hypothesis satisfied. Closer at hand, to his left, the sea strait sent up a kind of haze in which Pelican Island, where his ship was hidden, was merely a thickening.

There was still no sign of pursuit, but the turncoat bodyguards would discover that he had escaped the forced landing as soon as they extinguished the fire he had set. There was nothing left now but the hope that he would reach his ship before they found him, and escape the traps of Earth. Yet how carefully he had planned the selling of Bifrost!

Other singleship pilots had warned Westerly about Earth in general and the Witnesses in particular, but in his arrogance he had dismissed their cautionary tales. He would pull it off and show them all, even if it did mean descending to anarchic Earth and dealing in person with the chief cause of that anarchy. He had landed in secret, had hired a small army of bodyguards, and had spent a whole month arranging the deal. His expenses had been enormous, but not one tenth of the taxes any world would have imposed on the transaction. And when it was done and Westerly had been flying back to his ship, half of his bodyguards had sprung their trap, neatly slicing off his aircar's thrusters with two laser bursts and turning on the others. But Westerly had wrestled the aircar to the ground and had escaped. They'd missed killing him, and he still had his payment.

Lucky, Westerly thought grimly, as he bent to examine his wounded leg. Blood still flowed freely, but the fragment had passed cleanly through the big thigh muscle, had missed the bone. Lucky. Betrayed, shot down, and wounded . . . but lucky. He checked his payment and the little transponder that would summon his ship when he was close enough, and was suddenly aware of the humming silence. Anyone might be watching him, anyone at all. He crabbed down the loose scree slope and went on his way.

There had been a city here, thirty years ago: it had served the largest spaceport on Earth. Gone now, all gone. Abandoned by its population when the spaceports had been closed after the Revelation, and broken and bombed and burned in the countless skirmishes between sects and gangs and roving communities in the thirty years since.

Westerly had known it as well as he had known any port, but now, as he limped through the rubble and ghostweed, he had only a vague idea that he must be somewhere near the sea front. So he was surprised when he rounded a slumped ruin and found himself at the head of a relatively intact street, and one he thought he recognised. The terraced buildings were mostly burnt out, shrouded by grape ivy and the ubiquitous clouds of ghostweed. Reeds rustled where the street had been, running down to water at the far end. A crudely built boat was drawn up on the mudbank there, and smoke drifted from a second-floor terrace nearby.

At first Westerly couldn't coax the fisherman from his eyrie, and once he was on the ground, he kept his hand on the hilt of his long knife, looking sidelong as Westerly explained that he wanted to get across to the island. The man spat and said something in a rapid stream of Spanish to the woman who was peering down from the terrace; she jerked her head back as if she had been slapped. "Well, Seyour," the man told Westerly in atrocious Portu-

guese, "there is nothing there for you. Not now. Where you from? Who hurt you?"

"Never mind that. All you have to do is get me across."

The fisherman squinted. "You with Witnesses?"

"I'm with myself."

"To the west, are the Witnesses. That is where you go. Sell them fish sometimes, they okay. Nothing over the water, and strange goings-on there, lately."

Westerly wondered if the man had seen his ship land. "But that's where I want to go," he said. "I'll pay." And he was gratified to see the man's eyes widen when he brought out his money.

Still, it took half an hour of one-sided bargaining before the man would agree. Westerly's wad of Witness scrip was useless to him now, and he agreed impatiently to the first, outrageous fee the fisherman suggested; money was simply a means to an end to him, as it was to most singleship pilots. But the fisherman's honor wouldn't be satisfied with so simple a transaction. Bargaining made the deal a human thing, gave it intrinsic value. He insisted that Westerly accept a small cup of bitter coffee and, as Westerly sipped, kept jacking up the price by minute increments, looking sidelong and nervously fingering his mustache.

So Westerly had exhausted his minimal reserve of patience when at last the deal had been struck and they were afloat. He crouched sulkily on the stinking nets in the well, massaging his aching thigh, while the fisherman stood on a little platform at the rear, sculling them through the chop with a long oar. At least Westerly's thigh had stopped bleeding. You bleed the same blood whether you're young or old, but when you're old, you can't afford to lose it. And he was old, too old for this kind of adventure. He looked across brown water at the island, a vague line in the haze, and asked the fisherman, "Do you remember the ships?"

"Remember my father telling me; he lived here, back then," the fisherman said slowly. The boat rocked with each swing of the long oar. "Can't say I'd have liked those days. Stars are stars, that's what we say now. Them Witnesses, calling on their Far Gods, maybe calling down trouble for us all. No need." He leaned on the oar and spat over the side.

Westerly told him condescendingly, feeling the usual contempt a singleship pilot feels towards the narrow-minded planet-bound, "They might soon be gone, then you won't have anything to worry about."

"Don't mean nothing against them, mind. They keep the peace around here and ask little enough for it."

The shore was a long slope of mud bristling with reeds. A concrete block, encrusted with mussels, reared up from the water, and the fisherman sculled towards it, catching hold of its top to steady the boat. Westerly stood, ready to leap ashore as best he could, saw something out of the corner of his eye, ducked. But too late. The fisherman's long oar smacked into his head and

catapulted him into the water.

The blow didn't quite knock Westerly out, but he went a long way away, was only peripherally aware of the fisherman plundering his pockets, of the soft mud he lay in, the sun burning the back of his head. The little waves lapping at the tips of his boots were one with the pulse of his heart, the rhythm of pain in his head and in his thigh. It was a long time before he had the strength to even roll over, and when he did, the whole world was washed with red. Westerly groaned and laboriously sat up, clutching sharp-edged reeds.

The fisherman was gone. The strait was empty. His hands working independently, Westerly took an inventory of what he had lost. The steel vials of agatherin were still tucked in the trick heel of his left boot, and the deadly little pistol was still hidden in the net of gold threads which bound his hair . . . but the scrip was gone, of course, and the analyser with which he had tested the agatherin's purity . . . and so was the transponder, the thing he needed to call up his ship. Christ damn that fisherman! Christ damn this whole rotten world! Westerly thought bitterly as, his head splitting, he stumbled up the mud bank and clambered over the mossy remains of a concrete revetment.

Puffs of ghostweed dipped and waved across a wide bare space; beyond, cypresses and scrubby palmetto palms crowded together. Thirty years ago, Westerly thought, no, nearer forty, I lived here, I was trained here. He remembered the barracks, the warm greasy smell inside the womb of the simulator, twelve hours a day with the hypaedia chattering in his ear and his head humming with hypnotics. The Alea Campaigns . . . all gone now — all.

Westerly had not walked far when he heard a familiar dull throbbing, and barely made the shelter of a stand of live oak before the thopter rounded the curve of the shore, its bubblecabin glistening beneath the pulsing vanes as it beat above the water. They were already looking for him, then. Westerly watched until the thopter was out of sight, then pushed deeper into the trees.

They crowded together so closely, and the grass that grew between their gnarled trunks was so tall, that Westerly almost missed the ruined ship. It rose at a slant through the trees in which it was inextricably embedded, its plates pitted and blackened by corrosion and pried apart by the avid suckers of grape ivy and red-leaved vines. The corridor inside the gaping hatch was covered with dirt and dry leaves, and something squeaked and scuttled away as Westerly groped through the semidarkness. He found a spiral ladder and began to climb. The circular room which had been the ship's commons was split open on one side, but the rent was so shrouded by leaves that it let in only stars and spangles of sunlight. Westerly limped across the tilted floor to the musty remains of a couch and sank onto it gratefully. A few moments later he was asleep.

And woke to darkness, his head aching, his mouth dry. The shrouded rent let in thin fingers of cold moonlight, and Westerly made his way to it, stirred aside the leaves. He could see, above the scrubby trees in which the ship was stranded, lines of surf glimmering as they restlessly unfurled at the margin of the black sea and the black land; just as the shore turned at a far headland, a single point of warm light flickered: a fire. Westerly watched it a long while, licking his cracked lips, but at last limped back to the couch. He was too tired to think straight, too tired to act. Let it wait until morning. But sleep was a long time coming, and his dreams were full of unending motionless falling, as if he were already in space, beyond the relentless grip of Earth's gravity.

He awoke some time in the middle of the morning, thirstier than ever, thirsty enough to lick dew from the hand-shaped leaves of the vines. There was no other water on the ship, so he painfully descended the spiral ladder, his thigh as stiff as wood now.

