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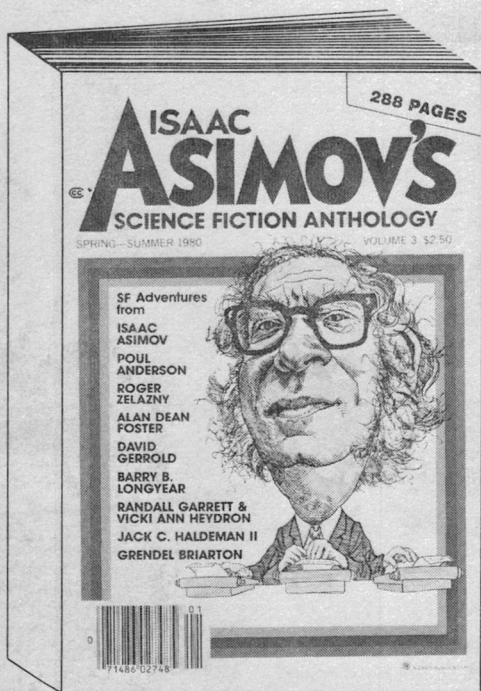
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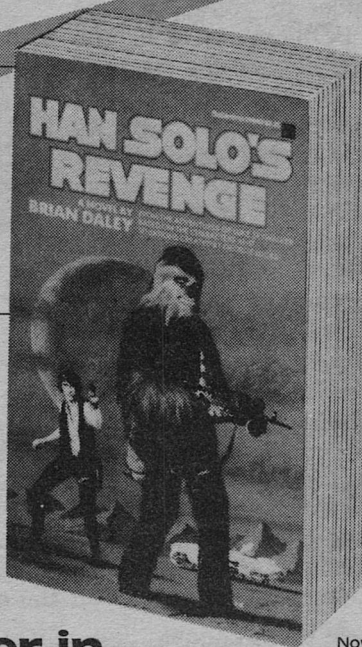
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# EDITORIAL: WELCOME, SIBLING!

by Isaac Asimov

art: Frank Kelly Freas

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By now, a number of you may have heard that Davis Publications, Inc., the esteemed publishing house that puts out this magazine, has purchased *Analog Science Fiction/Science Fact* from its previous publisher, Condé Nast Publications, Inc.

This means a great deal to us at *Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine*.

I find it difficult to express what it means to me, personally, word-smith though I am. Anyone who has read the first volume of my autobiography, *In Memory Yet Green*, knows what *Analog* meant to me in its earlier incarnation as *Astounding Science Fiction*, and how closely I identified with it and with its late, great editor, John W. Campbell, Jr. during the late 1930s and throughout the 1940s.

To have *Analog* now as our sibling-magazine is something I find rather awesome, for it doesn't take much of an effort for me to close my eyes and to be back in 1938 on the occasion of my first visit to Campbell. And now?

I almost have the superstitious feeling that if there were a special niche in Heaven, where SF'ers dead and gone could still swap ghostly plot-lines and reminisce of pulp paper and bug-eyed monsters, I would someday be brought before Campbell in order to explain to him that we took good care of his magazine for him.

However, before I give you an entirely wrong impression, in my excitement, let me make a few points clear.

1) It is not I who bought *Analog*. Nor is it George, nor Shawna, nor *IA'sfm*. It is Joel Davis. It is the publishing house that is the purchaser, and we at the magazine had nothing to do with it and didn't even know about it till the deed was done.

To be sure, we are still gratified, for Joel would not have been willing to spend the money if he had not been satisfied with his experience with science fiction so far. It is a testimony to how



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far this magazine has come in four years that Joel was willing to compound his investment by so much.

2) We did *not* merely buy the name of the magazine, intending to use that and to throw out everything else. We do not intend to make it over into something quite different, leaving only the name as a tenuous connection with the past.

No, indeed! We have purchased the magazine as it exists, with its editor, Stanley Schmidt, who will continue to put out the magazine with the expertise he has already well demonstrated.

3) Although the offices of *Analog* will now be located on the same floor of the same building as we are, it will not be interfered with by us. George and Shawna will continue to work on *IA'sfm* and will have no connection with *Analog* except for friendly conversations with Stan, and vice versa, of course.

4) In particular, although I am "editorial director" of *IA'sfm*, I will *not* hold that position with respect to *Analog*, and Stan will in no way be subject to my whims or orders. (In fact—just to keep the record straight—neither is George. George has always had a free hand. My remarks have the force of suggestions only, and I try to avoid giving advice unless asked.)

All this means that *Analog* and *IA'sfm* will remain distinct magazines, different in editorial policy and in aura.

For instance, in many ways *Analog* is a more serious magazine than *IA'sfm* is. *Analog's* editorials, as a result of a tradition tracing back to Campbell himself, are important essays on political, economic, social, and international matters—often very controversial.

The editorials I write for *IA'sfm* are, on the other hand, light-hearted, and deal almost exclusively with the various facets of science fiction.

Again, *Analog* generally runs one or two science fact articles in each issue (and, indeed, note that the title of the magazine includes the phrase "Science Fact"). These articles are generally solid pieces written at college-level.

*IA'sfm*, on the other hand, is a little freer in this respect. We have run science fact articles that have been well received, but we have had an increasing tendency to have the fact articles we publish deal with some aspect or other of the SF phenomenon.

*Analog*, of course, runs serials, and we do not.

Naturally, I don't mean to imply that each of us is frozen eternally in place. Either one of the magazines may change in many



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ways according to market needs or editorial decision, but no changes are planned at the moment, and the magazine personnel want them to remain distinct.

But what are the advantages of the change, then?

The fact that we are sibling magazines makes it easier for each to go its own way, for one thing. We at *IA'sfm*, for instance, can find it easier to let go of a novel if we know our sibling down the hall can run it. It therefore becomes easier to adhere to our "no serials" policy.

In the same way, we can feel easier about our general air of light-heartedness; my rather trivial editorials, my one-liner responses to letters, our horrid puns and comic verse, the contests on sonnets and double dactyls I've initiated and so on. We know we've got a more sober partner to take care of that side of the readership.

I imagine that *Analog* will feel more comfortable following its policy, too, knowing that we exist as a lightning-rod for heel-kickers and toe-tappers.

Then, too, we can always use additional brains on the job. There are always problems that arise that have nothing to do with story selection—problems involving distribution, mailings, subscription, inflation, and so on. It will be good to have Stan join us in considering these matters.

As it happens, Stan is a gentle guy, quiet and courteous by nature, and incredibly bright. These are all Good Things. Then, too, he and I are friends; so are he and George; and no one can be anything but friendly with Shawna. What's more, Stan had a conference with Joel once the purchase was announced, and I gather they got along swimmingly together.

Therefore, I thoroughly expect there will be no friction whatever, only a lot of helpfulness all around.

There will be a little something for the writers, too.

Any writer can submit stories either to *IA'sfm* or to *Analog*, specifically. It would make sense to do so, for a particular writer may well feel that a particular story will suit the editorial policy of one magazine rather than the other.

However, if the editor in question finds that he cannot use the story for whatever reason, he will pass it on to the other editor, who will make an independent judgement. In short, for one set of postage and one effort of mailing, the writer will have submitted a story to two first-rate magazines and, every once in a while, will

find he has made a sale to the magazine he did not submit to as first-choice.

Naturally, if a writer does not wish to be considered by the second magazine, but only by the one to which he has specifically submitted the story (perhaps because he would rather submit it elsewhere as second choice) he need only say so and his wishes will be respected.

Both magazines will, of course, offer top rates by digest-sized science fiction publications standards.

So the September issue will be the first of the Davis *Analogs*. I can only hope that *IA'sfm* and *Analog*, in a spirit of mutual help and friendly rivalry (for I strongly suspect that George and Stan will labor hard to outdo each other in both story quality and circulation figures—as they should) will reach new heights under the Davis banner. And I hope that Joel will be smiling whenever I see him.

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## ON BOOKS by Baird Searles

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- The Beginning Place* by Ursula K. Le Guin, Harper & Row, \$8.95.  
*The Snow Queen* by Joan Vinge, The Dial Press, \$10.95.  
*Topper, Topper Takes a Trip, The Night Life of the Gods* and *The Stray Lamb* by Thorne Smith, Del Rey Books, \$2.25 each (paper).  
*Far Future Calling* by Olaf Stapledon, edited by Sam Moskowitz, Oswald Train: Publisher, \$12.00.  
*Morreion, A Tale of the Dying Earth* by Jack Vance, Underwood/Miller, \$20.00.  
*Science Fiction and Fantasy Authors* edited by L. W. Currey, G. K. Hall and Co., \$48.00.  
*Science Fiction and Fantasy Literature* edited by R. Reginald, Gale Research Co., \$64.00/set.

I've been devoting a lot of thought to a couple of things lately, and the two are rather closely linked. One is science fiction/fantasy as a genre (more correctly, related genres), the other is Ursula K. Le Guin (to whom, I guess, I should not refer as a "thing"—sorry, there). And while I believe that this column should usually be devoted to telling the reader about books (as opposed to those reviewers who use their space to sound off about everything but, or consistently use the new titles simply to expound on their pet theories of literature and/or SF), I hope it is forgivable every once in a while to go a little farther afield than the latest new book to hand.

Not that this will be a total digression; Ms. Le Guin has a new novel out (two, in fact, but I want to consider only one of them) which is one reason she's been on my mind. Others are that her work has been in the national spotlight with the PBS broadcast of *The Lathe of Heaven* (which led to a piece by her in *TV Guide* about science fiction), and a few months back the appearance of one of her short stories in *The New Yorker*.

Now *The New Yorker* has always occupied a special place in American *belles lettres*, as have those who have published there. And I'm afraid that my first thought on seeing that story was, "We've lost her."

But who are "we"? That leads to the second area of recent speculation; not so much "what is science fiction," which I'm not about

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to go around again in this space but "where are science fiction's boundaries?"

Many SF writers resent being labelled SF writers. Part of this is the natural human resistance to being pigeon-holed, which can be carried to silly extremes—if you have red hair, you're a redhead, whether you like being categorized or not. Another consideration is financial; there seems to be a generally held opinion that mainstream writers make more money than genre writers—true or not, I don't know, but this is a valid consideration. I'm all for creative people making as much money as they can.

Whatever the reasons, this has led some authors to make as many "goodbye to science fiction; I'm off to write mainstream" speeches as Sarah Bernhardt made farewell appearances, and, by golly, there they are at the next SF convention.

But the major question about a genre—for me—at the moment—is as to whether it should be judged by the same standards as you judge the area it is a genre of. The dictionary defines "genre" as "a kind or type." This immediately implies a kind or type of something, i.e. science fiction is a kind or type of literature and therefore should be judged by general literary standards.

But right off the bat I can name any number of books that are excellent science fiction, but are far from being good literature, and I can come up with several titles that are generally regarded as good literature, but are lousy science fiction (*Brave New World*, 1984 and some recent works by Doris Lessing). One of the implications of genrehood is difference—let's say simplistically that science fiction deals with different matters than mainstream fiction—and what follows therefore is that since you have a difference in matter, you must perforce have a difference in standards.

Now I'm sorry this has gotten to be so didactic because that's just what I'm about to accuse Ms. Le Guin of being, and all of this intellectual tomfoolery I've been going through is because I don't much like her new novel, *The Beginning Place*, and it would be perfectly valid for those who do to say it's because I'm judging it by the standards of science fiction/fantasy rather than as the well-written novel it so obviously is. But at least on the surface, it's a fantasy and not a very good one. Let's amend that; let's say not a very satisfying one, since Le Guin can't write any way but good.

It concerns two young adults who live in an unspecified suburban sprawl somewhere in the contemporary U. S. (it's here that the "well-written" is most deserved; Le Guin does a brilliant job of evoking the nasty, plastic emptiness of all those urban-surrounding areas

that seem to contain nothing but supermarkets, freeways, and tacky houses on inappropriately named streets). They both independently find a sort of gateway, in a polluted patch of blighted woodland, to another place, a country of no sun and perpetual twilight, endless countryside, and a small village inhabited by a pastoral population.

Hugh and Irene form an uneasy alliance (she resents his presence here since she had found the gateway first) to help the people of the village, afflicted by some unspecified scourge which can only be eliminated by Hugh's killing of an amorphous monster that lives in the mountains.

As you can see, all of the fantasy elements are quite deliberately vague—there is no real attempt to make the "ain country," as Irene calls it, a real place. And so one is forced to the conclusion that Le Guin is not spinning us a fantasy, but Telling Us Something About The Real World.

To back up for a minute, I was interested to see how *The Lathe of Heaven*, when stripped down to a movie script, became much less a work of science fiction and much more a sort of classic fable, relating to the age-old story of the person who was granted three wishes and blew it all because he phrased them badly. Le Guin's *Earthsea* trilogy certainly has its didactic side, as do *The Left Hand of Darkness* and *The Dispossessed*, though I think those two to be her most successful works because in both the story, concept, and didacticism are all beautifully balanced.

But *The Beginning Place*, I think, is more fable than fantasy, and therefore, an unsatisfying fantasy. It would seem that Ms. Le Guin, who so far as I know has never made an "I'm off to write mainstream" speech in her life, has stepped quietly out of the genre (it is, after all, a long way from the Ace doubles in which her first novels were published to *The New Yorker*) and is, some might say, going on to bigger and better things. Bigger, yes, in the sense of more (and well-deserved) recognition as a writer and fatter fees for her work. But better? Well, that's the question I've been tossing around here. It's certainly not better for the genre; Le Guin is the kind of class act that has helped us gain whatever dignity we have achieved.

(A final note—I sincerely hope that it is recognized that I am talking here exclusively about Ursula Le Guin's *work* and not about her personal motives or *modus operandi*—it is not only uncivilized but absurd for a reviewer to speculate on those aspects of the artist's life.)

Well, there's nothing, praise be, ambiguous about Joan Vinge's

*The Snow Queen*. It's one hell of a science fiction novel, a rip-roaring story that isn't trying to tell me anything, except perhaps for fairly obvious things such as the fact that it isn't nice to kill intelligent beings even if their bodies do contain a substance that prolongs youth and life itself.

In *The Snow Queen*, Vinge has set up a universe of such complexity that it would take me from here to the end of the column just to get a start on explaining it. In fact, she does a rather marvelous juggling act, keeping the multiple major characters and their stories going at top speed while at the same time unveiling aspect after aspect of this complicated future.