As he limped through the dense groves of live oak, he thought of what he would do when he got off the island, of how he would return to the fisherman's hovel and burn him out, him and his whole damned family. But his anger was merely froth on the deep-running tide of his fear. He was a stranger, stranded with only a pistol and the little cache of agatherin — and without the accompanying treatments, agatherin was worth nothing at all. If his erstwhile bodyguards had understood that, Westerly would be on his way out of Sol System by now . . . but they had been blinded by the lure of a world's ransom which Westerly had obtained from the Witnesses. Who, Westerly believed now, had their own designs on himself. Never trust fanatics. He could hardly go back to them.

So he had no clear plan, except somehow to quit the island and, if possible, escape from the area of the Witnesses' influence. The ship would have to wait until he had some way of calling it up.

But at least this was Earth. He could live off the land, he thought, and nibbled an oak leaf, spat it out, and wiped the bitter taste from his lips. There must be something edible, fruit or berries or game he could shoot, provided it was big enough to withstand the narrowest setting of his pistol. Just in case, and remembering the fire he had spied, he tucked the pistol in his belt. And as he walked, despite his hunger, he found some capacity to wonder at the ruins.

He reckoned that he was passing the edge of the military spacefield, but all the buildings had long ago been reduced to overgrown rubble, fluxbarriers and bafflesquares had fallen away from the launch pads like petals from so many dead flowers, nothing more now than support for billowing ghostweed. Farther on, maintenance pits were filled with still green water, shingled with the coins of water lilies. He clambered down to the edge of the water and drank, lying on his belly and lapping up water like a beast. Strag-

gling trees stood where the machinery had been; grass had long ago carpeted the concrete. All gone, faded like the dead dreams of Earth's stellar empire, faded as a painted picture fades in the true light of the sun. Westerly traced the deep hole which had housed a gravithic generator test-bed, the ceramic sides torn and scorched. What ruthless energy had been wielded here, and to what purpose?

As he walked on through the quiet groves an insect landed on his hand with a loud buzz. A bee, its hind legs furred with pollen. After a moment it raised its tiny wings and flew off heavily, and Westerly followed it remembering his boyhood, that one summer on Novaya Zyemla when he had tended the hives of a farm.

So he was in a grassy clearing before he noticed the woman on the far side, an old woman all swathed in black net. A buzzing rose and rose in Westerly's ears. His joints softened like wax, and he fell onto the grass.

"You needn't have shot him. Why, he's as old as I am, and as harmless too, I'd say." An old woman's voice, cracked and querulous, and speaking English.

"You said no one else was here. Who is he?" The second speaker, a man with an oddly inflected accent, grunted, and Westerly felt his pistol being lifted from his belt. He was quite unable to move, could see only a patch of grass blades and the scuffed toe of a black boot. "Off-world, I reckon," the man said.

"I wonder." She added, more briskly, "Come on, get him up. We must take him back."

"Shut up, old woman."

"You shot him. Get him up, now."

Westerly was turned over, and sunlight dazzled his eyes. There were pins and needles in his limbs now, like fire. He tried to sit up, shook his head to clear his blurred vision. Nearby, the old woman was fitting the slanted top back onto a hive. A little tracked machine sat obediently beside her, no higher than her knees. On the other side of the clearing a young man, bare-chested and muscular, black hair flopping over narrow, deep-set eyes, cradled Westerly's pistol. A sonic 'caster was tucked in the waist of his black jeans.

"Careful with that," Westerly said.

The young man eyed Westerly. "Funny kind of piece. Where you get it, huh? You a Witness?"

"No, I'm not. Who are you?"

"That's my business, man."

"Hah," the old woman said. She hobbled across the grass, the little machine following like a dog. A wicker basket rested on its flat back. "You're a pirate, you and all your kind. I don't care what Nathan says — this is my island."

The young man pushed back his fringe. He seemed amused. "You've been told, woman. No one has a place anymore, 'less they can hold it. Or 'less it ain't worth nothing to others."

"I heard all Nathan said, thank you." She wore tattered, baggy coveralls beneath the netting. The left sleeve had been torn off to show the gleaming augmented arm: a mechanic, then. An old mechanic living on in the ruins of her trade. . . .

"We go back," the young man said. He affected an air of disdainful lethargy, yet Westerly sensed a potential for violence brooding within him, like a snake under a rock. "I mean now," he added impatiently, and Westerly stood carefully, wincing at the pain in all his joints. Three ambushes in two days — he was old.

"I didn't realize anyone lived here," he said to the woman as they followed the young man. He was wondering if they had seen him bring in his ship.

"Well, I do. Him and his kind are pirates. You're in the Navy?"

"Years ago. The Alea Campaigns."

"Thought so. How do you feel? Those sonics can make you feel like you've a kilo of sand in your head instead of brains." When Westerly said nothing, she added, "And let me guess, you're a singleship pilot now. You got that manner, abrupt, if you don't mind me saying so. Used to know a lot of them when this place was something. We didn't have to lose the stars." She looked at Westerly. "It's still all out there?"

"Sure." His head ached from her babble, and he was trying to think what he could do. But there was nothing; he really had fallen into it this time.

There was an open space of concrete, a mostly intact warehouse blocking one side, that ran down to decrepit jetties where two boats doffed at anchor beneath camouflage netting strewn with ghostweed that hung from their cylindrical sails. The young man led Westerly and the old woman through the square entrance of the warehouse, and suddenly they were surrounded by people in the smoky gloom.

Scattered blankets and a handful of little fires showed that they had made a camp just inside the warehouse, a camp backed by a shadowy maze of dozens of obviously defunct machines. A few children clutched at the adults' legs, and one man carried a naked, sleeping baby; they were a strange kind of pirate, if pirate they were.

Nor did they seem to have a leader. For the first five minutes, Westerly was bombarded with more questions than he could have possibly answered even if he had wanted to. The man who had captured him stood a little to one side of the crowd, flanked by a slight, sandy-haired man and a sullen-faced woman: clearly his lieutenants. Gradually, the questioning devolved upon a tall, calm man who introduced himself as Nathan, who wanted to know where Westerly was from and why he had come to the island.

There was no harm in telling the truth, Westerly decided. At least, up to a point. He admitted that he was a singleship pilot, that he had made a deal

with the Witnesses and had barely escaped with his life when it had gone wrong, and that he had made his way to the island because his ship was there, but in the process had been robbed of what he needed to get his ship back.

Nathan listened with polite attention and, when Westerly was done, asked that bread and water be brought. "The Witnesses know you're here?"

"I don't think so, although the fisherman who robbed me might tell them. I want to get back from him what's mine. You can keep the pistol if you'd like, but I ask you to let me go." The bread was dark and dry, and the water tepid, but he ate and drank gratefully.

Nathan glanced at the black-haired young man. "What d'you reckon, Floyd? By rights I guess he's yours."

"Ain't got no use for him. I'll keep his piece, though."

Nathan tugged at his small, pointed beard. "You see, mister, we're on Witness territory here, trespassing in a way, though we're really just passing through. You know about us, so I don't know if we can let you just run off?"

"This fisherman," Floyd said slowly. "What d'he take?"

"Money, mostly, as well as the key to my ship. A lot of money," Westerly added, "in Witness scrip."

Floyd massaged one of his bulging shoulders. Westerly could see what he was thinking as clearly as if it had been written in a bubble over his head, and prompted, "Witness scrip is good pretty much everywhere on Earth, but not much good where I want to go."

"Hell, Floyd," the sandy-haired man said, "we could get on with that." A few of the crowd murmured.

"Look now," Nathan said, turning to them. "I don't know if this is right. When we set out, we didn't aim to get in anyone's way, right? Just find a place for ourselves is all, should be plenty of places to the north going begging. Folk all moved south when they didn't move off the land completely. We won't need any of this scrip where we're going."

"But it'll sure sweeten our passage. 'Sides, we'll be helping out the gentleman here." Floyd grinned. "And you can't call it thieving, if we get back what's his by rights. He'll pay us for our trouble, right, mister?"

"Surely," Westerly said, smiling. "All I want is the key."

"Hah," the old woman said. "You *all* watch out when a singleship pilot wants something. He'll kill to get it." She looked around at the smiling youngsters, a defiant clot of black. "I know it," she insisted, then told her machine, "Come on," and pushed through the watching circle, vanishing amongst the shadowy machinery.

"It could bring trouble on us," Nathan said, pulling his beard.

"Hell, we won't even hurt him, just scare him some. Damn spics, steal the shirt off'n your back soon as look at you. You don't have to come, Nate. Me and Iry and Marie here'll do the job." He squeezed the sulky-faced woman. "Right, honey?"

Someone called, to general laughter, "You be sure and come back now, Floyd."

"Don't I always?" Floyd's grin was wide. "Come on, Mister Starman. We'll go get your stuff back."

They took a dory from one of the boats. The reaction motor in its stern spread a wide white wake as Iry, whistling around gappy teeth, steered on a long curve for the far shore. Westerly sat between Floyd and the woman, Marie, letting the sea breeze blow away his headache as the shore grew clearer through the haze.

Leaning at his shoulder, Marie asked, "You really from the stars?"

He looked back at her. "Surely. Though I don't have a certificate, I'm afraid."

But she was intently serious. "And you have a spaceship on the island?"

"Close by, let's say."

"Maybe we should take that, when we get this key thing back." Now she did smile, moving only her thin, bloodless lips. She could have been no more than twenty.

"You know how to pilot a spaceship? It won't do you any good otherwise."

Her smile widened. "Maybe we could stick a sail on it."

"I'm keeping your pistol," Floyd called. He sat near the bow, looking at Westerly with his dark narrow eyes.

"It isn't a laser — it accelerates ionized hydrogen at close to light speed, you understand? Far more dangerous. I'll show you how to use it, but you'll have to let me borrow it back a while."

"I don't —"

"Come on, Floyd. You've got your own gun." Marie reached over, and after a moment Floyd handed her Westerly's pistol; with a little flourish, she passed it to Westerly.

"Don't shoot that spic," Floyd said, "at least, until he's told us where the money is. Damn, I'm going to enjoy this." He leaned forward and spat at the water creaming back from the hull, grinned sideways at the woman.

Westerly smiled indulgently. They were so easy to manipulate, simply kids on the run from someplace, restless, looking for adventure before they finally settled down. Savages, in a way. He'd felt the same restlessness after the Alea Campaigns; that was one reason why he'd resigned his commission and lost what little inheritance he would have come into, becoming first a freespacer and then a singleship pilot, an explorer like these kids, but of the infinitely vaster ocean of space. But that had been so long ago that he could smile at it now.

The dory idled along the shore, its motor sputtering at intervals, as Westerly looked for the ruined street. "There," he said at last, and Iry reached between his feet and threw the anchor over the side.

They had to wade ashore. Sea water stung Westerly's wounded thigh, and

he wondered about infection. If you could eat things on Earth, things could surely eat you. With brief hand-signals, Floyd ordered Marie and Iry to flank either side of the door below the terrace, and then he darted into the darkness. Westerly waited, clutching his pistol, and after a moment Floyd appeared above. "No one here. Ashes of a fire still warm, so they aren't long gone." He swung over the wall and dropped easily to the muddy ground. "I guess you lost your stuff, Mister Starman."

Westerly fired the pistol convulsively. The blindingly bright beam touched the terrace and the concrete imploded, showering them all with stinging fragments. Beyond, a wall collapsed and a girder groaned before shrugging up, displacing tonnes of rubble which dropped straight through the floor. Dust billowed up like a thunderhead.

"Goddamn . . ." Floyd knocked Westerly's arm up, grabbed the pistol. "Goddamn, there ain't no need. Calm down now. We're going back."

Westerly breathed deeply, shaking from the sudden surge of adrenaline. He hadn't lost control like that for some time — it was alarming. "I'm going to see if I can find that fisherman. Without the key I can't get my ship, so there's no need for me to get back to the island."

"Sure there is — if I say so."

Westerly looked at the burly young man. Behind him, his two lieutenants were studiously not quite pointing their antique but no doubt quite serviceable weapons at Westerly, watching him with hard, alert expressions. After a moment he sighed, and spread his hands in acquiescence.

But he was damned if he was going to stay a prisoner.

As soon as the dory returned to its berth, he jumped ashore and strode through the crowd of watchers, shaking off the questions Nathan asked, walking into the warehouse and entering the maze of dead machinery. He was looking for the old mechanic.

He found her in the heart of the maze, in a kind of nest of rags and rubbish: rusting tools and machine parts, chipped plates and cast-off filthy clothing, spools and bobbins and dozens of other unidentifiable objects, packed almost inextricably together like the beginnings of a fossil seam and smelling of old sweat and honey. Westerly affected not to notice all this disorder. He needed her. He had to be polite.

The old woman was feeding a waxen comb into a conical extractor, flicking off a few dead bees with one of the extensors of her augmented arm. There was a hum, and dark sticky fluid began to ooze into the flask beneath the spout.

"They won't let me go," Westerly said, squatting so that he could look into the woman's face. "You understand that I have to get away."

"Oh, I understand." Her face, round and wrinkled as an old apple, was barely visible in the shadows. "Didn't think you'd find your thief, but there was no telling you. Never was telling you singleship pilots. See, I'm just an

old mechanic; I can do nothing. I'm as much a prisoner as you."

"All the more reason for us to help each other."

She watched the level of honey rising in the flask. "I don't think so."

"Damn it, they'll make a slave of you!"

The machine moved forward, several of its tentacles writhing up, its sensor-cluster raised like a striking snake, but the woman waved it back.

"Well, maybe it's worth it, to see you wriggle."

Westerly sighed. "Look, you could help me get my ship. I'll take you away." He remembered her phrase. "It's still all out there."

"All sorts of ships lifted from here, once."

He prompted her. "And you wanted to go, too."

"I've been here too long, you know." Which could have meant either of two things. She was still placidly watching the honey ooze.

And watching her, Westerly breathed deeply, holding back his anger until his hands began to tremble. She really was the only hope he had of getting his ship back — the fine manipulators of her augmented arm, sheathed like cat's claws above the grosser extensors, could surely construct a signal device from some of the junk lying around — so he had to court her. But single-ship pilots aren't good at dealing with people. That was one reason they had become singleship pilots. Westerly had long ago evolved a code of minimal politeness — politeness cost nothing — but all singleship pilots, like children, expected to get what they wanted at once, and he was no exception. Sweet-talking this decrepit old woman was a terrible effort for him. He had to convince her, yet his usual means of persuasion had been stolen by the fisherman.

Keep talking. He said at random, "I used to keep bees when I was a kid," and reached towards the spout of the extractor.

The little machine swiftly extruded a tentacle and laid it upon Westerly's forearm. It said in a flat voice, "This is not for you. Did you hear what he said, Seyoura?"

"I heard," the woman said. "I didn't know there were bees on the colony worlds."

"My father owned a farm on Novaya Zyemla; I helped out there once. Bees pollinate the alfalfa that conditions the atmosphere of the Tarysheena." He flicked the machine's tentacle away. The place it had touched tingled. "What's the honey for?"

"Myself, my machine here. Or for its biological part anyway."

"I was a dog once," the machine said. Its sensor-cluster, a fist flecked with glass, bobbed in the dim light.

"But you aren't from Novaya Zyemla," the woman added. "Not with that name."

"No, from Elysium. My father owns an estate there. Part of the Fountain of Youth Combine."

"Agatherin, eh? So, why aren't you young?"

"I'm disinherited. The youngest son to begin with, and then I resigned my commission. My father didn't like that, still won't talk to me." His left foot, above the hollow heel where the payment for Bifrost was hidden, itched. Two hundred years of life, a whole point ought six grams of agatherin.

"I've never been to any of the worlds," the woman said. "Do you know, not even Luna." She said it as if it had suddenly struck her, after all the years.

Westerly said, "With your help —"

"Oh, I couldn't." With a theatrical gesture she pressed her hands, flesh and metal, over her ears.

"It would be easy, but I need your help. Think it over."

"You singleship pilots. You and your damned arrogance. You haven't even asked my name."

"What's your name?"

She drew herself up, gathering her ragged black net about herself as if it were a regal robe. "Catarina de Cyrene. But you aren't interested in me. I'm just a means to an end." Her augmented arm flashed in the gloom; the six-clawed fist quivered a centimeter before Westerly's nose. "All you are interested in is this."