Just to give some sort of hint though, Arienrhod, known as the Snow Queen, has ruled the planet Tiamat for centuries, due to the youth-prolonging "water of life" taken from the bodies of the Mers, a mysterious aquatic race. However, she and her people, the Winters, will soon lose control of the planet to the Summers, sea-faring peasants of Tiamat, due to a major cyclical change brought on by the intricacies of Tiamat's two-sun system.

This will also mean the evacuation from Tiamat of all aliens from the Hegemony, a loose-knit interstellar Empire that claims some control of Arienrhod's planet, because all contact with Tiamat will be impossible for several centuries. But Arienrhod and her consort, Starbuck, are determined both to remain Tiamat's rulers and keep as many of the Hegemony's technological devices as possible and . . .

Oh, the hell with it. That's just the beginning of the bare bones of an incredibly convoluted plot set against a background of Byzantine intricacy. Ms. Vinge writes classic (and classy) science fiction with an original voice. I had a grand time with *The Snow Queen* and think you will, too.

I've never really understood the practice in book-review supplements of giving lists at about this time of year of "suggested summertime reading." Any book I want to read in June I'm pretty damned sure I'd want to read in January. On the other hand, there's a gaggle of reprints coming out in the next few months that so epitomizes what is thought of as light summer reading that I can't resist mentioning them in that context.

Probably the best-selling author of fantasies in the 1930s was a gentleman called Thorne Smith, a name that now will get little or no recognition. The fact that he wrote *Topper* brings an "oh, yes," but on the whole this Mr. Smith is not exactly a household word these days.



He was a best-selling author, not because he wrote fantasies, but because he wrote *ribald* fantasies, which probably accounts for his current obscurity. Ribaldry seems to be a lost art in this anything-goes day and age, which may or may not be a good thing.

Thorne Smith's novels almost always took place in Suburbia (and that's '30s upper-middle-class Suburbia); his heroes were usually inhabitants of that Suburbia who had spent their lives at commuting and business and who were going through what is now known as a mid-life crisis. Suddenly something magic falls into their lives—a ghost, a fountain of youth, the ability to change into various animals—and all hell breaks loose.

Much of the humor derives from broadly fast and loose talk about sex—Smith was doing his best at the time to help America escape its delayed Victorian adolescence—but very little of it is actually *done*; his heroines are the type who can discuss being “ruined” (how's that for period?) very glibly, but almost never let it happen. But perhaps the funniest aspect of Smith's novels are the mundane situations that get totally out of hand, usually to the discomfiture of stuffy authoritarian types such as judges and policemen. Anyone who has seen a 1930s “screwball comedy” movie (for instance, *Bringing Up Baby*, the second funniest movie ever made) will know exactly what I'm talking about.

Upcoming soon from one of our more enterprising publishers will be: *Topper*, the businessman who is haunted by two very sophisticated ghosts (and their dog)—please don't judge him by the anti-septic TV efforts done in his name; *Topper Takes a Trip*, in which he is followed abroad by his spectral (and usually inebriated) friends; *The Night Life of the Gods*, wherein Venus, Bacchus & Co. create total chaos in Manhattan; and *The Stray Lamb*, who in reality is investment counselor T. Lawrence Lamb whose habit of turning into a stallion, lion, or seagull wreaks havoc with his social life. All of these may need a dose of historical perspective to appreciate—they come from a younger, happier America, but maybe that's why I thought of them in terms of summer.

Olaf Stapledon is not a name one thinks of in regard to the short story—in fact, just the opposite, considering *Last and First Men* and *Starmaker*, two epic literary works to end all epic literary works. But we have now from a small press a collection of short works of Stapledon, perhaps the only genius to have written science fiction. (I can't phrase that “. . . that science fiction has ever produced,” since apparently he didn't know he was writing SF until well into

his writing career.) It bears the name *Far Future Calling* and contains several short stories, an address to the British Interplanetary Society on "Interplanetary Man?", and a radio script that capsulizes *Last and First Men* which has, so far as anyone seems to know, never been produced (!). There is also a biography by Sam Moskowitz which is lengthy and straightforward.

While I am more than grateful for any Stapledon brought into print, I must strongly object to one aspect of this particular edition. Stephen Fabian is not quite the right illustrator for Olaf Stapledon—to make the understatement of the year. The winged, bare-breasted ladies on the dust jacket just don't seem to capture the Stapledonian essence, and the interiors, while less blatant, are almost as inapropos.

Now let me turn right around and eat those words *re* another new book illustrated by Fabian, Jack Vance's *Morreion, A Tale of the Dying Earth*. Vance's "Dying Earth" stories, I hope, need no introduction; this one has not appeared, so far as I know, anywhere except for its initial publication in a now-out-of-print anthology. What a beautiful book has been made from it! It is oversized, with each page of text handsomely bordered, and Fabian seems to have been inspired in this case to some really good-looking drawings, with a knockout frontispiece in color.

And finally, a quick look at a couple of reference works. As I've said before, I don't usually favor reviewing them as they're of fairly limited interest, but both of these seem to be of more than the usual narrow range.

Science fiction people seem collectors by nature; science fiction people therefore will find L. W. Currey's *Science Fiction and Fantasy Authors: A Bibliography of First Printings of Their Fiction* an absolute must. It is just what the title says it is, handling well over 200 authors, and Currey, one of the most knowledgeable book dealers in the field, has done a superb job.

The two-volume *Science Fiction and Fantasy Literature* edited by R. Reginald is a good deal less specific in its area, and overlaps several good references already available. But it is up-to-date (at least as references go—its cut-off point is 1974) and, in a sense, centralizes a lot of information. Vol. 1 contains an author index devoted to bibliographies and publishing information; a title index cross-referenced to the author index; a series index, alphabetized under the "name" of the series, which are sometimes peculiarly

arbitrary (but it also has such esoterica as a complete listing of the *Bomba*, the *Jungle Boy* books, in case you ever need it); an Awards index; and an index to Ace and Belmont doubles (if you don't know what they are, don't ask—you don't want to know).

Vol. 2 is devoted to biographical sketches of some 1,443 authors, which provide a great deal of information (and in some cases, statements from the author which are also pretty peculiar). This is not for the casual reader, but if you need an extensive reference work in SF/fantasy, this might be the one to consider because of its range.

(No, gentle readers, I am not going to pull the essential trick of most SF reviewers in finding as many mistakes as possible in these works. What reference work is without them on its first printing? I'd rather point out what such books are good for rather than displaying how much more I know than their authors.)



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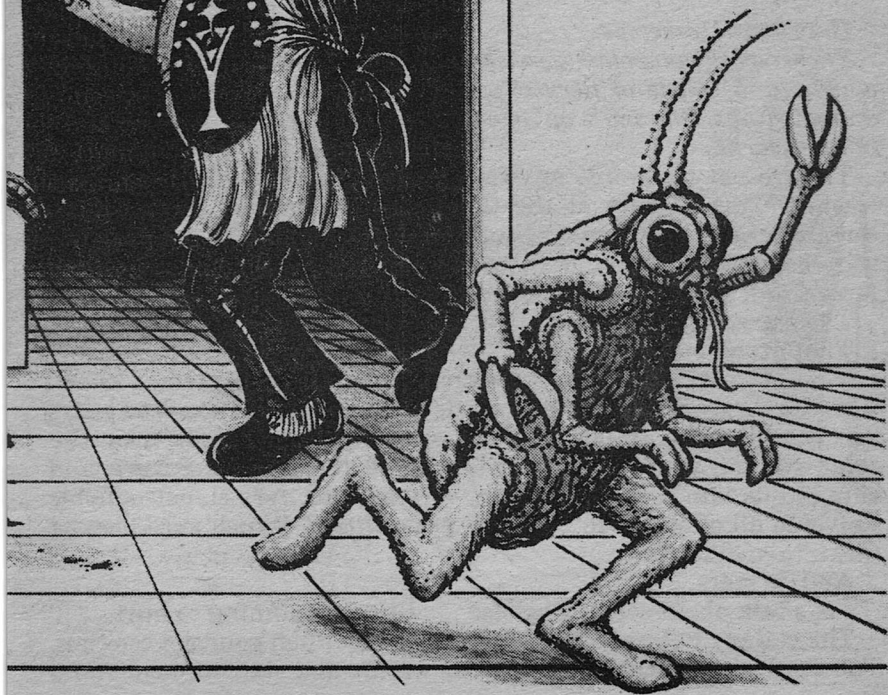
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## RABID IN MALLWORLD

by Somtow Sucharitkul

art: Karl B. Kofoed



*Mr. Sucharitkul, when not commuting between Arlington, VA, and Bangkok, Thailand, in pursuit of an avant-garde composer's career, has become successful enough as an SF writer to be amazed by some of the responses he gets from readers, such as all those claims that Mallworld is a chilling dystopia. "All I did," he pleads, "was describe a place I wanted to live in! Mallworld is often a monument to plastic tackiness quaint and charming. I suppose it has to do with not having grown up in America." Then there was the fellow who was convinced that our author is a Russian, and his stories depict the Marxist/Capitalist interface, but that is a different affair entirely, and far, far stranger.*

*Here's the Universe—*

*Flickersparklepinpoints dervish-dancing through darkness. Whorls, whirls, and swirls of fiery stippledust. Giddy worlds wheeling on unseen slings. Starspills out of cosmic salt-and-pepper shakers. Frozen fireworks—*

They're not my words anyway. All I am is Joni Gryphon, dishwasher extraordinary at the Galaxy Palace in Mallworld, and I certainly can't wax poetic about anything off the cuff. But if there were a subject that would make me, the most down-to-earth person I can think of, go all dreamy-eyed . . . that'd be it.

The stars.

That aren't ours.

Yeah, I guess every human burns inside about the stars. I know. Because they were taken from us. Because a couple of hundred years ago the all-wise, all-powerful, all-sexy Selespridar took over the solar system, stuck a forceshield around the orbit of Saturn and shunted us into a very exclusive, very private, very claustrophobic universe all of our own. Until we get *civilized*. Which sure doesn't mean in *my* lifetime.

And no stars.

Let's talk about something else . . . this is beginning to hurt.

The Galaxy Palace in Mallworld. Home of alien gourmet cooking. The most glamorous dinery in four worlds and sixteen moons and

a thousand azroids.

If you're wondering about why people would pay a kilocred for one meal—when that same amount will feed a starving family of fourteen for a year, earthside—you've never heard *anything*.

Why come to Mallworld in the first place?

I must tell you first that I come from Eggroll, an azroid half-way from nowhere, whose only claim to fame is as a caterer's planet and home of the Saint Betty Crocker School of Culinary Achievement. We lived in a one-room plastic hovel on Rigatoni Level and dreamed of a better life. Well, of course, when I was of jobbable age—eighteen—my family looked up the dazzlingest family connection they had—which was Great-Uncle Agrippa, maitre d'hôtel of the Galaxy Palace in Mallworld, a familial patriarch spoken of only in the most reverent of tones . . . and bang! I got the job.

Mallworld took some getting used to. Teleporting in on the transmat, floating down the nothing tubes into a world of wonders. Tier upon tier, level upon level, serpentine crowdstreams pouring into demat-booths, holosigns blaring and flashing, little pink men buzzing around yelling slogans in your ears, corridors crazy-graving and twisting into doughnuts and crullers, slidewalks snailing and snaking alongside you, autopushers handing out free Levitol pills, robots dispensing candy, kinky sex, encyclopaedias and fluffy toys . . . I hope you're getting the idea.

Well! I thought. Me, a slovenly, unpretty girl from the back azroids, and I end up amid tinselglint and glamor! How's it done?

There I was, in a thirty-klick-long shopping center floating in space, between the belt and Jupiter, where any dream was there for the asking if you could pay for it—and, well, I wasn't just another shopper. I *worked* there. I was one of the gang. Thrills, thrills, thrills.

I soon learned that the glamor was strictly surface. Unless you had a really well-heeled thumbprint.

I hitched up with a guy called Dunny Lorenzo—for warmth, and to save money—and moved to a closet of a room in Cramp Concentration, a little azroid towed out to Mallworld area for people who worked there, to save on transmat bills. Commuting might have been instantaneous for the customers . . . for me it was an hour or more in the car, bumper to bumper across the blackness of space as the Mallworld work shifts chugged to work in their thousands of identical toyochesvs.

So far from accumulating spacecars and holovee sets and other possessions, I worked my tail off, washing dishes at the most glamorous restaurant in the whole solar system. They had no robots to

do that sort of thing at all—the labor was all human. That was part of the glamor. Actually being waited on by human beings. Yeah, I netted high for this work. But hours were long and I never had time to spend it.

Mother always said to me, *You'll meet interesting people, Joni dear, you'll be mixing with the crème de la crème, we all struggled up from nothing to do this for you. . . .*

Sure. Shelling malaprops in a kitchen.

Here's why people come to the Galaxy:

First there's the alien gourmet cooking. Courtesy of our Selespridon masters' trade routes, there's softshell malaprops marinated in angels' tears, roast Vegan dingwort, klitterbungas fried in oyster sauce, sweet-and-sour ice turtles with chocolate chips, as well as ancient earth dishes, whose recipes are extracted—by the restaurant's research department—from ancient, decaying earth documents (so the propaganda goes): bird's nest soup, roast boar, London broil, corned beef hash.

It's about the only place where you'll see aliens, too: where you'll run into one of our masters, two meters of blue-skinned point nine nine nine humanoid with their flaming magenta hair and their sensual, erotic odor . . . or some of their confreres. The plasma beings from the heart of Arcturus, glowing from their shielded magnetic-fielded bottles. Rigellian plants, humming as they sip their scented sugar-water.

Second—envy. The customers want to turn the tables on our masters; so they have people dressed up as aliens, serving their food and bowing obsequiously as though the humans were masters of the Galaxy.

But the most important reason people pay to come and eat there was and is—

*The stars.*

I guess we always come back to that subject sooner or later.

It was the only surviving holoZeiss recording of how the sky *really* looked, in the old days . . . and when I was first working at the Galaxy Palace they played it twice every standard day, lunch time and dinner time, against the huge dome of the main ballroom.

Soft starlight would shine down on the diners.

It certainly brought in the credits. It made me angry at first, the way we humans exploit the anguish of our own condition, the human tragedy . . . for a buck.

The very first day on the job, I was on waitress duty and jaunting out of the kitchen with a tray and they'd just turned it on.



The ballroom, wonderstunned, hushed as a cathedral. My eyes getting used to the dimness, and then—

Starlight stared down from a past when men had a future. Oh, god, the pain in my guts, the anger, the longing . . . *Why do we even go on? I thought. Why have children, why live?* I dropped the tray. Glass splintered. I heard it as if it was worlds away.

*My kid's going to see them the way they really are*, I vowed, as I bent down to mop up the mess. Uncle Agrippa began scolding me from somewhere behind, it sounded like a fly buzzing through the intense quiet. "I'll dock you a week's wages for this, you imbecile!"

*My kid will see them as they really are*, I swore, hopelessly, fiercely, wincing as a piece of wine glass nicked my wrist.

Day 23 of my job began routinely enough.

0695 standard metric time: woke up. Dunny woke up. Lights blazing; bed deflating rapidly, me clawing around and bumping into the wall and then rolling into a heap with Dunny; the dispenser disgorging two cups of caffoid.

I watched Dunny pull himself together. "Sheeeesh," he said, testing the caffoid with his finger.

"Hot," we said together. It was a little game. I knew what he was going to say next, too . . . and he did.

"Let's make a baby," he said.

We were saving up for one. We'd been hitched for two weeks now . . . and it looked like it might last a year or more. He was gentle. He had soft eyes, dark gray with just a hint of tangerine . . . and flame-orange hair with streaks of gray programmed into it, and the colors shifted when he shook his head. It was hard to believe that he was a cop. Or rather, a security comsim overseer—"Cops" are for the backworld azroids like Eggroll.

Then he said something different. He said, "Why don't we do it the new way, I mean, just make our own baby—mingle our genetic material and all?"

I was shocked at him. I don't believe in the newfangled, reckless babymaking that allows nature to take its course and accepts any old thing, any old one-arm-bandit combination of genes. I'm old-fashioned, I guess, coming from somewhere like Eggroll with its values and traditions. "When I get a baby," I said softly, "I'm going to *buy* one—preferably from Storkways Inc. Nothing but the best. My baby's got to have all the things I never had—"

I was being more emotional than I realized. In fact I was starting to cry and couldn't even control myself.

"What's wrong, honey?" He put his arms round me. I felt the room close in on us like the walls of the solar system itself.

"My cousin Walt was a natural," I said, "I used to watch him gangling around the kitchen. I used to get angry for him, angry at his stupid parents who trusted to the cosmic dice . . ."

I'm a good Catholic. Why, I was remote-confirmed by the Pope herself at my Bar Mitzvah. How my parents loved me! They'd saved up for years, got me from a subsidiary of Storkways on Deimos too . . . nothing but the best.

Later the commuter convoy snaked through the blackness to Mallworld, a silver sliver glinting in huge nothingness. I remember looking up and seeing one star, a reddish Mars—not a real star at that—and thinking: *Why even bother to have children, if they're going to grow up and be slaves to a power they can't even see?* And I thrust the unCatholic thought from me like a piece of dirt, but it nagged there still, like a robot salesman.

Dunny said, "Remember our date, darling. After your shift today, we're going to go monopole-skating and then we'll eat our lunch together in the simulated earthscape park. . . ." He kissed me and got out of the car; we'd gotten to the parking lot in a state of sheer somnambulism.

"I love you," I said, trying to sound tough: I didn't want him to think he'd won our daily argument. But his wanting to have a 'natural' baby disturbed me more than I could say. It went against . . . you know, there was something almost *dirty* about the idea. Even though I try to have an understanding attitude towards newfangled ideas.

Shrugging it off, I sprayed on a work smock and headed for the nearest demat-booth.

"Late, late, late!" Great-Uncle Agrippa as soon as I'd winked into the kitchen. "And today of all days!"

"But Uncle Grippie—" I saw him pacing up and down, pausing now and then to bang the counter with a rolling pin.

"Enough, enough. I'll have you know that today, today, *today*, girl, a five-tier Selespridon is coming to lunch. Lunch, lunch! Now. You and Vanessa get to shelling those malaprops at once." He paused to subvocalise a command to his rolling pin, set it to kneading dough, and raised his arms for an attendant to spray on his work clothes. Then he waved at the pile of malaprops that lay quivering in a basket. Fresh from the Selespridon home planet. . . .

I shuddered. A five-tier Selespridon! Why, even Klutharion, governor of the solar-system, was only a three-tier. I turned to Vanessa,

a round, blue-skinned woman—cosmetics, I knew a woman of *her* means couldn't afford a genuine blue skin—and said, "We'd better get going. I think he means business today."

"I certainly do!" Uncle Agrippa said. He turned his back to direct some more attendants, and the arm he'd had grafted in his back waved a finger sternly at us. He was very proud of that arm, Great-Uncle Grippie was. He could stir a cocktail and light a flambé and pour wine all at once, and the arm was removable, too.

"Sweet and sour, sweet and sour, damn you!" he screamed at a chef who was struggling into a fuzzy suit so he could pan-fry a dingwort authentically in front of his customer. "Sweet and sour, that means chocolate sauce and oranges, stupid! Don't you know the most basic of traditional recipes?" He stormed towards the demat-booth and dematted with a flurry of distraught attendants.

I looked at Vanessa in the sudden silence. We cracked up at once, then stifled ourselves.

"Well," I sighed, "let's start shelling."

Malaprops are curious creatures. They're from the Selespridar's own planet and are a favorite delicacy of theirs; and they are the ugliest things imaginable. They're a cross between a lobster, a rabbit and a zucchini, with a sort of tortoise-shell in the middle. It's the shell you have to pry off—with a knife—ever so delicately—and since they come frozen, you can just feel your fingers numbing and you can just imagine them dropping off from frostbite; and you can't get a new set of fingers with the insurance, either, it's specifically excluded for workers in alien gourmet restaurants. . . .

We got to work.

"You look fazed," Vanessa said, throwing a reddish-blotchy shell into the basket. "Had a fight with Dunny?"

I nodded.

"About babies?"

"Uh huh."

"Oh, Joni," she said. "It shouldn't bug you so much. After all, you won't be hitched forever, will you. . . ?"

She could be very annoying at times, as best friends always are. "I have no idea—" I began.

"You're in love with him, then?"

I nodded dubiously.

Just then—

A malaprop leapt up from her lap. She screamed. It pinched her hard on the cheek. She shook the thing off and it started to shamble toward the demat-booth.

"Oh my god, oh my god, it's alive, it's alive," she shrieked. I grabbed a bottle and tried to hold the thing at arm's length.

"Someone, come quickly, come!"

The malaprop shuffled round and round me. I jumped up on a chair, still brandishing the bottle. Its claws made a rasping squeak on the metal floor. I heard a crash as Vanessa fainted and crumpled to the floor. "For god's sake," I said, "someone do something!" It looked like it was about to hurl all two feet of claws, pincers, tentacles and furry paws right at my face.

A commotion. I turned around and saw some attendants come in, aimed the bottle at the malaprop's head and resumed my screaming. The malaprop sprinted to the booth with astonishing swiftness and vanished. *My God*, I thought, *how did it ever learn to operate the thing?*

Great-Uncle Agrippa was shaking me. "Damnation!" he was saying. "We're one worker down and the things not shelled yet, and this five-tier Selespridon, heir to twenty-two stellar systems or something, is going to come here—I'm through, through, through!"

"Get this woman to a medicomp," I said Calmly—I hoped—as my Great-Uncle stormed around. "And look, those things are meant to be dead, Great-Uncle Grippie! How could that ever have happened?"

"You mean a *malaprop*—"

"Yes, and it's disappeared down the demat system. It could be absolutely anywhere in Mallworld," I said, as I watched them cart Vanessa away on a gravi-stretcher.

"Well, I don't have time to deal with that now. It's only a piece of food anyway . . . look, I'm assigning you on waitress duty to the Selespridon's private table. For God's sake don't make a mess of things. It's only that we're so understaffed."

"Thank you, Great-Uncle!" I said, and kissed him. Despite his talk of understaffing, I knew he'd done it for me . . . just imagine, I'd be talking to one of the masters of the Galaxy! I couldn't wait to tell Dunny later when we went on our date.

Uncle Grippie detailed a couple of extras to help me shell; I was too squeamish to go on even though I figured the chances of *another* live one were probably very remote indeed. I stood and watched them shelling and shucking, and as lunchtime and the first rush of the day came nearer, I decided to tiptoe out of the kitchen and take a look at the customers.

As I peeked out of the little opening in the wall, I saw the dome and I saw they'd already turned on the stars. Even after 23 days it was enough to make me catch my breath.

I caught a whiff of him as I bent to serve him a goblet of genuine Earth mineral water (eighty-nine creds per half-liter). They were walled off, the Selespridon and his guests, inside a cunning arrangement of sliding, curving opaque walls. The booth was candlelit, the flames played shadow puppets against their faces—above, the stars wheeled. He smelled of musk, or something even more erotic . . . the hair rippled slowly, deep purple in the flicker. His eyes met mine for a moment: deep, dark, unfathomably alien, set into a sky-blue face. We'll never understand the Selespridar.

His name was Gdazhkeh and he really was heir to twenty-two star systems.

His guests clustered on couches. The cream of Earthling society, nodding obsequiously and sagely in unison like marionettes. There was a pleasure girl from Deimos, decked in an outrageously concealing muu-muu; a poet who declaimed between fits of snoring; an old man with eyes in the back of his head—the quadrillionaire Clement barJulian XII, who owned this restaurant and god knows what else besides.

"*Sacre bleu!*" said the Selespridon—he'd picked up a very strange accent in his peregrinations, for he'd spent twenty years in Greater Calcutta, capital city of Old Earth, among all the dirty Earthies—"you human beings are endlessly fascinating. *Scheisse!* I've brought my young son here today—he's newly adopted—on his first Grand Tour of the Galaxy. I *had* to have him confront himself with the very pangs of a civilization in the throes of being born. . . ."

I'd finished pouring, but I hung on every word. Maybe he'd even drop the Big Secret: when where the Selespridar going to release us from our bondage?

The poet was saying, "And where is your son now, Gdazhkeh? This scion of your noble race, this flower of the Galactic Masters—he must surely be a wonder for us poor mortals to observe—"

"Oh, he's back at the hotel," said the Selespridon, dunking his fingers in the fingerbowl. "I had to punish him for tweaking an Earthling's nose. So hard to inculcate the proper respect and compassion, for, you know, those less fortunate than us, *n'est-ce pas?*"

(I bit my lip and turned up to watch the sad stars, haunting me in the flickering semi-dark. . . .)

The smell of charbroiled malaprops.

"I've ordered something special for you, Gdazhkeh," said bar-Julian. "Your planetary delicacy."

"Ah," said the Selespridon, sniffing appreciatively, "how flattering! Thus do the simple folk of the simple worlds show their touching

respect for us . . . *mamma mia!*”

The waiter waltzed in. “This tray,” he droned, “is genuine sty-rofoam, salvaged from the Temple of Colonel Sanders on Old Earth.” He started to slice the malaprops and to tong them onto the plates. (As a good Catholic I objected to this mumbo-jumbo. A little self-righteously, I fingered my St. Betty Crocker medallion, a first communion gift from my grandfather.)

Lips began to smack. Skewers elevated from the table top and adjusted themselves to each guest’s feeding speed.

Just then—

A chorus of screams ran round the hall. Someone knocked the holoZeiss over and the stars swayed chaotically. The guests rose and babbled, the booth dividers were yanked up into the air, all the lights blazed on, and I saw—

Vanessa, running around the room, scuttling from table to table. An army of security clunkers clanking after her, overturning tables. Vanessa cackling wildly. Then Vanessa jumping on to a table top and throwing pieces of fruit at all the guests.

“For God’s sake, somebody stop her!” It was Great-Uncle Agrippa charging in, wielding his rolling pin. Guests clattered into corners like bowling pins.

Vanessa jumped on my Great-Uncle and bit him in the cheek. I screamed. Great-Uncle froze and fell face-forward into a tureen of soup. “See to him, you fools!” I shrieked to a couple of waiters, who dashed up to him and began to carry him out. Vanessa was still jumping up and down and pelting people with food. Finally two burly clunkers clapped metal arms around her and carried her off, still cackling like an uncooked goose.

I rushed to Agrippa’s side. Embarrassingly, the whole congregation of the human race’s elite gathered around me and I found myself in charge.

“She knocked the orderly on the head, pulled the medicomp’s plug and escaped,” a waiter said. “What’s going on?”

“Damn that damned malaprop! It’s all your fault, you . . . you master of the Galaxy, my foot,” I yelled at the Selespridon. “If you’re so clever how come you can’t even make sure a food shipment is properly dead, huh? Civilized, my foot. Get out of the solar system, get out, get out, get out. . . .” Then I started to cry.

“What’s this? A malaprop bit the woman? That’s impossible!” someone muttered, and then—

The Selespridon let out a cry of what seemed like sheer anguish. He reared himself up to his full two meters, and—visibly straining

to be calm, said: "*Mince alors!* You have to find that malaprop. *Alive.* You must. I don't dare think what would happen if you don't. The fate of twenty-two stellar systems is at stake. If it's not found, I'll personally see to it that you're all destroyed—" He paused. More coldly he said, "I apologize for this outburst. I extend my compassion to all of you. Get me security now! Summon the cops! Do something!"

What was wrong? Why was this suddenly so important to him?

Then the Mallworld police force trooped in. Uniformed cops in sparkling bodystockings, in strict formation, a gaggle of six-inch high computer simulacra hovering like a swarm of bees, an armada of clunkers beeping and buzzing and waving their metal arms.

And at the head of this impressive force—

My own hitchmate, Dunny Lorenzo!

I was confused. I like order and I didn't like seeing him without warning like this, especially after our fight.

He ignored me. "I'm on duty," he said to Gdazhkeh. "What's the trouble?"

Everyone started talking all at once. "Hold it, hold it," said Dunny. "You mean a live malaprop is on the loose and biting people who are in turning going rabid and biting other people?"

The Selespridon said, "The effects are only temporary, officer. Twenty or thirty hours at the most. But you must find the malaprop! In the meantime . . . ah, if only I had not punished my poor little child! I must find him . . . before it's too late . . . *merde!*" He strode to the nearest booth and dematted before anyone could ask him any more questions.