He stood, slowly and stiffly. "Just think about it. Or would you rather spend you life as a slave to those kids? What do you think you are to them?"

But she made no reply. Westerly turned away.

Some of the youngsters were squatting around a little fire to one side of the gaping entrance, and a few glanced at Westerly as he painfully settled opposite them. The haze had cleared and a gorgeous sunset was in progress over the ruins of the city, the sun an oblate orange sphere sinking in streaks of red cloud against a deep violet sky. The sea strait glittered like bronze; the camouflaged boats were gilded.

Presently, Nathan came over with a bowl of lukewarm fish stew. When Westerly took it and smelt its salty stench, something happened between his throat and his belly, like a band snapping. He was that hungry. Nathan, squatting on his heels, his hands on his knees, watched as Westerly spooned the stuff down. Nathan had put on a pair of steel-rimmed spectacles, lending his long face a serious, scholarly air. Presently, he said, "It isn't my idea to keep you. Floyd reckons you might be useful if we have to dicker with the Witnesses. They might pay for you."

"So let me go."

"Well, I can't rightly do that. The rest are on Floyd's side, mostly. See, democracy is a tradition our people have kept alive, and we're taking it with us."

"Where is that?"

It turned out that they didn't have any real plan, except to sail north and

look for a good place to start a settlement. "Getting kind of itchy back home, which is why," Nathan explained, "and there's the whole world for us now. But I'm sorry you had to run into Floyd."

"It just hasn't been my day."

"Why are the Witnesses so keen on you, do you think?"

Again, Westerly thought of the agatherin tucked in his bootheel, and of his ship, but he couldn't tell Nathan that. Or at least, not directly. After a minute he said, "Pyramids."

Nathan looked politely puzzled.

"Destroyed now, but thousands of years ago kings erected huge tombs for themselves and the wealth they thought they'd need for the afterlife. They had traps and mazes constructed to deter the robbers, and the workers who built those, who knew how to reach the treasure, were executed. The bodyguards who shot me down weren't aiming to kill me, just rob me, but the Witnesses want me dead. You see, I know where they will be going. Away from Earth's babble, where they hope to hear their Gods, where they hope their petitions will be heard."

"Those Gods have nothing to do with us," Nathan said, echoing the fisherman's remark. "I guess you might think differently, though, being old enough to remember the Revelation."

"I was in contraspace at the time, on an expedition. I only knew of the Revelation after I returned."

Nathan scratched under his skimpy beard. "My parents talked about it sometimes, how it seemed they saw and felt everyone in the human race, and all the stars above and below. I guess I don't really understand it." He smiled. "That's one of the reasons we're on the move, I suppose. It's like people were marked by it; and some of the babies born just afterwards more so. Some of them are very strange. But it isn't anything to us, except we have to live in its consequence."

"Well, no one really understands it; that's why the things that caused it are called Gods by some. But it didn't make much difference, in the end."

Nathan gestured, meaning the ruins spread beyond the strait, silhouetted in the sunset. "I guess you didn't have the Witnesses, stirring things up after. My people, though, the Arcadians, we kept out of it. Like you said, life goes on. We lived through the war, and through being conquered afterwards. Our ancestors ruled the Earth once, know that?"

"Half of it, anyhow. They're my ancestors, too. The United States settled Elysium, after all."

"Oh. Yeah." Nathan looked up, then down. "That kind of makes us cousins."

"So why am I your prisoner?"

"Like I said, Floyd —"

And the airship dawned above the edge of the warehouse.

Silent and silver, it began to turn as it passed over the welter of the strait,

flashing from end to end in the light of the setting sun. Westerly saw the row of little windows in the gondola slung under its belly. Half the Arcadians were standing in the warehouse doorway; others were hustling small children into the shadows beyond. A little way off, Floyd was pointing defiantly at the huge craft. . . . Or no, he had Westerly's pistol!

Westerly shouted a warning just as Floyd fired. A line of light as bright as the sun lived for an instant between his arm and the center of the airship. There was a dull boom, and the rear of the airship, bisected as it travelled along the beam, began to collapse in on itself. Lift gone, the nose tilted at the sky as the craft slid down the air. Just before it touched the water Floyd fired again, and the beam must have touched some power source. For a brief instant, the sunset was doubled.

Westerly looked away, heat scorching the side of his face. When he looked back, scattered fires were burning on the water, but the airship was gone. Long waves rocked the boats at their moorings, slapped spray above the jet-ties.

Nathan was running, and Westerly followed as quickly as he could. Floyd said truculently, "They saw us. They saw the boats. I had to, Nate."

Nathan's spectacles flashed. "Something like that, the Witnesses were sure to have detected it. We're in line of sight of their damn telescopes!"

"Well hell," Iry said, scratching at his sandy hair, "the starman there fired the piece when we was on the shore, and nothing happened."

"Only that an airship comes sniffing along a few hours later. You call that nothing?"

"The Witnesses can't detect that pistol," Westerly said, and everyone turned to look at him. There was a spot of color high on each of Nathan's cheekbones. "Look," Westerly said, "those telescopes are aimed up, at Sagittarius. The Witnesses aren't much interested in their backyard."

"Then what was that airship doing here?" Nathan demanded.

"Looking for me, I expect. You should let me go; keeping me'll only bring trouble."

Floyd stepped forward, raised the pistol. "We can deal with trouble, right?"

Someone in the watching crowd shouted, "Tell him, Floyd!"

Floyd grinned. "I told you this guy was worth something. Listen, we don't have to run from no one. We start doing that, we never stop. That's the way of the world. We show these Witnesses what we can do, there's no one'll say no to us. We can take what we want. You all with me?"

As the cheering started, Nathan turned on his heel, the spots of color suddenly erased. Westerly followed him into the shadow of the warehouse and said, "Let me go."

"Go ask Floyd." Nathan shook off Westerly's hand and walked on.

The victorious Arcadians built a huge bonfire on the apron outside the ware-

house; as the crescent of Luna rose above the island, flames lapped higher than the warehouse roof, sent whole constellations of sparks whirling into the night. Westerly sat at the edge of a crumbling jetty, watching as the Arcadians drank and sang and capered in the firelight. Once, a young woman with a primitive kind of projectile rifle slung over her shoulder came up with a bottle, tried to make him drink, but he smiled and said no until she went away. He could have stolen one of the boats quite easily . . . if he had known how to sail it, and didn't mind risking Floyd using his own pistol against him. And the Witnesses were out there looking for him, and perhaps the renegade bodyguards too, if the Witnesses hadn't dealt with them yet. . . . He sighed and stood and walked to the end of the jetty. And that was where he found the wounded man.

There was a gasping mixed with the lapping of water beneath the jetty, and Westerly peered into the tangle of shadow and moonlight, and saw the man lying there on the wrinkled mud like a grounded fish. He cried out harshly when Westerly, up to his knees in mud, tried to move him. But he was too heavy. His face was a livid ruined mask, his hair shrivelled like peppercorns across his swollen scalp. Without any doubt he was a Witness. Around his neck was a chain bearing a representation of the galaxy's triple spiral, a single synthetic ruby at its heart, and the same symbol was stamped into the stock of his pistol, a small old-fashioned laser. Westerly slipped it into his pocket, clambered back up onto the jetty, and went to look for Floyd.

The Arcadians' leader sat with his back against the warehouse wall, flanked by his lieutenants. "Well," he said, looking Westerly up and down, his eyes hooded and insolent, "you been swimming?"

"There's a wounded Witness on the mud down there. I can't get him up by myself."

"No kidding?" Floyd took a long swallow from his bottle and handed it to Marie. "We'll go take a look. You stay there, old man."

"Have a drink," Marie suggested. "Come on, Mister Starman."

But Westerly pushed her away, followed Floyd and Iry around the huge fire, and stood on the jetty while the two men laboured to lift up the sobbing Witness. "Go away now," Floyd said, clambering up. "We got to question this guy."

"You had better hurry. He's ninety per cent gone."

"I got to know if there're any others of his kind around, Mister Westerly. Leave me to my business, okay?"

He called over a couple of the revellers, and the little party pushed past Westerly, carrying the wounded man through the entrance of the warehouse and into the shadows between the machines. Westerly stood indecisively at the entrance, wondering if Floyd was as smart as he hoped. He had half-decided to find Nathan and try to persuade him to help when the screams started.