Dunny was barking orders and cops were filing out in all directions. I'd never seen the cops at work and I was impressed despite myself. Clunkers rolled after the men and women; many sounded as if they needed a lube job. Mallworld Security sure didn't look after its robots very well.

Then we were alone together, Dunny and I. Except for Uncle Grippie who lay in a pile of debris, algae soup dribbling down his face. I clutched Dunny's hand. "We had a *date!*" I said, unreasonably. I knew what a mess things were in, but still—

He didn't listen. I knew he was still subvoking instructions to his aides as they spread through Mallworld. "We had a date, damn it!" I said. I had had important things I wanted to discuss. Like settling the problem of babies once and for all—fixing a price limit, choosing the options, stuff like that. I wanted to get it on credit, if only it'd tie the man down for a year or two. . . .

"Well, damn you all," I grated. "I don't give a Pope's boobs about

anything anymore!" I knew it was unreasonable to expect to be noticed, but I couldn't help it. It was such a wretched day.

Dunny went right on subvoking. Overhead, the lights blinked on and off and sometimes there was half a starfield, splintering the dome in two. So pathetic looking. *We're worthless fakes, all of us!* I thought, despairing.

I picked up a skewer of malaprop and pitched it at Dunny as hard as I could. It missed, scudded across a table, and plopped to the floor. I huffed off to the nearest demat-booth in a grand funk.

. . . Found myself slidewalking down the C12 level, getting angrier and angrier. Slidewalk slung round a corner and I passed a suicide parlor with fluorescent skeletons doing a song-and-dance number in the window. In a grocery, cucumbers waltzed. The walk slithered past a head shop with a dozen heads grinning grizzlily . . . *Too many people here, damn it!* I thought. A bevy of gawkers pattered past with an entourage of auto-shopping baskets.

Trying to make sense out of the events. Why was the Selespridon so worried about a missing bit of food? What did his son and the future of his twenty-two star systems have to do with anything? And what strange chemical in the malaprop's bite was making everyone crazy and setting off this biting spree? Who had Vanessa managed to bite before being restrained . . . and how in the Galaxy were they going to locate a missing malaprop among twenty thousand shops and feeliepalaces and amusement parks and cathedrals and restaurants?

Just then—

A crowd, gibbering, jabbering, a kid snarling and biting, scattered screams, clunkers rushing out and dousing everyone with sleepitoff gas—

*That does it!* I found a booth, leapt off the slidewalk and just yelled a random letter/number at it. I breezed out of it into a chrome-glitter corridor curving upwards, bumped right into a vending robot giving away free deodorant pills—

A voice, in carefully synthesized comforting tones:

*Alert: alert: do not panic, please. Stand by for announcement. There has been an outbreak of biting madness—mordomania—which is highly contagious. The bitten victims are affected within fifteen minutes to half an hour and become violent biters. The effect is due to a chemical secreted into the victim's bloodstream which catalyses the production of more of the same until it reaches the victim's saliva. This is only temporary, repeat only temporary. Do not panic. If you*



*have been bitten in the last few minutes, report at once to a security officer. All attackers are now being restrained. For your protection, a shelter has been prepared at the neo-Amish Temple on Level Q91. All demat-booths have now been re-routed. We apologize for any delays and all bitten will be compensated on application to Mallworld Surety Co—the Insurance Company that makes you feel loved! Special rates for the discorporate! Please proceed to the nearest demat-booth in an orderly fashion for processing. Alert. Do not panic—*

A shrilling, impossible scream, and—

Stormclouds of people stumbling tumbling rumbling towards me, scrambling for the demat-booth I was in. Racing in the slidewalks, helter-skelter down the aisles. They pushed me off-balance. I hurtled backward, fingers slithering across the chromewall . . . *let me through!*

Here and there a six-inch high comsim in a pink uniform helplessly trying to keep order. Shopping bags clattered aimlessly, trying to sniff out their masters. People bottlenecking into the demat-booth, converging from every corner—

An exaltation of zonkies, spaced out on Levitol, whizzed by, daisy-chaining round the crowd while an attendant from the drug palace tried to steer them toward the booth—

*Do not panic do not panic do not panic*

*This is the worst day of my life,* I thought bitterly. I elbowed a shopping bag, stepped over a bawling brat, and dived into the booth.

The crowd exploded into the neo-Amish Temple in mid-air. The Temple was one of the seven wonders of Mallworld, a gravity-controlled 400-meters-across perfect sphere of dazzlepolished mirror metal. I didn't have much time to appreciate it. I was feeling queasy—and not only because I was a good Catholic zooming into a den of heathen vice. They were turning down the gravity to nullgrav so's to pack in the mob, and they were dropping the gravity too fast. My stomach churned as I swooshed into a fat gentleman who was twirling like a top.

*I guess it's a good idea to use this place,* I thought bitterly as the momentum whirled me into the ocean of sardine-packed people—maybe 100,000 of them—floundering, grasping at each other, vomiting in the nullgrav, writhing as they tried to navigate past each other . . . several had fainted and were just floating aimlessly. The zonkie chain, still spaced out on Levitol, were figure-eighting and obstacle-racing through a school of terrified nuns.

The din was staggering.

*Kindly stay calm please kindly stay calm please*—thundered a voice, sparking off renewed screaming.

I was just about to abandon myself to chaos when I thought I saw Dunny. A little head poking out from—yes, it was! I hurled myself against a passing nun, trying to gauge my angular momentum right, caromed off a little boy with a security blanket, careened past a woman who was chasing after her disconnected hand—

Suddenly my nose was impaling his armpit.

“Joni, Joni—” he screamed above the roar while I desperately tried to lipread. His hair was all matted and I’d never seen him so haggard. He kept trying to direct the traffic with a whistle. “This is the biggest to-do Mallworld has ever had! Do you realize there’s a megared reward out for capturing this blasted malaprop alive?”

“What’s going on?” I yelled. A boy in full skating gear pried us apart and sent us flying in opposite directions. I managed to bounce off a fat man with gray sideburns and then I threw my arms around Dunny, clinging hard to him. With all the sweat the gray in his hair was melding into the orange—“Goddamn it, Dunny Lorenzo, we had a date! Isn’t there any way we can leave this bedlam?”

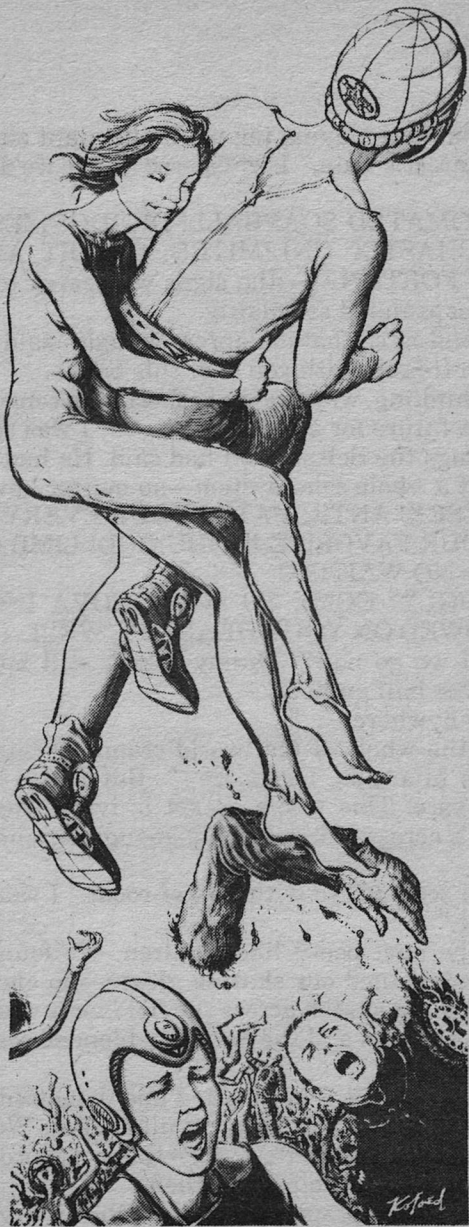
A momentary glitch in the gravity control sent the whole crowd barreling towards the walls, then released us again. I hung on to Dunny for dear life. He was saying, “I’m sorry about our fight,” or something, and I was fending off a drunk with four arms who was trying to use *all* of them on me. . . .

“I’ve had enough!” Dunny yelled. “Hold on tight! I’m supposed to be running this show, but I don’t seem to be able to do anything at all! Just hold on, will you? I’ve got a demat-scrambler—” He turned on his boot jets and we were lurching wildly through the crowd, whistling past floating people left right and center. We fairly smashed into a demat-booth in the mirror wall and—

Silence like a slap in the face.

Not the water-torture drip-thrumming of Cramp Concentration but a deeper silence. Like the whole Mallworld sucking in its breath, waiting, leviathan in repose. . . .

I reached for Dunny’s hand. After a while I heard surf-whispers from the signs in shop-windows, and I realized that they were calibrated to roar over the crowdswell and now they’d turned down their volume to save energy. The corridor glistened, rainbows darting across plastichrome. I held his hand tighter. We picked a slow slidewalk and stood still, our hands our only contact, while the slidewalk corkscrewed and merrygorounded past walls that spun and kaleidoscoped and holoads that strobed and jaunted back and



forth, over and over. . . .

We walked then.

Faster.

Ran!

Bolted like children playing tag while the giant slumbered. . . .

"This is a fantastic date," I whispered when we'd slowed down.

"Yeah. . . ."

ACME AUTOMATED SOAPBALL! DEODORIZES AS IT MASSAGES—STOCHASTIX UNLIMITED: CREDIT ALLOWED ON PROPHESED FORTUNES—the signs whispered to us, each sign a miracle of encapsulated sensuality.

"I wish we could catch that malaprop, though," said Dunny. "Then I wouldn't be in trouble with you over this baby. . . ."

"But I keep thinking, why are we bothering to consider it, Dunny, when there's no future for any kid, now. . . ." I was still enraged at some of the things the Selespridon had said. He had no right to be so callous about a whole solar system—no matter how inferior.

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IMITATE YOUR FAVORITE HINDU GOD! LIMB GRAFTS—100  
CHIROMATS—NO WAITING

ARE YOU UGLY? COME TO SOMA NOVA INC! TRADE-IN  
CREDIT ALLOWED ON YOUR HEALTHY, WELL-TUNED BODY

"Where shall we go now?" Dunny asked, still holding me. We hadn't let go after half an hour.

"Anywhere, anywhere. . . ."

I thought of the whole of Mallworld crammed into that Temple on Q91. It was hilarious, I suppose. . . . But I also wanted space, space, lots of space. This whole pocket universe they've caged us in—all 19 A.U.'s across of it—isn't big enough for one human being with a vision.

"I want to go somewhere with lots of room," I said, "or at least the illusion of it."

We ran for the next booth like children. We found a monopole skating rink and donned our skating gloves—no one to collect the rental fee—and hung-skated across the field for a while, feeling the pseudowind in our faces and the perfectly-blended scent of fresh air and salt and ozone. . . .

Soon we were tired out, so we halted and dematted and thumbed a robovender in the corridor for two milkshakes. We stood awhile for the little capsules to take effect. Soon the cool chocolate sensation was running through our veins, and then—

"Let's go to the earthscape park," said Dunny urgently. I knew

we'd end up enjoying a little more than just the view of a simulated Old Earth. We grabbed a slidewalk and raced upstream on it, giggling as it tried to reverse direction for us.

Then, through the booth again and. . . .

A forest of dendroids under a full moon. Soft howling of wolves, continuous-looped chirping of strange extinct earth insects. A dark shadow, a flurry of feathers in our faces—

"Don't worry," Dunny said. "It's just one of the ornithoids, probably an owl."

We walked on, through the Sphinx-dominated Sahara, to where the shadow of the Statue of Liberty crossed the breasts of the Venus de Milo as it swung gently under a weeping willow. A brook babbled the latest love-songs. I began to feel very romantic.

"It feels like it was made for us, doesn't it?" I whispered. I thought of the hundred thousand people crammed into the Temple, and the whole wide Mallworld all around us and only the two of us, together, alone. . . .

Dunny said suddenly, "If we save up for four standard years, we can just about buy any kind of baby you want, Joni, if we pool our two incomes. . . ."

I gave the Venus de Milo a little push—it was light as a helium floater—and watched it pendulum slowly back and forth. "But we'll have to stay hitched for four years," I said, wonderingly. "How are we going to know we want to be together that long?"

"Come on!" he said, grabbing me fiercely so that I couldn't breathe for a moment. "Can you stop being so bloody down to earth for one moment? Can you dream for a while, Joni? Just because we're in a cage doesn't mean we have to stop living, stop being human!"

I threw myself at him. "I wish it could always be like this," I said. We stepped across the brook, past a thin little tundra patch, into a perfumed garden full of rosebushes and gilded swings. A pair of white ornithoids fluttered by, cooing. Above, the simu-sky glowed cool and blue, and pretty clouds in the shape of lambs skipped merrily—a pleasant conceit on the part of the designers.

I was just about to say "Let's make love" when I distinctly heard a child sobbing. "Shh," I said, "listen, do you hear it?"

"Wait, what?"

The wailing cut across the singing brook, across the chirping and cooing of the background synthnoise. . . .

Dunny was beginning to get hot! "Look, over here, next to the simulated rose-bushes. . . ." He started to drag me over, when the wailing came again.

"For god's sake, Dunny," I said, "there's a lost kid or something around here, and we'd better help it—"

"Oh, all right. Just as the mood was perfect . . . what a day! It's just one thing right after another!"

"Look!"

There ahead of us, in the shadow of a low wall, vine-brambled and moss-mottled, was a child. Huddled under a bush, with only an arm and the top of the head showing, and already I knew what it was—

We dashed across to it to cut off its escape. It was about a meter tall, in a flowing four-tiered tunic, and purple hair that rippled in the shadowlight, and the scent, sensual, unmistakable—

"You're a Selespridon!" I blurted out. The child just went on whining as if the world had come to an end. I didn't know that the masters of the Galaxy ever cried or showed grief . . . quickly I went to the child's side and held him. He was shivering with terror.