Westerly gripped the purloined laser inside his pocket, telling himself that

this was necessary. Floyd had to know the Witnesses' plans. But the screams ran on and on, denials torn from the very roots of language, a litany of agony babbling in the darkness beneath the high roof.

Westerly paced up and down, sweating, went outside where the noise of the Arcadians' revelry drowned the screams, went back in again. He wanted nothing more than an end to the screams, and when they did stop, as abruptly as if a switch had been thrown, the silence amongst the ruined machinery was densely ominous.

Something whirred and Westerly spun around. But it was only the old woman's machine. Firelight ran like oil along its metal flank, winked in the lenses of its sensor-cluster. "Bad thing," it said.

"Yes. Very bad."

"They wanted to know what the Witnesses are planning. Bad. My mistress wants to talk with you."

Catarina de Cyrene was hunched within her nest of rags and rubbish, clutching a bottle. "This is my place," she said, "*my* place, and they do something like this. Starting a war against the Witnesses. Don't they know what they're up against?"

"Obviously not."

"You surely got Floyd started. Yeah, I saw you splitting him off Nathan. You let him keep that pistol, and that's power. You expected him to let you go?"

"Something like that."

"Singleship pilots. Think you know it all." She swallowed from the bottle and held it out. "Fermented honey. Want some?"

Westerly shook his head.

"How easy is it to get up your ship? What kind of signal? My machine might be able to mimic it."

"Radio. One hundred fifty kilohertz."

"And?"

"If you're coming with me, I'll tell you the rest when we get there. How can I trust you?"

"How can you be sure I can get your ship up, if you don't tell me the signal?"

"Oh, it's a simple little tune. Let me worry about that. It will be difficult, you know, hiding from Floyd when he finds we're gone."

"This is my island," the old mechanic said. "You might think I'm crazy, but I'm not as crazy as the Arcadians. They think they've inherited the Earth. Well, no one has. Even the Witnesses want to leave, to get nearer their Gods."

"They aren't anyone's Gods really. Are we going?"

She pulled herself up, a little drunk, and adjusted the black netting over her augmented arm. "I said I would, don't worry. There's a way out of the back."

The path led around the side of the warehouse, through banks of ghostweed that trailed little touches across Westerly's face, intimate and unsettling in the darkness. Then they passed the apron where the Arcadians were still dancing around their bonfire, staggering and clapping. The pulsing firelight suffused the ghostweed like blood. Someone was playing a fiddle, that most human-sounding of instruments, and its wailing voice soared into the night.

"We have to cross to the other side of the island," Westerly whispered.

"I know. I saw your ship come down, and I saw you sink it and take off in that aircar of yours."

"Christ."

"Don't worry. I never told *them*. I've not told one tenth of what I know. Follow me, now."

They left the light of the bonfire behind; the ghostweed glimmered like frost in the level light of the setting moon. The old woman was a soundless shadow flitting through it, the machine humming quietly at her heels; Westerly kept stepping on crackling foliage.

They had not gone very far when a hand, cold and papery, gripped Westerly's own, and the old woman thrust her face near his. Her breath was sickly sweet. "Someone's coming."

Westerly listened. The noise of the revelry was small and faint; the nighttime susurruration of insects was louder. Then Westerly heard a crackle, and another, light and sure footsteps coming towards them. He turned and blundered into the old woman, and from their left a beam of light snapped on, pinpointing the machine. Westerly brought up the stolen laser and fired; in the flare he saw Marie's startled face, and then she was running, lost in darkness. A line of ghostweed burned with fitful blue flame.

"Come on!" He grabbed the old woman's flesh arm and they ran, thrashing through ghostweed.

But after a few minutes she pulled back, gasping hoarsely. "Walk," she managed to say.

His own heart pounding, Westerly told her, "They'll be after us."

"I'm old. Walk. I know . . . I know what I'm doing."

They had reached the clearing where the old woman kept her beehives, when once more they heard the distant sounds of pursuit. "What now?" Westerly was beginning to feel the first sliding edge of fear.

"Now you go on."

"Don't be crazy." He knew the machine wouldn't leave her, and he needed it to reach his ship.

"Don't worry. I know what I'm doing. You go on now; I've been stung so often I don't take any notice, but it'll hurt you like hell." She pulled netting over her head and walked towards the hives. A shadow in the fading moonlight, she stooped and lifted off the top of the nearest hive. Westerly saw her

augmented arm gleam as she reached inside, and then, above the nearing sounds of the Arcadians, he heard a low menacing hum. He ran.

"Don't walk on the grass, now. You'll leave a trail. On the bits of wall, there."

The ghostweed had not taken hold here. Grass covered the ground between the ruins of what had been the administration complex of the civilian part of the spacefield. Ragged cypresses stood here and there, like black tongues of flame against the black night.

The moon had set now, and the only light came from the rigid patterns of the stars that bestrode the sky. His wounded thigh aching, Westerly followed the dark shape of the old mechanic crabwise across uneven rubble, clutching at dry, spiky weeds. The machine whined and slipped behind him. They reached a wall, and she felt along it, muttering, then lifted a trailing fringe of vegetation and vanished as she ducked beneath it. Westerly followed, banging his head on a sharp edge. "Light," she said, her breathing harsh, and the machine struck a dim blue refulgence somewhere in its up-held sensor-cluster.

They were in the remains of a once-splendid hall. Ivy let down great ropes through holes in the domed ceiling; the marble floor was littered with rubbish and in one place had been scorched and broken. The old woman led Westerly to one corner and bent and tugged. Part of the floor came up.

"Service hatch. Cableways down there. We can rest for the night."

Westerly had to carry the heavy machine down the rickety metal ladder; as he descended, things squeaked and rustled somewhere beyond its blue light. The old woman chuckled. "They won't hurt us. Rats in a trap."

"Pardon me?"

"An old saying. By God, the way those Arcadians shrieked when they ran into the bees! Well, maybe I'm not finished after all." She chuckled again. "We've done all right, but we should rest. This used to be Luiz's hole, I remember."

Luiz, she explained, had been a mechanic, too. "Used to be half a dozen of us. I'm the last, and when I'm gone, there'll be no one to remember how it was, here, when Earth ruled the stars."

Westerly didn't bother to correct the gross romanticism. He was tired, too. Tired and old. How long a day it had been! He slept fitfully that night, seeing again and again Marie's startled face as the laser bolt sizzled past, the airship folding as it fell, hearing the panicked shouts then hoarse cries of astonished pain as the Arcadians ran from the bees Catarina de Cyrene had loosed. It was cold and dank in the old service tunnel, and gradually he and the old woman came to huddle together, sleeping as innocently as two lost babes until by Westerly's chronometer it was morning.

He was still tired, but left the old woman to sleep on and climbed up into the ruined hall, at its request taking the machine with him. Thin grey light

seeped through the holes in the ceiling. Westerly peeked through the holes in the curtain of ivy that masked the breach in the wall through which they had entered, but no one moved in the weed-choked ruins outside.

Behind him, the machine said, "People went past an hour ago. Seven or eight by their footsteps, but they did not come very close."

"All the same, I'd like to have known."

"My mistress needed to sleep. So, I think, did you." It sat on its tracks on the filthy marble floor, regarding him with its arched sensor-cluster.

Westerly sat beside it. "Where did she get you from?"

"I was in a library; I worked in the archives. After the city was evacuated, we machines were left behind, and we decided to carry on working. Almost all of us had died when she came to rescue us."

Westerly asked about the library, finding it hard to believe that texts which had been transferred onto more convenient media centuries ago should be kept for themselves. The machine tried to explain; obviously, it missed its tasks. Westerly told it, "That was the trouble with Earth. Too much clinging to the past. Too much history."

"Perhaps. I read some of the books, after we had been left alone, but I did not understand much. And the library has been destroyed, burnt five years ago. All of the books are gone now."

"Tell me about your mistress."

"When she became a mechanic, when her arm was replaced, something was done to her head so that she would accept the change. They do that to all the mechanics, but in her something went wrong. The conditioning was too strong. She prefers machines to people, needs machines, I think. There were others like her, and after the Revelation they began to gather us and bring us here, to the island. They looked after us, and we worshipped them. But the other mechanics died, and one by one our powerpacks ran down. I was the smallest, and the reserves of the others, too low to do them any good, sustain me. But I am glad that we are going with you, for I knew the day would come when there would be no more power."