"Well," Dunny said, "there's only one Selespridon child *in* our solar system right now . . . Gdazhkeh Junior! And his father, in between yelling on about capturing the lost malaprop, has done nothing but sit in his hotel and mutter about his son, his son, about how it may be too late. . . ."

"We've got to take the kid to his Dad," I said.

Suddenly Gdazhkeh Junior squirmed out of my arms and started shrieking in terror. "Leave me alone! Leave me alone or I'll show you!"

"Must have learned our language on his grand tour," I said to Dunny, turning, when the child began to shimmer and blur at the edges—

And suddenly he was a malaprop!

"God almighty!" Dunny groaned.

"You were the one who bit Vanessa and injected that mordo-maniac compound into her and . . . you mean, all the *other* malaprops . . . are baby Selespridar?" I said.

I mean, the adult Selespridar looked so human, it never occurred to me that they might have a metamorphosis cycle . . . I just gaped at him.

And then another, grotesque thought surfaced for a moment, but it was so absurd that I choked it back down at once. "Come on, honey," I said to the kid. "Change back, be a dear."

He did so. "Neat trick, isn't it?" he said. "My cellular structure won't be completely stable in the adult shape for another ten or eleven of your years."

"So let's have an explanation," said Dunny.

"Well. . . ." He started to cry again and I had to hold on to him. "I didn't like staying at the hotel and I was just sneaking around following my father. So I saw him on the restaurant level and I wandered around till I hit the kitchens, and the malaprops looked like a good place to hide, but—they were shelling them! My father was going to eat them!"

"Well, I think I'd better take you to your Dad now," said Dunny, who turned around to subvoke an order to the security department.

"No!" the child screamed. "I'll get eaten, I'll get eaten—"

The thought I'd just pushed aside now hit me like a sledgehammer. "God!" I shouted. "They're monsters! They eat their own children! Oh, god—"

"And I'm only two weeks old!" the kid managed to sob. "I only just came to on the river bank on our home planet and I didn't know—"

I couldn't stop to think that this was an alien creature, that there might be different motives, different feelings involved. I just knew it must be desperately frightened and it all got mixed up with how badly I wanted to have a kid and how poor we were and how we couldn't afford it and how much I wanted to give myself—

I clasped the soft blue thing hard to me, rocking it like a human mother would, not afraid that it might turn into a malaprop and bite me . . . finally, when I had gotten the Selespridon child calmed down, I started to sob hysterically myself, and I'd cried myself silly by the time security arrived.

I tried to be brave as we matted into the Presence.

A hotel room in Mallworld, I didn't know which hotel. I suppose it was much like any other room, except that I'd stayed in hotels only vicariously, through watching holovee shows. Fluted columns, delicate fragrances from a scent-varigator, a bedfloat three meters long to accommodate the extra height of a Selespridon . . . and pile carpeting woven on Old Earth itself, so I felt almost as though I were standing on a cloud. At the other end of the room, in front of a French window that afforded a simulated view of a Martian sunset, the Selespridon sat, in his own pool of darkness; his chairfloat was of beaten iridium. The air was permeated with the smell of him. A simu-breeze played with his soft magenta hair. . . . He was so beautiful, so powerful, so . . . monstrous! What sort of creature was it whose child feared to be eaten by him?

With a graceful wave Gdazhkeh dismissed the guards, clunkers and computer simulacra who had brought us from the earthpark.

That just left me, Dunny, and the cowering kid.

"Thank you for returning my son to me," he said. "*Gott im Himmel!* Your reward of one megacred has been deposited in both your names; any creditcomp will confirm it on your way out. . . ."

The kid clutched me harder.

"Now look here," I said. "We don't want your dirty money!" When Dunny started to say something I shut him up with a dig in the ribs. "This kid is scared to death, and besides, we saw him change form into a malaprop. Something very terrible is going on, and I'm not going to give you the kid! Okay, I suppose you've got a lot of power and you can probably give me a permanent somatectomy. So be it! Over my dead body, damn you!"

Gdazhkeh started to laugh.

"Well, come on, this isn't funny!" I screamed, and made a mad rush across the room. He held me at arm's length. I hadn't realized how strong he was. And the smell of him, so erogenic and overpowering, stopped me dead.

"All right, you humans. You have shown compassion, even though it is as a result of a rather ludicrous comedy of errors. I admire that." He let me go and I walked back to the other two rather sullenly. "I suppose I ought to tell you some little-known facts about the life cycle of the Selespridon species. . . ."

I listened openmouthed as he began.

"After a gestation period, we Selespridar give birth to several million tiny eggs not dissimilar to your frogs' or fish eggs. Our pregnant ones (they can be either male or female) either wade out into the nearest stream, or make use of special drains in our houses—the eggs then recapitulate, more or less, the evolutionary history of our species.

"The fact that malaprops are eaten as a delicacy on our home planet is an evolutionary necessity, genetically programmed. You see, the malaprop is the last stage before a Selespridon attains consciousness and becomes self-aware; it is therefore the last stage at which a weeding-out process can compassionately occur. The malaprops undergo a final metamorphosis, crawl up onto the dry land, and stagger into the nearest Selespridon habitation; there they are shipped to an adoption center and prepared for their entry into the civilized community. You see, just because, in our developed stage, we happen to have parallel-evolved a surprisingly similar somatic form to humans, doesn't mean that our genetic makeup is anything like the human one. . . ."

"But still!" I said. "You'd have eaten your own son, wouldn't you?"



"Of course not!" said Gdazhkeh. "*Mamma mia*, no! For the first few years of life the infant Selespridon retains a certain cellular fluidity, and in times of stress will revert to his old form. But you think I wouldn't have recognized my own son?"

"But," Dunny said, "he was afraid of being eaten!"

"Alas, yes. You see, the trauma of achieving consciousness in the river-mud and realizing who and what one really is . . . is one of the central problems of being a Selespridon. You have your human condition, we have ours. One way that many of our infants react is to cling to the earlier, more primal form. The pressures of being a sentient being all at once . . . can be very overpowering. Besides, there may be an unconscious memory of the malaprop trapping devices that proliferate in every pond and lake on our home planet. That's one of the reasons I brought my boy to your system, by the way; I wanted to get him out of the usual growing-up environment. I wanted to try to take his mind off the awareness-acquisition trauma. . . ."

"I guess you're right," I said dubiously. "But I still think it's disgusting to eat your potential children!"

"It's a genetic necessity. How would you feel about it if nature had ordained for every single ovum and every single sperm produced by your race—to reach babyhood?"

There was nothing I could say to that.

Suddenly the kid said, "Can I stay with these humans, Daddy, please? I like them!"

I looked at Dunny and said, "Well, if he's here to learn about our barbaric ways, I don't see why we shouldn't have him around for awhile. . . ."

The Selespridon said: "*Baka yaro!* You've succeeded where I've failed . . . you've made my son sympathize with an alien species! To think I punished him for tweaking an Earthling's nose. . . ."

"All it takes is a little understanding."

"Well," said Gdazhkeh. "How much more money would you like for this . . . ah . . . babysitting work?"

"You really don't understand, do you?" Dunny said. "We'd *like* to do it." I remember thinking then how *good* Dunny is. And yes, I really *did* love him.

Gdazhkeh smiled. "We have a saying—'inscrutable as a human,' " he said. "We'll never understand you people. . . ."

"Of course," I said slyly, "there *is* something we'd like . . . if you really wanted to repay us." There was a trace of bitterness in my voice.

"Money?" said the Selespridon. "Well, I daresay I can let you have enough to afford anything you want, *nicht wahr?*"

"Our freedom!" I gasped. There was a long silence.

The Selespridon came towards us quite close. With one hand he toyed with his child's hair. "You humans, you humans," he said softly. There was irony in his voice; but compassion too. "You're a promising, dangerous species. You know how many 'human' jokes are going around the Galaxy these days? Well, listen to me. We Selespridar have been babysitting various species for millennia . . . longer even. And when we see one of our babies shooting up, wayward but undeniably brilliant . . . can we help it if we are a little oversolicitous, a little overprotective? How does a father feel on the day he truly realizes his son will ultimately replace him. . . .?"

His tone was light. But somehow I was really moved.

"Because you have taught me some very important truths," the Selespridon said, "I will give you a very important gift. I want you to take the child for a few weeks, let him learn something about the inscrutable humans—but I also want both of you to come down to the Galaxy Palace tomorrow, early, before opening time. An hour or so early. I have some arrangements to make—first I must contact the Universe Outside, you understand, and get their permission, and arrange for the appropriate machines to be set up—but your gift should be ready by that time. *Capisce?*"

His eyes twinkled.

Like starlight.

*So they've turned on the holoZeiss, I thought.*

The Galaxy Palace: hushed, empty, starlit.

Above us, the stardome slowly wheeling. The milky way splashed over darkness. Just me and Dunny, waiting. . . .

A voice. Gdazhkeh's.

"I'm not here. This is a precord. I wanted the two of you to be alone here to appreciate my gift. And before you decry it, and say that it is something insubstantial and a mere symbol and totally useless . . . I would have you know that it was necessary to use up the entire mass-energy of a star as a power source, to bring this gift to you. And it is a gift that only a civilized being would appreciate; judge then, how fair I am to you, members of an uncertified race.

"If you don't mind, I can't resist a little lecture. As you know, there are an infinity of universes; the one from which we originally took you, and the one into which we have thrust you—for your own

protection—are two such. With enormous power expenditure it is possible to force open a transdimensional window, and this is what has been done with the dome of your Galaxy Palace Restaurant . . . if you see what I mean. The Dome is now a window into your former home. But don't try to break through into the other universe—the forcesshield that protects it is as impenetrable as the one that surrounds your entire little universe at the orbit of Saturn.

“I cannot give you the stars yet, *mes enfants*, but I can at least give you *hope*.”

“Listen carefully . . . you think the holoZeiss is on, don't you? But why isn't it humming?”

I was chilly and I moved closer to Dunny for warmth. There was no sound at all. I strained. No humming. This could only mean that—

*The stars! They were the real thing!*

I couldn't stop crying.

Well, the Galaxy Palace Restaurant is the only place is our little pocket universe where you can see out into the *real* universe. So you can imagine how long the line to eat there has gotten, and how much they're charging. Clement barJulian was so happy he made me a partner. Money comes easy now.

Every day, the shoppers in Mallworld walk by and they hear the same hypey holoaad screeching in their ears—

*Here's the universe! Flickersparklepinpoints dervish-dancing through darkness! Whorls, whirls and swirls of fiery stippledust! Giddy worlds wheeling on unseen strings! Starspills out of cosmic salt and pepper shakers! Frozen fireworks!*

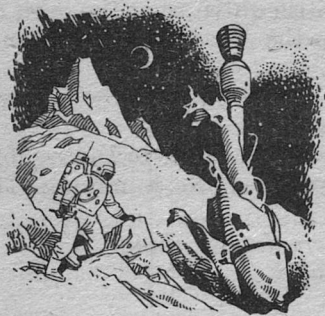
Yeah.

We bought a baby last week. We didn't even feel our budget pinch. We don't live in Cramp Concentration anymore either; we commute in from Deimos on the transmat like decent folk. I got the baby from Storkways and it really was the best baby money could buy. . . .

I brought him to work one day and held him under the stardome so he could watch. He stopped crying suddenly and began to gurgle and laugh.

You know, I always used to wonder why the Selespridon's gift was so important. I mean, it doesn't make any difference whether the stars in the Restaurant's decor are real or fake, does it? You can't touch them. You can't tell the difference. They're unreachable as ever.

I think I understand now, though.  
I think it means this—  
It isn't the past up there anymore.  
*It's the future.*



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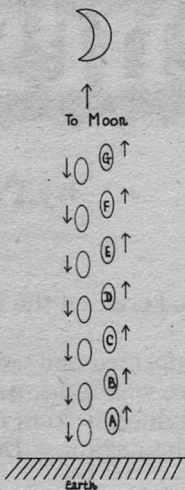
**HOF182**

# OFF WE'RE GOING TO SHUTTLE

by Martin Gardner

You live in Mars, Pennsylvania, but you work at a cheese factory on the Moon. Each Monday morning you helicop to Pittsburgh where you take an ion-powered shuttle ship to the Moon, then you return to Earth on the following Friday.

Except on holidays such as New Year's and Asimov's Birthday, a Lunar shuttle ship takes off every even hour (12, 2, 4, 6, . . . ), day and night, from the Pittsburgh launching station. Every even hour a ship leaves the Moon for Earth. In both directions the ships maintain a constant distance from one another, and their speeds are adjusted so that they arrive at each destination on the odd hours (1, 3, 5, 7, . . . ). The illustration shows a number of the ships, greatly



enlarged of course, leaving Earth, and an equal number arriving. One day on your way to the Moon you see the red port light of an earth-bound ship streak across the ebony sky like a fiery meteor through Earth's atmosphere.

"I've been counting the incoming ships," says the young lady seated next to you and by the window. "That's the seventh ship we've passed since we blasted off."

On which ship (A through G) are you riding? Try to answer this in your head without modeling the problem by moving counters across a tabletop. The answer is on page 48.



# ALTERNATE Genesis

by Peter Allen David

art: Mark S. Haskett

**I**N THE BEGINNING, God created the heaven and the earth.

2 Now the earth was unformed and void, and the Lord said, "Let there be light," and lo, there was light. And God saw the light, and seeing that it was good, divided it from darkness. And God called the light Nighttime, and the darkness Daytime; and lo, there was confusion.

3 And the Lord looked upon the earth, and She saw that there was not really much to look at. And She stretched out Her hand, and created from the seas the dry land. And to be consistent, She called the dry land Earth. And the Lord created the grass and trees, and She created the seasons, and since She already had light, She created the sun and the moon. And God looked upon all that She had created, and found it good.

4 And the Lord created the fish in the sky and the birds in the stream and lo, it didst not work, so She reversed it; and no more

creatures plummeted or drowned during the week of creation, and the Lord saw that it was good.

5 And the Lord spake unto Her creatures, saying, "Be fruitful and multiply." And so the Earth was populated by all manner of things that crawled and swam. And to give dominion over all the creatures of the Earth, the Lord created woman in Her own image from the dust of the ground, and breathed into her nostrils the breath of life; and woman became a living soul.

6 And the Lord created the Garden of Eden, with the tree of Life and the tree of knowledge of good and evil; and She spake unto the woman, saying, "Thou shalt be named Eve; and thou shalt have dominion over the Earth, as long as thou dost not eat of the tree of knowledge." And Eve was naked, and she was not ashamed, but chilly.

7 And the Lord looked upon what She had created, and lo, it was not great, but it was good for a first draft. And there was morning and evening, the sixth day.

8 And Eve spoke with the Creator frequently, and Eve was sorely troubled. And the Lord spoke unto Eve saying, "Thou hast a problem. Speak unto me and thou shalt be heard."

9 And Eve said unto the Lord, "I see that all the lesser creatures have a mate, yet I have none. I think this be not fitting for one made in thy image; and I beseech thee, Lord, to give unto me a mate."

10 And Eve then knew she had raised a sore point with the Lord, for God ceased to speak with Eve. And Eve was sorely troubled, for now she had no one to talk to at all, and she wept for many days. And all the creatures tried to comfort her to no avail; even the subtle serpent was touched to the heart by her grief. And she mourned her desertion by her Creator, and her loneliness; and Eve was inconsolable.

11 And she pleaded with the Lord but received no answer from Her, and Eve was grief-stricken. And she wished to rend her garments, but she had none, so she fashioned garments from fig-leaves and rended those. And still the Lord turned Her back to Eve and was silent.

12 And Eve's frustrations grew until she became angry with the Lord, and she reviled the heavens above. And she spake unto the Lord, "As thou hast forsaken me, so shall I forsake thee."

13 And the Lord heard and was angered by Eve's words. And She sent a storm through Eden, and the thunder roared and lightning flashed, and the lesser creatures were fearful. But Eve was unafraid, and shouted over the deafening wind, "Thou hast no motives or reasons for what thou dost. Speak unto me, and tell me why thou hast ignored me and my pleadings? Why hast thou not seen fit to fashion a mate for me? Why art thou so cold to my needs and wishes?"

14 And at last the Lord answered, and Her voice shook Eve as the Lord spoke forth: "Because frankly, my dear, I don't give Adam."



## ANSWER TO OFF WE'RE GOING TO SHUTTLE (from page 45)

You are riding on ship *D*. Try pushing counters if you don't believe it.

After you understand this puzzle, here is a closely related one, though a trifle trickier. At noon the long and short hands of your watch coincide at 12. Twenty-four hours later both hands are back at 12. How many times during the 24-hour period does the minute hand pass the hour hand?

Assume there is no "passing" at the start or at the finish of the 24-hour period. How many passes take place *between* start and finish? No fair twiddling clock or watch hands! As before, try to solve the problem mentally. The solution is on page 83.



# UNDER THE RAINBOW: ON SCIENCE FICTION IN HOLLYWOOD

by Craig Miller

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*The author, an active science fiction fan and member of the Los Angeles Science Fantasy Society, here tells us what Hollywood has been up to of late.*

I first saw *Star Wars* in a screening room at Twentieth Century-Fox a few days before it opened in May 1977. I sat in that screening room anxiously awaiting the start of the film. I had seen the slide



*Director Irvin Kershner, producer Gary Kurtz, executive producer George Lucas, and co-scripter Lawrence Kasdan gather in an ice cave on the planet Hoth.*

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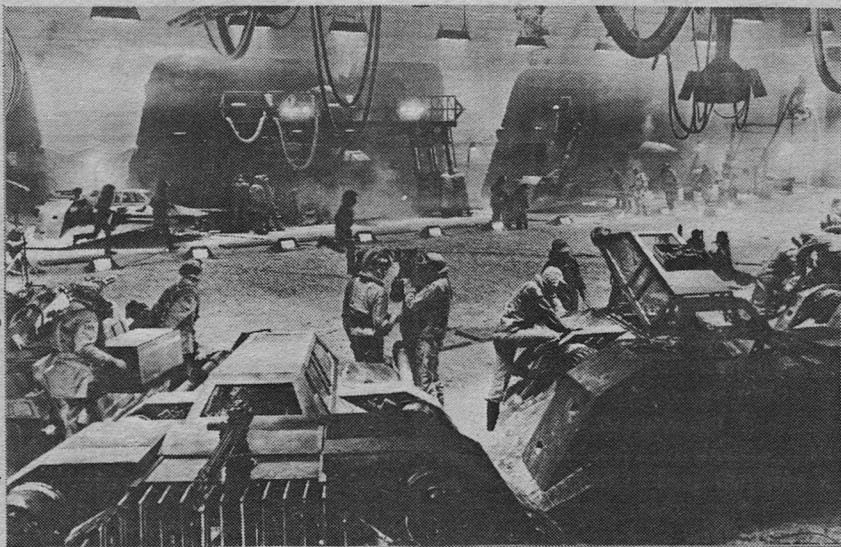
show Charley Lippincott had been taking around to the science fiction and comic book conventions; and, just like the thousands of other fans who had seen that show, deep in my heart I knew this film was going to be good. It didn't hurt that the maker of *Star Wars*, George Lucas, was also the maker of one of my all-time favorite films, *THX 1138*.

Finally, the lights dimmed, the curtains parted, and the film began. The title came onto the screen followed by the introductory crawl, with that now-immortal phrase, "A long time ago, in a galaxy far, far away . . ." After that, a small spaceship came onto the screen from behind camera, being pursued by another ship that kept coming and coming and coming and coming. My eyes widened, my jaw dropped, and I was theirs, body and soul.

I loved the film, every second of it, and saw it several more times soon thereafter. Three and a half months later, I was working for George Lucas and the *Star Wars* Corporation.

In the nearly three years since then, I have lived, worked, eaten, and slept *Star Wars*; and I'm a little tired of the film.

Don't get me wrong; I still love the film—still think it's well made, well written, and well directed. I still marvel and thrill when I look



Rebel warriors prepare for battle in their underground hangar on the ice planet Hoth.

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*Darth Vader (David Prowse), Lando Calrissian (Billy Dee Williams), and Boba Fett meet in Bespin, the cloud city.*

at clips from the film. But I just can't get *excited* about it anymore.

It's a bit like the story of the boy who gets a job in the candy store. The owner tells him he can have all of the candy he can eat, and the boy gorges himself the first day. He then spends the second day feeling miserable, and doesn't eat another piece of candy for the entire ten years he spends working there.

I became jaded.

But then, something happened that has really excited me again. . . .

## **THE EMPIRE STRIKES BACK**

The continuation of the *Star Wars* saga, *The Empire Strikes Back*, is everything that was *Star Wars* and more.

Admittedly, I'm biased. Also admittedly, this is being written in January, and the film hasn't been completed yet. But the vagaries of the publishing industry insist that I write this article-p/review

now. So, let me tell you why I feel secure in making so strong a statement.

*Star Wars* was written in the tradition of space opera. It is Sword & Blaster science fiction in the grand style of the old pulps and serials, taken to a higher level. It is the sort of movie every kid wished he could see, wished he could be in. It brought to life the collective daydreams we all had as children, and still possess.

*The Empire Strikes Back* is a continuation of the *Star Wars* saga—a further look at the themes and concepts set down by George Lucas in a twelve-part epic.

Most sequels, which are made only to capitalize on the success of an earlier film with few of the original filmmakers involved, are made by motion picture studios looking back and attempting to figure out what went right with a picture. This method usually doesn't work, witness *Jaws 2*; *The Exorcist, Part II*; and *Omen II*. However, when the original filmmakers are involved, as was the



Han Solo (Harrison Ford) discovers the best way to get C-3PO (Anthony Daniels) to stop talking.

case with *The Godfather, Part II* and *Rocky II*, the results are much better.

In the case of *The Empire Strikes Back*, not only are the original filmmakers involved, but the story for this film was conceived at the same time as that of *Star Wars*. Further, all of the elements making up *Star Wars*, *The Empire Strikes Back*, and the other ten stories are part of the vision of one man—George Lucas—who intends to see that his “collective daydreams” are captured faithfully.

A new director, Irvin Kershner, was brought in by Lucas for a fresh view of the material, and to relieve Lucas from the tremendous physical and emotional pressures of directing. Even though he did not actually direct *The Empire Strikes Back*, every element of the production, from script to sets, from editing to music, went to Lucas for approval.

This is not to say that he was autocratic in his decisions. His decisions were based on a melding of his vision and his cinematic knowledge with the expertise of his talented team.

Producer Gary Kurtz has been with Lucas from as far back as *American Graffiti*. His years of experience as a lab technician, electrician, writer, cameraman, director, editor, sound mixer, assistant director, still photographer, production manager, and producer gave him the background to coordinate the technical, logistical, and artistic needs of films of epic proportions such as *Star Wars* and *The Empire Strikes Back*. Working with associate producer Robert Watts, he hired the crew, planned out the logistics of the film, set up casting sessions, and worked on details of the script, figuring out what could and could not be done within the budget and technical expertise available. He made sure that all of the elements needed to make the film were there.

Director Irvin Kershner brought over thirty years of directing experience to the production, including such films as *Stake Out on Dope Street*, *The Return of a Man Called Horse*, and *Eyes of Laura Mars*. He also brought to the film a more stylized look, stemming from his earlier career as a still photographer. His directing background is that of the small, intimate film, dealing with human drives and needs. Combining this with the action-adventure of *Star Wars* added a more three-dimensional quality to the characters in *The Empire Strikes Back*.

The talents of screenplay writers Leigh Brackett and Lawrence Kasdan built upon the original story by George Lucas. Brackett's flair for science fiction action goes back to the days of the old pulp magazines; she was a frequent contributor to them, noted for her

swashbuckling but literate adventures. She was also no stranger to motion pictures, having written the screenplays for such films as *The Big Sleep* (starring Humphrey Bogart), *Rio Bravo*, and *Hatari!* Lawrence Kasdan is a newcomer to the field, but his ability to write strong, convincing dialogue, and to capture a personality have made his talents highly sought after. Their screenplay, and the story upon which it's based, brings to the screen once again the classic themes of good versus evil, romance, and adventure that are found in the myths and fairy tales of every culture and society. This was the case with *Star Wars*, too, and that's why it found its way into the hearts of people the world over. *The Empire Strikes Back* should do the same.

There isn't really any point in going through the entire storyline of *The Empire Strikes Back*. Instead, let me touch on some of the high points; some of the characters and elements that help to make the film memorable.

The three locations: Hoth, the ice planet; Bespin, the cloud city; and Dagobah, the bog planet, seem so real that audiences accept them as actual places. Science fiction works only if the reader or viewer is able to suspend his feelings of disbelief, to accept the incredible as credible, the impossible as possible. If a filmmaker tries to stretch that suspension too far, if he overloads his viewers' ability to accept the incredible by including too many elements of the fantastic, he is going to lose his audience. The incredible elements must be anchored to reality to give the viewers perspective. The three locations in *The Empire Strikes Back*, although obviously alien, seem natural. The audience can accept them as places that might actually exist.

It was the work of conceptual artist Ralph McQuarrie, who converted George Lucas's concepts into artwork, and Norman Reynolds, the production designer, who—along with his associates and staff—turned those drawings into the realistic settings that make much of *The Empire Strikes Back* work for the viewers.

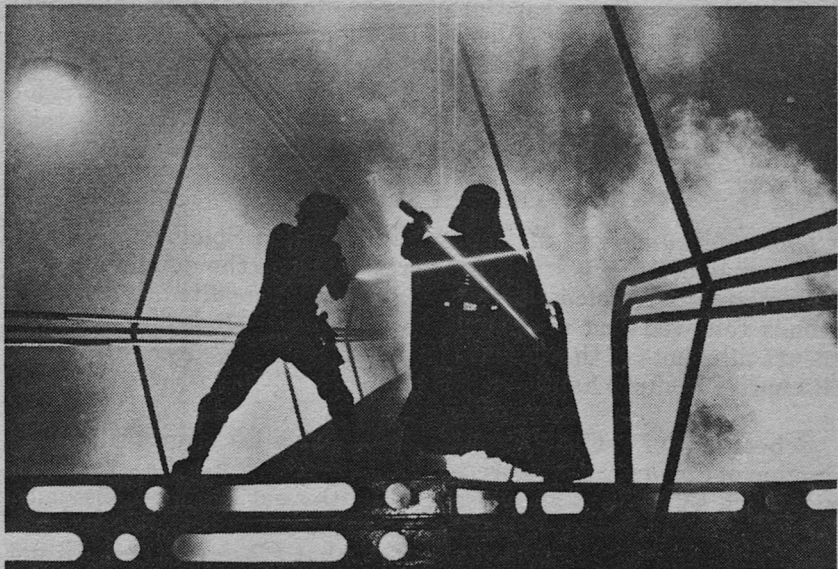
Hoth is a combination of actual location shooting (on a glacier in Norway up above the grow-line); an enormous set, decorated with several tons of salt and plastics for the appearance of snow and ice; and miniatures, used during the walker stop-motion animation sequences, which required the creation of special miniature snow that would match the look of the real snow from Norway and the chemical snow from the studio.

The design of Bespin was based on certain periods of contemporary architecture and design taken to extreme, while Dagobah is the

archetypal swamp from everyone's nightmares. So convincing was the set for Dagobah that when I walked onto it, it seemed absolutely real—as if it were a real place moved whole into the studio. The only time the illusion broke was when members of the crew came out to touch up the paint on the trees.

The special effects are once more impressive, and once more an integral part of the film. Fortunately, their use, as in *Star Wars*, is an adjunct to the story, not the story itself. Lucas and Kershner both realize that the effects must serve and enhance the film—the film cannot act merely as a showcase for technical expertise. Brian Johnson, the film's special effects supervisor, working with special effects experts such as Richard Edlund and Dennis Muren, has kept Industrial Light and Magic at the forefront of special effects state-of-the-art.

John Williams's score for *The Empire Strikes Back*, just completed at the time of this writing, is at once powerful and moving. Sections of the *Star Wars* score, such as Luke's Theme, appear again, mixed with new themes and melodies. The score is once again performed by the London Symphony Orchestra.



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*Luke Skywalker (Mark Hamill) and Darth Vader do battle in a confrontation between the good and the dark sides of the Force.*

These elements, and the talented people who brought them together, make *The Empire Strikes Back* a worthy successor to *Star Wars*.