"It's all true," the old woman said. Westerly turned. She was crouching at the edge of the service hatch, her black net wrapped around her like a shroud. "Maybe I am a little crazy, but not as crazy as I once was." Then: "Listen."

It began as a muted rumble, like distant thunder. Then something passed overhead, a long roaring that shook dust from the ceiling. And another. Westerly reached the breach in the wall first; the old woman crowded behind him. Two aircars streaked through the dawn, tiny flecks of silver that glittered as they turned and wove; below their frenzied dance there was a flare of orange. Something stabbed up from the ground, a dimensionless, hurtlingly bright thread.

Westerly said, "The Witnesses have found your friends."

"No friends of mine. Look at that!"

One aircar burst into a ragged blossom of flame that thinned to drifting smoke. The other dived steeply, and there was another orange flare before it turned and skimmed away.

"There'll be reinforcements," Westerly said. "Perhaps we should move."

"Never thought I'd hear a singleship pilot admit he was scared. Well, we've no breakfast, so I suppose we've nothing better to do. Adventures at my time of life," she said, smiling and showing black stumps of teeth.

A tall unwavering column of smoke stood in the direction of the warehouse as Westerly and the old woman and her machine began to pick their way through the remnants of the launch facilities. Westerly's leg was stiff and his eyeballs felt as if they were bedded in grit, but he was calm and clear-headed. The old woman found a pool of water cupped in the crumpled vane of a fluxbarrier, and they drank from it, stirring away snorkeling insect larvae. It had a bitter metallic flavour, but it quenched Westerly's thirst, and he splashed it on his face and the back of his neck. Although the sun was barely clear of the horizon, the air was already warm and close.

"We should get on," the old woman fretted.

"Your friends won't be coming after us now," Westerly teased. He was relaxed and confident now that his ship was only a walk away. The attack would have whetted Floyd's determination; he would want more weapons like the one Westerly had given him, and if Westerly was right, he now knew where to get them.

Catarina de Cyrene pulled her net closer around her thin bent body. "I like some of them, you know." She seemed diminished in the dawn light. An old, old woman, a relic of the dead past that lay all around.

Beside her, the machine raised its sensor-cluster and said, "Someone is coming."

"Where?" Westerly could see nothing but ghostweed straggling over fallen fluxbarriers and bafflesquares.

The machine pointed with several of its tentacles. "There," it said, and Nathan emerged from behind the upturned remains of a gravithic generator, raising his hands when he saw the pistol Westerly held.

Nathan explained that he meant no harm; he was, he said, trying to escape as well. "Floyd shot down one of those aircars and the other turned tail, but by then they'd just about blown apart the warehouse. They kept diving and dropping little capsules, tiny things that exploded in midair or blew into sheets of flame. People were killed, a lot were wounded, but Floyd went a little crazy and ordered everyone who could to climb into the boats. I wanted to tend the wounded first, bury our dead, and that's when he started shouting at me, told me to stay behind, he didn't need me. So what could I do, with that pistol of yours aimed at me? I watched the boats sail off and then came to find you."

"Which way did the boats go? Toward the sea?"

"No, around the point, hugging the shore. I guess Floyd was afraid he'd

be caught out in the open.”

“Goddamn,” the old woman said. “We’re standing here talking when that Floyd could be on our tails. And the Witnesses will be back, probably blow the whole island up, too. We should go!”

They set off through the ruins, the old woman and her machine leading, Westerly walking beside Nathan. “You were lucky to find us,” he told the Arcadian.

“Oh, I knew where you were. You were heading in this direction when you set off the bees, and I knew about her bolthole in those ruins. She’d been there before, after we came, and perhaps she was thinking of hiding from us when time came to leave. Though until you arrived, I didn’t think she’d have the courage to try and escape.” He smiled. “Floyd was real mad about the bees; he couldn’t shoot *them* down with that pistol, though he burned down the hives. Got stung for his pains, too. Swore he’d cut up both of you.”

“But you didn’t tell him where we were.”

“I was kind of relieved when you escaped. Things were getting out of hand even then; I guess maybe I should have done more.” He knuckled his eyes, reset his steel-rimmed spectacles. One side of his face was scorched; holes were charred in his black jeans and his loose old-fashioned blouson. “It wasn’t supposed to be like this. We’re supposed to be a democracy. But Floyd kind of took over.”

The old woman, hobbling stubbornly ahead, looked back and said, “That’s what happens to all democracies, boy.”

“Floyd was just a quiet kid, back home. I don’t know what’s gotten into him.”

“It’s like the ghostweed,” Westerly said, struck and pleased by the parallel. He pulled loose a diaphanous handful from a bank that climbed a fallen fluxbarrier. “On Serenity, where it comes from, it grows no higher than your knees, and grows sparsely at that. Put it somewhere where there’s no control, where it isn’t supposed to be, and look what happens.” He smiled, suddenly happy. He hadn’t thought like that in years, thought about the way things were and why. He’d simply ignored the travails of human history; he’d cut himself off. Now he was back in it, and deeper than he cared to admit, but he was happy to be walking side by side with this stranger, this Earthman, as the old woman and her machine led them through the devastated circles of the launch pads.

And then the machine stopped. “Something ahead,” it said. “Perhaps the discharge of your pistol, Seyour Westerly. I cannot tell exactly where; too far away.”

Westerly took out the Witness’s pistol and handed it to Nathan, who almost dropped it. “It’s just a laser,” he told the Arcadian, “no need to be nervous. Keep it hidden, all right?”

Nathan started to say something, then simply shrugged and tucked the

weapon away.

"Let's go," Westerly said, and led the way out of the broken maze of the spacefield. Beyond, as he had remembered, was the broad road that circled the island, broken now, with weeds thrusting aside its tilted slabs. And beyond the road was the ocean. Its fresh breeze blew in their faces, and white sea birds rode the air overhead, calling with harsh voices.

"Raise your ship," the old woman said. She reached up with her augmented arm and tugged at her pigtail, plainly nervous in the open. "Raise it up. Tell me the signal."

Westerly looked at the machine. "A pure high C note, oscillating at ten cycles per second on one hundred fifty kilohertz."

"A simple siren song," the machine observed complacently.

"Well do it," Catarina de Cyrene said, clutching at her black net as it fluttered in the breeze. And when nothing had happened after a minute, "God-damn, don't tell me you can't."

"I am signalling," the machine said, "but there is no response."

"You have to be close," Westerly told her. "Otherwise anyone could have taken the transmitter from me and called up the ship for himself. We have to walk around that bluff. Then you'll see."

Parts of the road had subsided, forming deep inlets in the bottom of which white water seethed and ebbed; the largest forced the three people and the machine to take long detours. Catarina de Cyrene wrapped a fold of black net over her white hair to protect herself from the sun; the machine kept close to her heels.

Westerly took the lead, a lightness in his head compounded of hunger and anticipatory fear. He was fairly sure that he knew who would be waiting for him, but for all his scheming he didn't quite know what would happen. Yet he had to have his ship.

The road looped around the bluff and then sloped down and vanished in a level stretch of sand. Blowing grains struck Westerly's face. He looked at the concrete embankment that backed the beach, and at the wind-twisted groves of live oak above it, then turned and gestured at the sea. "Raise it up," he told the machine.

Far out in the glittering swell, a long way beyond the shifting boundary where combers began their curling runs towards the beach, the sea rose in a long smooth hump which broke in a flurry of white as the ship came up, its curved hull and then the delta wing beneath glistening in the sunlight. Under the dumb urge of its programming, Westerly's ship turned and sped across the water toward the beach, coming to rest a dozen meters above the beach, its triangular shadow falling across the watchers. "Goddamn," Westerly heard the old mechanic say reverentially, and then Nathan yelled a warning.

And a dozen meters away the sea erupted in a gout of steam and foam that

spouted higher than the back of the floating ship.

Nathan reached inside his blouson for the laser, but Westerly caught his arm and murmured, more calmly than he felt, "No. Wait."

One, then another, then half a dozen more: the figures rose from the edge of the embankment and dropped on to the beach. The pistol in his hand, Floyd swaggered up to Westerly, Marie and sandy-haired Iry at his back.