## WORKS IN PROGRESS AND OTHER NEWS

Production is underway on *Starhunt*, a multimillion dollar science-fiction film based on David Gerrold's novel *Yesterday's Children*. The screenplay, written by Gerrold, deals with the human conflicts and interactions of the crew aboard a space-going battle cruiser. Long overdue for the scrap pile, the ship is pressed into service by the demands of an interstellar war. Held together with spit, baling wire, and the will of its first officer, the spaceship detects and pursues an enemy vessel almost certain to defeat her. The film is scheduled for release during the summer of 1981 from Grayson Productions, an independent production company.

*Superman II* is due out in July, with Christopher Reeve reprising his incredible role of Superman. Although he was an unknown at the time, and given third billing under Marlon Brando and Gene Hackman, it was Reeve's performance as the Man of Steel that saved *Superman* from disaster. Also returning are Margo Kidder as Lois Lane, Gene Hackman as Lex Luthor, and Ned Beatty as Otis. Marlon Brando has stated that he will not return. Current plans are for Susannah York, Lara (Superman's mother), to take over the task of guiding Superman on the path of Truth, Justice, and the American Way.

*Close Encounters of the Third Kind*, Steven Spielberg's science fiction masterpiece, is scheduled to return to the theaters in August. Not merely a re-release, the film has been re-edited, with some scenes removed and some new ones added. Included in the new scenes are shots of the interior of the Mothership, after Roy Neary (Richard Dreyfuss) has gone on board.

Scheduled for a Christmas release is Dino De Laurentiis's production of *Flash Gordon*. Lorenzo Semple, Jr. is doing the screenplay along the same lines as his scripts for the old *Batman* television series. While there is some talk that some of the "camp" material is being removed or toned down, I fear that *Flash Gordon* will not even live up to the old serials for dramatic content.



Also coming from De Laurentiis are three multi-million dollar productions: *Conan*, to be directed by John Milius, has yet to settle on a final (or near-final) script, and so far only the title role has been cast, with Arnold Schwarzenegger. *Dune* is in pre-production, with the best-selling novel's author, Frank Herbert, at work on a script for the film. While having been pushed onto a back burner, plans still call for a full length feature version of *Gumby and Pokey*, the clay animation characters popular during the late 1950s. Originally budgeted at 12.5 million dollars, the project now calls for an upped budget of \$17 million. The extra money is to go towards research and development of new computerized methods for doing clay animation, and to lure name actors to take on the voiceover chores.

*Raiders of the Lost Ark*, the "collaboration" between George Lucas and Steven Spielberg, is currently filming in Europe for a summer of 1981 opening. The action-adventure film is not science fiction. Spielberg is directing from a script by Lawrence Kasdan, based on an original story by George Lucas. Kasdan was co-author of the screenplay for *The Empire Strikes Back*. Lucas is executive producer, with Frank Marshall producing.

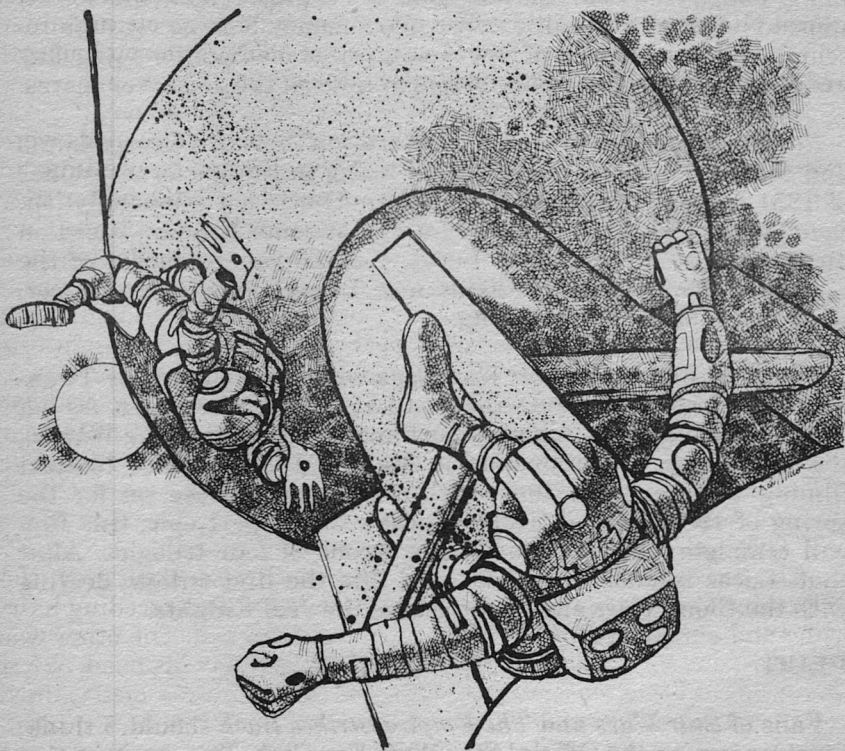
The third film in the *Star Wars* saga will be distributed by Twentieth Century-Fox, as were the first two films in the series. As yet untitled (though this author is bucking for *Triumph of the Whills*), the film began pre-production in May, and is scheduled to start filming in January of 1981, with a tentative release set for the spring of 1982. Part of George Lucas's twelve-part epic, this film will complete what is actually the second of four trilogies. After that, Lucas intends to go back and film the first trilogy, dealing with the Clone Wars and the origins of the Jedi Knights.

## PLUG

Fans of *Star Wars* and *The Empire Strikes Back* should, I think, consider joining the Official Star Wars Fan Club. This organization is operated by Lucasfilm Ltd. as a service, rather than for profit. To join, send a check or money order for \$5.00 (\$6.00 in Canada) to Star Wars Fan Club; P.O. Box 8905; Universal City CA 91608.

# COLD HANDS

by Jeff Duntemann  
art: Ron Miller



*The Combine wanted to treat Ed as property,  
arms and all. Ed didn't . . .*

Ed Graczyk sat before his easel in the cool Maine evening, painting the sunset. He had had arms once. In those days he had been a Combine employee, Combine-born. In Titan orbit he had piloted a tiny steering tug, single-handedly orienting monstrous sausage casings for filling from the Titan ramscoop, and then orienting them for the long pull to Earthspace.

Things go wrong. A leaking oxygen tank near the stern of his skeletal craft had thrown it off trim, edgewise into a soft container of endless tonnes of dirty methane. The resulting inferno had cost him a lot of skin, and both arms below the elbow.

The skin they had replaced. The arms were gone forever.

Ed painted a lot. It was good therapy. His prosthetic arms were very good: ingenious metal things which responded to swellings in the muscles in his shoulders. The more he used them the better they would respond. Still, the hands were little better than claws. They were without touch or any but the grossest motion. Ed adapted, and painted, and did software work in his little geodesic dome for a firm in Augusta. He was as content as a man who had been brought back from the dead should have been, but in the deep Maine nights he wished he could see untwinkling stars again.

Evening light would be gone soon. Dusk was robbing his canvas of its color. When Ed heard the unfamiliar whine of a turbine car on his gravel approach, he guessed that the Bipartisan Economic Combine was coming to visit him, and he was right.

"Mr. Graczyk."

"That's me."

The big car emptied itself of two men. Both wore slate grey, the Combine's color. One was a solidly-built fellow with a receding hairline and a healthy tan. He smiled as he approached. The other was shorter, and very thin, and wore a hood tossed over his head. What skin Ed could see was pale, untouched by the sun. Both men walked with the slow, cautious gait of the centrifuge-born and -raised, overcompensating for Coriolis forces which were not there. Ed put his brush down.

"I'm Herb Sussaine. Combine PR," said the smiling man. "This is Thomas Rector, Combine R&D out of Adam Smith Nexus. We're glad to see you've established yourself."

Ed grunted. "It's not what I'd like to be doing."

Efficiency had made the Combine's fortunes, and efficiency drove it. Ed's inborn talent for spacecraft course correction had put his

efficiency rating in the top one fiftieth of one percent. Without arms, he could no longer make his talents work for the Combine, and like all unprofitable employees was sent to Earth for the universal welfare state to care for.

Sussaine's smile widened. "We know. It's been a long time, Ed—how many years now? Six? Hardly seems like it. After you left us R&D realized a lot of good men are lost to disability every year. It's a shame to waste a good brain for lack of a good body. We want you back—and R&D will give you arms again."

Sussaine handed Ed a glossy plastic sheet. The instant Ed saw the complicated image for what it was—a blowup of a mechanical arm identical in all outward ways to a human arm—he knew he could never be satisfied with his Earth-given prostheses again.

"I'm impressed."

"I should hope so. This device can do anything an organic arm can do, and more. Forty-nine hydraulic levers in each hand, and sixteen more in each arm. All interlinked through a microprocessor equivalent to some of your better spacetug guidance systems, on a chip three millimeters by two. The chip is interfaced to your nervous system directly. The hands will respond as your old hands used to. About sixty thousand piezothermic diodes embedded in the plastic skin provide touch feedback to your nerves through the processor. On top of that, there will be a direct microwave link from the hands to the ship's computer. Our psychiatrists have programmed several thousand basic hand-arm actions into the ship's compiler. The computer will smooth out the kinks from coordinated hand movements when it recognizes a common function being initiated. Even better—" Sussaine pointed to the palm of the hand in the diagram. "—each hand has an 'eye' in its palm, which images in color and three dimensions, to further assist the computer in guiding your actions. Think of the advantages of working in tight spots and with very small objects! It will be like having an extra set of eyes."

Ed scanned the drawing, tracing incredibly fine wires, outlines of tiny hydraulic pumps, the minuscule power supply, the hair-fine diode sensors scattered across the palm and concentrated on each fingertip. He had been nodding as Sussaine explained the various features, and when the lecture was finished he stared into the deepening night. The other man, who had said nothing until then, tossed back his hood.

"Do you want these devices, Mr. Graczyk?" His voice was deep and very soft.

Ed looked at Rector. The man's head was shaven clean in a popular

Combine style, ghostly white behind piercing eyes. "Of course I want them. I wanted them when I saw the drawing. I don't need a sales pitch. But you can tell me what you people stand to gain by this. The Combine doesn't make a habit of philanthropy."

"We certainly do not," Rector said. "See it this way: When you pushed blimps for Titan Hydrocarbons, you saved us thousands of tonnes of fuel every year, and hundreds of man-hours of labor. What you did alone is done by a crew of three now. This project has been expensive, but if it enables you to work for us for only six years, your remarkable efficiency rating will absorb all costs. After that it will work wholly to our profit. The computers at Physiology Central give you forty more productive years at .7 G average. The savings that represents is something to consider."

Ed rose, smiling. "That sounds more like the Combine I know. Do I get my old job back?"

Rector shook his head. "We're going to try something new. You'll be flying the tanker *King Lear* in cislunar orbit, distributing liquid hydrogen, oxygen, and water to several stations and plants we have found awkward to supply by conventional methods. You'll be picking up water from the smaller stations, which use fuel cells, and giving it to the larger fusion-powered plants which generate no water on their own. Your mass will thus be continually changing, and this kind of problem has never been easy to deal with. We trust that your approximations will be better than anyone else's. Aside from your work itinerary, the contract is standard."

Ed looked at the proffered contract. "Hmmm. My signature is poor these days, and I haven't got a thumbprint."

"Toeprint will do. When can you leave, Ed?"

Ed looked away toward his little dome. "Can you wait ten minutes? I never got out of the habit of living out of a footlocker. But first . . . tell me something. Why bring a PR man along? No offense, Herb, but I know your job: You deal with these crazy Earth people. I'm a Combine man. Always have been."

Rector looked up at the first stars. Several of the great orbiting stations and plants were drifting across the sky, brilliant white points. "A precaution. Furloughed Combine employees have picked up some objectionable attitudes down here in the past. Earth can be like that, and we couldn't be sure about you. Herb could tell me if you had grown a little too . . . Earthlike."

Ed chuckled. Night was complete now, a nearly palpable darkness. "Maine is the nearest thing to space that Earth can offer. I never really left."

Ed turned and followed the gravel path back to his dome.

## II.

Barefooted and chewing a wad of gum, Ed Graczyk drifted from handhold to handhold in *King Lear's* crawlspace on his semidaily inspection tour. Docking with Golwing Nozzles Plant 7 was three hours away. Fifty kiloliters of liquid hydrogen to be dropped there, and then it was a leisurely climb to the first of three R&D stations in wide lunar orbit. Ed had the entire schedule committed to memory.

Terminal 19. Last one. Soft plastic flesh gripped the handhold while Ed considered the small hole set into a plate beneath six guarded controls. A jack. For a most unusual sort of plug.

He curled all his fingers but his second-to-last (something he could never have accomplished with their organic forerunners) and plugged the finger firmly into the hole. He closed his eyes and weighed the feelings coming in on the finger. The six monitor voltages which surfaced in Terminal 19 had become a harmony of textures, six separate sensations which Ed could only compare to running each finger of one hand over a material of distinct and different texture. The feeling of harmony was important. If any of the six voltages had changed value, a weird tactile cacophony would alert him to a misadjustment in the system. By adjusting the six controls above the jack, the sensations could be brought back into harmony, and proper operation obtained again.

The adjustments were independent of sight and hearing. Even if blinded and in a vacuum, Ed could service his ship and bring it back to port.

The six textures marched in step. Ed removed his finger from the jack and dusted his hands symbolically. R&D had done a good job. Just below each shoulder a polished steel band encircled each arm. Above each ten-centimeter strip was flesh and blood. Below each was steel and synthetic, but in the minimal light of the crawlspace Ed could see no difference.

Ahh, but when they moved—the hands did not jerk, twitch, or tremble as organic hands did. They flowed. With the ship's computer assisting, every movement of every tiny finger-segment was coordinated to the movement of the whole. And when Ed would reach for a screwdriver, the computer would recognize the action and guide the hand to graceful, perfect completion of the act.

A finger touch against a handhold sent him drifting toward the center of the ship, past a wall of grey panels, beams, and dim light-spots. To the other side of him, behind a thin steel mesh, the ship's centrifuge turned silently. He swung feet-first through the frictionless repulsion bearing at the center of the centrifuge and began the twelve-meter clamber ever more strongly downward.

*"King Lear from R&D Six."*

Ed settled himself into the control couch. "Come in, Rector. Good copy here. Just got back."