"Well now," Floyd said, pushing back his long fringe and squinting up at the singleship's underbelly. His bare chest and arms were dotted with puffy white blisters. "I guess you're wondering how I knew you'd be here."

"Not at all. You found out when you tortured that Witness. They had prepared an ambush here for me, and I suppose I should thank you for saving me from it."

"Pretty smart for an old man. I suppose you know what I want as well."

Westerly gestured at the ship above their heads. "You want the weapons I have in there. But I'm not all that clever, you know. I didn't realise how ruthless you were."

Floyd hefted the pistol. "Yeah, well, we don't have things like this on Earth."

"You don't have much on Earth, anymore. What about the others?"

"Oh, you can go free, when I've gotten what I want. But I want to deal with the traitor there, and the old woman." He touched his bee-stung chest.

Westerly moved then, but the machine moved faster. It smashed into Floyd's ankles and began to claw up his body as he fell. The man rolled away and staggered to his feet, backing away as the machine advanced on him. "Call it off," Floyd yelled, and swiped at it with the pistol. Westerly saw the fat blue spark, heard the flat crack of the discharge. Floyd yelped and danced back as the machine snatched at his knees with its tentacles. "Call the fucking thing off!" the Arcadian shouted, then staggered and fell, rolling backward and coming up with the pistol at the ready. Westerly saw the look in Floyd's face and ducked just as the pistol went off.

The machine blew apart in a flare of violet, spraying molten sand and live steam and a shower of red-hot fragments. Westerly covered his face as burning stuff pattered all around; behind him one of the Arcadians grunted and clutched the place where something had gouged a chunk from his arm.

Floyd lay facedown beyond the fused crater, the pistol still clutched in his outstretched hand. A halo of red soaked into the sand around his head. Before anyone else thought to move, Westerly jumped the crater, jarring his wounded thigh, pried loose the pistol, and felt for a pulse. His hand came away sticky with blood.

"How is he?" Nathan was training the laser on the other Arcadians, his face entirely white except for the livid burn on his cheek.

"Dead." Westerly was trembling, not with the residue of fear (he was still afraid), but with an almost irresistible urge to laugh. He walked over to Floyd's lieutenants and said as steadily as he could, "You two have no quar-

rel with me, but you'll have to answer to your own people." He looked at the rest of the Arcadians. "What about all of you? Is it all over?"

"We never wanted trouble," Marie said, biting her lip. She dropped her heavy rifle on the sand, and one by one the others copied her.

Catarina de Cyrene knelt over the steaming crater, then straightened with the machine's sensor-cluster held in the hand of her augmented arm like a flower. The net bunched above the manipulators was smouldering. She looked at Westerly and said, "You knew what we were walking into. You should have told me, singleship pilot."

"Why do you think I gave Nathan the laser? Besides, you wouldn't have come with me if you'd known." Westerly turned to Marie and asked, "Are any of the Witnesses left alive?"

"One," she admitted quietly; Westerly told her to bring the prisoner down.

The Witness was a small, bright-eyed man in voluminous particolored clothes that fluttered around him as he stepped cockily down the beach. He glanced at Floyd's body and at the pistol Westerly held, and shrugged. "We needed your ship," was his only explanation, and when Westerly said that he'd known that all along, the little man seemed amused. "Who told you? One of our people?"

"In a way. Some of the bodyguards tried to stop the ones who shot me down, and when they failed, they fled in the direction of your telescopes. I figured they were in your employ."

"A pity you couldn't have hired more reliable people. Being shot down was your saving." He was looking up at the belly of the ship. "Tell me, how did you call it out of the sea?"

"A radio signal."

"Ah. How quaintly simple. The question always was, what sort of signal, and what else besides. That's why we waited for you here. We weren't sure if you'd booby-trapped it. Otherwise —"

"Otherwise you'd have killed me as soon as I'd given you Bifrost's location. Tell me, how did you know the ship was hidden here?"

"We had agents all along the coast. We knew you'd have to land fairly close to where we'd arranged to meet you."

"The fisherman."

"Yes, he was a fisherman, the man who spotted you."

Westerly laughed. "Your help wasn't too reliable, either. After I was shot down, your fisherman helped me across to the island and then robbed me."

"Thank you for telling me. He will be dealt with in due course."

"What makes you think I'm going to let you go?"

"Why else would you want to talk with me?" the little man asked, folding his arms calmly. "Besides, do not think I am afraid of death. I am already elevated sixty degrees within the immanence of the living Godhead. I have logged over a hundred hours of prayer."

"Your prayers won't reach the Gods for thousands of years yet. If they are Gods. And if they are listening."

"Oh, I will not argue with you —"

"That's wise," Catarina de Cyrene said. "You'd save a lot of breath otherwise wasted to no purpose. He listens only to himself." She flung away the sensor-cluster and turned her back on Westerly.

The Witness raised an eyebrow, then resumed his little speech as if nothing had happened. "We no longer need to proselytize; that is one reason why we are retreating to the world you discovered. When our petitions are answered, we will have to deal with you colonists; until then, we will leave you be."

"Thank you," Westerly said dryly. "Now, go back and tell your people I won't betray the location of Bifrost. You needn't kill me."

The little man looked at the Arcadians, then mockingly bowed to Westerly and started up the curve of the beach.

Watching, Nathan said, "We must leave, too. Or they will take their revenge on us."

"I don't think so," Westerly said. "But in case — here." He handed over his pistol.

Nathan took it gingerly and stared at Westerly for a few moments, his eyes hidden behind his spectacles. Then, a weapon in either hand, he walked out of the shadow of the hanging ship to the edge of the sea and threw both pistols a long way out into the water. When he came back, Westerly said, "You're crazy. Those would help your people survive."

"No. We would fight over them and destroy ourselves, or we would destroy others with them." Nathan scratched under his beard. "You know, Mister Westerly, you are a little like a God, coming from the sky and changing our lives. Perhaps it is as well Earth no longer bothers with the stars. Good luck to you, anyway."

He spoke to the other Arcadians, had them pick up Floyd's body. When it was turned over to show the shattered bloody face, Iry said, "*Jesus Christ*," and vomited convulsively into his hands. Trembling, Marie wrapped an arm around his waist, and together they followed the others up the beach, climbing onto the ruined road and turning out of sight beyond the stunted live oaks.

Westerly went up to the old woman, but didn't quite dare touch her. "I promised I'd take you away," he said, "and I'll hold to that. And I'm sorry about your machine. I didn't mean for it to happen like that."

She turned. Her eyes, sunken in her wrinkled face, glittered. "I don't think you're sorry. Even so, I might have known; you singleship pilots care for nothing but yourselves." She held up the clawed hand of her augmented arm when Westerly began to speak. "No, I'm not going with you. Can you imagine me out there? No, the other mechanics lived out their lives here, and so can I. Only there'll be no one to bury my bones, if that makes a differ-

ence. Leave Earth to its heirs, singleship pilot." She gathered her ragged net around herself and added, almost shyly, "I suppose yours is the last starship I'll ever see, and I'd like to watch it go up. Is it safe to stay here when you lift?"

"I'll go up just like an elevator. You won't have a hair on your head disturbed." He ordered the ship to let down its ladder and ascended, not looking back even when the old mechanic shouted after him.

As he had promised, he took the ship up straight and level, the island falling away on the screen, a detail lost in the ragged shore that was itself lost in the great blue curve of the planet. And he felt a sudden empty yearning as he rose above it all, as if he, too, could find no better way to end his years than on the shore of Earth, at Galveston, instead of fleeing into emptiness with only his life and his ship and, still hidden in the heel of his left boot, the price of a world. And with Catarina de Cyrene's last words, the words he would puzzle over the rest of his long, long life in the worlds above: *You're all dead to reality up there; you'd better hope the Witnesses can call up their Gods!*

A few weak, old man's tears pricked Westerly's eyes, swelling but not falling in the negligible pull of the ship's acceleration. When he had wiped them away, the ship had already turned on the first stage of its programmed course. On the screen now were only stars. Westerly didn't bother to look back.



IN THE GARDEN OF THE STATE

When the self undergoes delineation
in the matrix of a psychoholo cube,
a fluted and opaque blossom (predictive)
with an articulated stem (actual) emerges:
a polychromatic explication in which
globular nodes of flickering brilliance
designate behavioral determination.

In cases of deviance from the norm,
this flower exhibits disintegration:
the spokes of the stem appear shredded
by striation, the petals will branch
in a broader array, flattening the
fluted cone; lines can even arc rapidly
out of the cube in acute angulation.

For the individual under consideration,
the nodes relevant to the aberration
can be excised by topiary techniques:
the surgical implantation of biochips,
injection of neurochemical inhibitors,
the traditionally proven application
of stimulus-response indoctrination.

In this way each floral configuration
can bear fruit within the garden
of the state; the seasons can continue
to accumulate in an unchanging cycle;
we need never again fear that the
wilds will invade or cross-pollinate
the boundaries of our cultivation.

At work, at play, as we pass along
the verdant boulevards and plazas,
we can celebrate the termination
of that weed-choked individuation
our antecedents called history:
our brightly blooming faces reflect
one another's modular realization.

— Bruce Boston

Inflections

The Readers

Readers and writers, take note! Please be aware that all materials — manuscript submissions, letters to the editor, subscription problems — should be sent to our Wisconsin office: Amazing® Stories, P.O. Box 110, Lake Geneva WI 53147.

— Patrick Lucien Price

Dear Mr. Price,

When you took over at *Amazing® Stories*, I wasn't sure what to expect. But after the first few issues, I think the results are excellent! I love the "On Exhibit" section, and the switch to the military and science fiction is welcome.

However, I'm not averse to fantasy either, such as the work of Sharon N. Farber or the humor of F. Gwynplaine MacIntyre. I hope the change will not prevent the publishing of such work.

Militaristic fiction is most likely a new topic for *Amazing* readers, some of whom are more fantasy-oriented. And, some of us merely aren't familiar with the military terms writers often use. I hope, therefore, that you publish more informative articles, such as Roland J. Green's "The Fantastic Battlefield," to help us out. As a hopeful (hopeless?) writer of the future, I strive to comprehend. As a big fan of excellent military authors David Drake and Joe Haldeman, I can't wait to see what kind of work you obtain.

Thanks, and keep up the good work.

Sincerely,

Chris East

181 Temple Street

Fredonia NY 14063

We are glad that you have enjoyed both the fiction and nonfiction materials we have recently presented in the magazine, Chris. We do aim to please.

In terms of fantasy selections, we are focusing more toward contemporary tales or ethnic fantasies, such as those stemming from Arabian, Japanese, or North American Indian cultures. "The Flying Mountain" in this issue is a good example of the type of ethnic fantasy we would like to offer our readers. Though there are good pseudo-medieval, pseudo-Celtic tales being written (keep a look out for "The Sword That Wept" by Sandra Miesel in our September 1987 issue), this category seems to have exhausted itself, not to mention this editor.

— Patrick Lucien Price

Dear Editor:

I am writing to you, as I have an unusual request which I am not sure you can help me with, but I thought I might try anyway. I have been an avid fan of both factual science and science fiction ever since I was a child. Since I live in New York and you publish from Wisconsin, I don't know whether you can answer my question, but I hope you might be able to provide an answer.

I want to join some sort of science-fiction club or organization composed of fans and writers. Not only do I share the interest, but have also written an outline for a science-fiction story I feel I can be proud of. I am hoping to find some kind of partner to help me work on the story and develop it into a full-fledged work.

Whether I do this does not matter as much as meeting other people I can talk to about my interests. If you know of any such club or organizations located in New York City, please send me any information you might have. Out-of-town organizations are impossible to attend, since I am on a low budget and cannot afford to travel. However, I am open to keeping correspondence by letter, if that is one of the alternatives.

Thank you.

Sincerely,

Amy Jack

135-17 87th Avenue
Queens NY 11418

Alas, Amy, residing in Wisconsin does pose a problem: we can inform you as to what SF organizations and clubs exist in Milwaukee, Green Bay, or Eau Claire, but not in New York City. So, we appeal to our New York readers to give assistance and to contact you if they know of any such organizations.

— Patrick Lucien Price

Dear Mr. Silverberg:

I was shocked that a writer of your experience could have written the ["Reflections"] column about modern fandom in the November [1986] issue of *Amazing Stories*. Yes, some cons have semi-naked slave girls and kids in capes. There are also authors who treat Worldcon as a six-day alcoholic binge. Stereotypes are *such* nasty things, aren't they?

I've never seen fans in line for "Godzilla and Mothra" autographs, but I've seen them line up for the major authors. Gordon Dickson's publisher rushed 800 advance copies of the *The Final Encyclopedia* to LACon II in 1984, and sold them all. Not bad for a bunch of illiterates. I rather enjoy going to the Worldcon

dealers' room to add to my collection of cover reproductions, T-shirts, and movie posters. Don't worry — I also buy *lots* of books.

I thought science-fiction writers were immune to the things-were-different-when-I-was-your-age syndrome. I think you're looking through the rosy glow of memory. I once saw a home movie of a 1940s convention. There was plenty of schlock — the "no costume is no costume" rule is older than I thought. You boast of "a poker-playing contingent, a hard-drinking contingent, a let's throw-bags-of-water . . . contingent" of your younger days. Is *that* supposed to represent a more literate or mature attitude? Maybe those "jolly" people of your youth would be wearing the silliest costumes today.

I saw perhaps two or three semi-naked slave girls and fat Conans at the Atlanta Worldcon [in 1986]. I also saw plenty of well-made hall costumes that would have been contenders for Masquerade Best in Show just a few years ago.

You probably saw the interpretation of Fred Pohl's *Man Plus* at the Chicon masquerade in 1982. In a recent interview on the CBC radio programme "Ideas," Pohl remembered the costume and wished that he owned it! Can you think of any higher praise for a costume? The same costumer later did your Lord Valentine, complete with juggling act. Costumers present their view of an author's, artist's, or designer's world. You wouldn't insult the artists who paint your book covers — why attack the costumers?

Who do you think attends Worldcon? Do you think that a bunch of illiterate teenagers could afford the rates at the Atlanta Marriott Marquis? In age, education, and occupation, the people you meet in the Costumer's Guild Suite in Atlanta reflect today's fandom. I spend much of my time at

conventions taking photos for the enjoyment of myself and my friends. In Atlanta, when I collected names for a permanent list of masquerade photographers, I was handed business cards from several major corporations.

I'm one of the Ph.D.s in the *Locus* poll you quoted. I've published a couple of dozen scientific papers and have a staff of six working with me at a major Canadian research institute. I have plenty in common with other Worldcon attendees, who, like it or not, are the people in that *Locus* poll. Don't confuse variety in our interests with lack of interest in what you're selling.

Your crack that the con attendees "don't read books" was downright insulting. You like to quote polls — let's see your figures for that one.

By the way, at a couple of recent Worldcons, Dr. Robert Forward lectured to packed houses on the science in his science fiction. If you need help

in understanding his work, ask any scientifically minded fan — perhaps one of the kids in the Con Suite.

Yours very truly,
Dr. Joseph Aspler
1100 Dr. Penfield Ave., Apt. 608
Montreal, P.Q.
Canada H3A 1A8

Bob Silverberg clarifies his stance on this issue [see "Reflections" column, p. 6].

As for "illiterate" teenagers, well, Bob has been misquoted: he used the word subliterate, not illiterate. And, it takes a literate person to know the difference between the two.

Readers, please continue to send us your letters. We'd like to read about your likes and dislikes; this way we can better serve your needs.

Till next issue.
— Patrick Lucien Price

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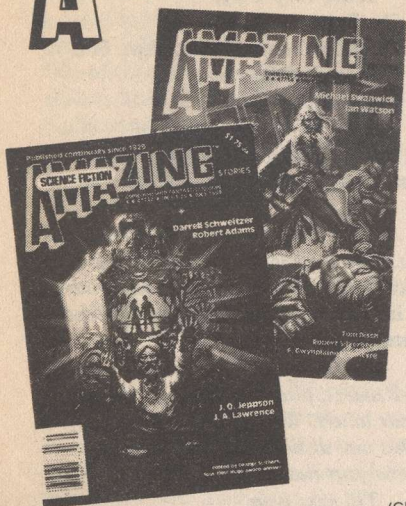
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