The efficiency engineer seldom wasted energy and bandwidth on video. The screen remained dark. "Our physiatrists just handed me the printout on the latest data set on your arms. They tell me coordination and reaction time have reached the expected plateau. I had hoped they might have kept on improving, but—well, they did better than we predicted. It looks as though nothing we can do will improve the hookup. Do you like them, Ed?"

Ed grinned. "Love 'em. Every sausage-bumper should blow his arms off for a set of these."

"What I should have asked: Will you be able to create that sort of rapport you once had with your spacecraft through the prostheses? That rapport is crucial to regaining your efficiency rating."

Ed flexed plastic fingers on the couch arm. "It's not a matter of 'through' anymore. One way to define machinery is that it's 'out there', and I'm in here." He thumbed at his head to a blind vidicon. "The hands aren't 'out there' anymore. I can think with my fingertips again."

Rector's soft voice sounded pleased. "That's a good deal better than we had hoped. With all your data in, we've gotten most of the glitches out of a mechanical leg and an entire lower torso-leg combination for double amputees. We'll probably never lose a good man to a disabling accident again. What's your ETA at Golwing?"

"Mmm . . . hundred thirty-eight minutes, unless I decide to fine tune again."

"I got a request from Plant Manager Pilsen up there. He's heard about the project and wants to see your hands. Golwing's a fair-risk plant and has its share of disabling accidents. Interest in this sort of thing is high over there. You have the usual half-hour contingency time you never need. Pilsen wonders if you'll stop in for a 'small demonstration.' I told him I would ask, but I warn you, half the plant will be there to gawk."

"Tell him I'll do a video show for the whole plant. Nobody gets left out that way and I get an excuse to stay in here."

"Good. I'll relay. Rector out."

Golwing Seven hung above a waxing Earth, bright steel in the sunlight. Ed watched it grow on his screens. The plant was a thousand-meter cylinder girdled by two centrifuges rotating in opposite directions. Docked at both ends of the cylinder were a scattering of freighters and supply ships. *King Lear* was approaching from the "north" or receiving end. A small pockmark in the wide expanse of shadowed metal was winking at him with its docking strobes. Ed would insert *King Lear's* nose in the center of the docking collar, and automatic pumps would withdraw the proper amount of the proper fuel from *Lear's* huge tanks.

It was not a difficult maneuver. A computer could do a fair approximation, but Ed's courses invariably saved time and fuel.

The docking collar slowly grew to a bright-rimmed hole with a blinking eye in the center. Ed peered at the screen and rubbed his eyes with one hand. Something looked wrong with that collar. There was a dim trace of grey in one side of that central hole.

The scene grew dizzily as *Lear* bore down. The course programmer fired another set of braking blasts. When the exhaust gases cleared away, Ed saw what was wrong with the collar: a suited human figure was curled inside.

Ed hit three buttons and touched his throat mike. The braking jets fired again. "Golwing, there is somebody in my damned docking collar! What are you going to do about it?" He was less afraid than furiously angry. The laws of physics did not forgive such idiotic behavior.

The com tech was incredulous. "Confirm your message, *Lear*: 'Someone is in my docking collar.' Is that correct?"

Ed was sweating. "Don't question my sanity! There is a body curled up around the docking strobe of my collar. A million tonnes of tanker is going to plug into that hole in one minute! *What the hell are you going to do about it?*"

"We can't do anything in a minute. Stop your approach with the full emergency brake program. We'll send out a detail."

Ed saw the scene in his mind: *Lear's* nose jets a small sun, throwing a six-gee reaction forward toward the collar. *Lear* would stop in ten seconds. And the detail would find a greasy ash in the collar.

Ed reached to one side of his console and fired a signal flare directly in the course of *Lear's* travel. The flare struck the plant's plates a meter to one side of the collar. It flared brilliant red for a moment and was gone.



The last of the braking jets fired. *Lear* coasted slowly toward the collar. The figure shifted in the collar but remained. Ed fired two more flares. At such close range, their concussion must have been heard throughout the plant.

Then the figure moved. In the last seconds to docking Ed watched it clamber up to the edge of the collar. Then the bulk of the ship hid the collar from view. The scene remained in Ed's mind: a human being climbing frantically over the collar's ring of extended docking fingers . . .

*Chunnnnnnnnnnnnnnnng!*

*Lear* heaved back and forth for several seconds as the ring absorbed the last of the tanker's momentum. Then, red lights flashed on the Unplanned Occurrences board. The computer sized up the situation:

FOREIGN OBJECT WEDGED BETWEEN DOCKING FINGER NINE AND DOCKING COLLAR. DOCKING INCOMPLETE.

"Christ," Ed muttered as he scrambled madly up the ladder toward the airlock.

Less than a minute later, in a special emergency suit that left his plastic hands ungloved, Ed blew the emergency hatch near *Lear's* nose and bore down on the docking ring. Filling his helmet were screams, throat-racking screams.

The screams of a young woman.

Ed hit the plates feet-first where the woman was trapped, a husky spring-puller in his hands. The woman's left leg was crushed between the jointed docking finger and the mating groove on *Lear's* nose. Air was silently issuing from her ruptured suit, mingled with tiny spherical droplets of red which soon froze cold pink.

Ed braced his feet against *Lear's* nose and jammed the spring-puller into the breakaway spring mount. He pried violently to one side. The finger hesitated, then with snapping release gave way and swung outward.

Ed threw the spring-puller away into the void and began unfolding a transparent casualty bag. He stuffed the screaming, thrashing woman into it as though she were a load of laundry, and pulled the pin on the attached cylinder of air. The bag expanded to a fat pillow which rapidly frosted over on the inside.

Pulling his burden by a corner, Ed tramped across the plates on magnetic soles to a cast-wide hatch from which the detail had begun issuing. Ed waved them aside with what looked like a hand exposed

to the vacuum of space. Ed pushed the bag ahead of him into the lock and climbed in after it.

When pressure rose in the lock and the anteroom beyond, he heard her screaming: "I want to die! Let me die, damn you!"

Helmet tucked under his arm, he watched medics anesthetize the girl and struggle to reassemble the crushed knee joint and shredded muscles surrounding it. He knew before they began the incision with blue-hot laser pencils that they would have to amputate. Ed had been that way before.

The plant manager approached him, a hunted-looking little man with shaven head and sunken eyes. "Mr. Graczyk, that was incredible. You had her in the bag before we could get a crisis team suited up and out the door. It must have been your hands . . ."

"Shut up," Ed snapped, turning on the man. He had begun to tremble so hard he almost let his helmet slip away from him. "How many more potential suicides are working for you? How long will it be before somebody decides to detonate a few ounces of pyroform under his mattress and sets half a centrifuge on fire?"

Pilsen looked down. "She was on probation."

"And now she's off. It almost cost us my tanker. And a lot of machinery on this end of your plant. If it had, she wouldn't have been the only one out of a job."

Ed looked back toward the girl. The ruined leg was gone, the stump covered with a plastic cocoon. The medics were wheeling her away. "There's still lots of ways to die, love," he said under his breath. "Lots."

### III.

Out beyond Saturn, Ed's arms were burning again, his entire body wrapped in fiery hell. He thrashed in the void, but the flames would not go out. It was worse than fire; it ate at him to the center of his bones. It stung every blood cell moving through his veins. Fire, he was on fire and falling slowly into the Sun. . . .

Ed Graczyk awoke. But the fire was still there.

He stared at his hands. From the nerves inside the stumps of his arms he could feel the fire coming, creeping in consuming waves from his plastic fingertips to the center of his brain. He twisted the hands around, and stared into the little black spots set into the centers of his palms: his hands' eyes. He almost thought he could see tiny flames flickering inside those dark circles.

Then the fire went out. From the comm console beside his cot, Rector spoke to him.

"Ed, you're awake. What's the matter? We thought we'd never rouse you."

Ed stared at his hands, then looked to the comm console. "You did that? I thought they were going to eat me alive!"

The efficiency engineer spoke calmly. "We rang buzzers, flashed the cabin lights, had the computer sing songs you hate. Nothing worked. You stayed asleep."

Anger roared up in him, like the flames he had felt licking his guts. "So? What if I decide I want another hour's sleep? I don't think I've ever missed an inspection tour in my entire career."

"It's not in the contract."

"It's never been in *any* contract I've worked under."

Rector said nothing for a long time. "Ed, your contract specifies eight hours sleep per duty period. The itinerary spells out retiring and rising times. It's all there. You signed it."

It was said coldly. Ed forced himself to be as cold. "A contract is an agreement specifying conditions to be met by the contracting parties. I agree to guide this ship to specified points at specified times and do specified tasks along the way. That's my job. You supply my pay. That's your job. I have never derelicted my job. You have not derelicted yours. We, both of us, have kept that contract."

"The itinerary is part of the contract."

"Getting up at 06:00:00 is *not* a part of my job!"

"No, Ed, not quite that simple. Your job is to maximize output for given input. That is the job of every person who works for the Bi-partisan Economic Combine. Human function is an equation with a very large number of variables. Some of those variables we leave up to you—course correction, obviously. If we could do that better than you we would not pay you to do it. Other things—diet, sleep schedules, rest schedules, work schedules—have been plotted very precisely according to your biorhythms. We have men who specialize in such things. We have entire departments devoted to nothing but optimizing sleep schedules. We assume they can do their job better than you can. Or we would not have hired them."

"I'm tired," Ed said. "The Golwing incident shot my nerves."

"There are drugs for that in the medconsole."

It was true. Ed nodded, feeling sheepish. He had never thought of it. Before his next sleep period he took a double tranquilizer, and awoke five minutes late with flames engulfing his dreams. He retched from the pain until he remembered to point the palms of

his hands toward his sweating face.

"What the hell do you think I am!" he roared at Rector.

"You're a Combine man. You work for a living. You maintain a high level of competency in keeping with your salary. You forgot to set your alarm."

That, too, was true, but Ed's anger got the better of him. "Fold it five ways, Rector. I'll take a burn-specific before I turn in."

Without warning it struck, for only a moment: a resonance of absolute agony ringing up and down his entire nervous system, as though he were a bell struck by a red-hot hammer, echoing until he wished for death. By the time he could scream it was gone.

His arms tingled coldly, well up into his shoulders. Ed looked, unbelievably, at the palms of his hands. There was warning in Rector's words:

"We will accept your resignation at any time."

Ed had to bite his lip to keep back what he was thinking. If the hands could watch, they could probably listen as well.

*You'll have my resignation, but not the way you think!*

#### IV.

*Lots of ways to die*—the thought came to Ed often as the days passed. It came on the heels of the crazy dream that made him feel alternately exhilarated and ashamed. Rector was wrong in assuming that Ed Graczyk was the same man who had once nudged methane blimps around the solar system. Still, Ed told himself that he *was* a man, and deserved better.

Indecision made his mouth dry while he browsed through *King Lear's* engineering manuals. He had done that often before, simply for curiosity's sake, to be better acquainted with his ship. Now he was looking for something, nothing in particular, but he knew that it would announce itself when he found it.

One evening, the crazy dream crystallized on the page of an engineering manual, and left Ed with an agonizing decision. To betray the Combine by his own hands—

He swore, and then laughed. His hands would have nothing to do with it.

Several times each day Ed left the centrifuge for various parts of the ship. To re-enter, he had to pass through the center of the two-meter diameter frictionless magnetic repulsion bearing which held the rotating centrifuge away from the stationary ship's core. It was

an automatic action: reach hands into the meter-wide opening, grasp handholds there, and swing body with a clockwise twist into the rotating tunnel within. Ed began adding a new, strange action to the procedure.

Each time he swung his body into the tunnel, he pulled his mouth up against the line where the rotating bearing met the stationary core. With his tongue he pressed a wad of chewing gum into the five-millimeter gap where intense superconducting magnetic fields held the two surfaces apart.

Some weeks later, Ed woke from a deep sleep with crawling nausea wrenching his stomach. Another slow, slithering lurch threw his body against its sleep tethers. A low, nearly subaudible moan came down to him from the center of the centrifuge, and his nose picked up the acrid smell of burning insulation. Moments later the malfunction alarm began sounding, and Ed was climbing out of his cot, trembling all over. No going back now.

He did not have to feign grogginess. Rector's thin, peering face met his at the comm console. It was not like Rector to be using video. Ed felt himself being scrutinized.

"Ed, the centrifuge bearing is beginning to seize up. We don't know what, but something leaked into the gap. Shut down the centrifuge and get on it."

Ed waved a wordless salute. He leaned over, ripped the cover from a guarded switch, and threw it home. As though some velvety hand had grasped the rim of the centrifuge, it slowed to a smooth halt. Ed heard the emergency flywheel coming up to speed with the angular momentum from the centrifuge. His weight lifted away from him, and he gripped a handhold while trying to shake himself awake. Eddy currents induced in the moist chicle had heated, dried, and eventually hardened it until the heat of friction made it burn. Ed had made odds with himself that the coolant control circuitry feeding the superconducting magnets within the bearing would not be able to respond to such an impossible situation, and he was right. It was hard to suppress a smile as he read to Rector a list of microcircuits which had overheated and burned out.

"Fix those microcircuits *first*," Rector was saying. "If too much of your coolant bleeds off as gas, you won't have enough to go around. The computer won't work without it."

Ed tried to look worried, but the only thing worrying him was how to make the rest of his liquid helium coolant boil and bleed off into space. He headed for the tool locker.

§ § §

Every part of Ed Graczyk was shaking except his hands. This was a new Ed, one he himself had never suspected could exist. To damage his own ship . . . he shivered, but continued tucking tools into a belt kit. Only his hands didn't know what he was doing. Smoothly, expertly, they executed their motions. Almost by themselves. Ed swallowed hard. The hands did not share his pangs of conscience. Ed finished filling the kit, and clambered barefoot up a crawlspace to Ship's Circuitry.

Circuitry itself was a crawlspace of sorts: a narrow channel between wide walls of hexagonal panels, each dimpled with reactionless bolt wells and printed with a large code number. Ed drifted between the walls, pushing with his fingertips against occasional handholds. Part of his mind was unhurriedly looking for panel VV47. The rest was steeling itself to what it intended to do. The arms were controlled by the ship's computer. The computer had to go. Once it was gone, the computer on Ed's shoulders could take care of the last step in his plan.

The computer was helpless without its main memory, stored in superconducting magnetic bubbles frozen into hair-thin sheets of tellurium. Ed's trick with the gum had caused a good part of *Lear's* liquid helium to be lost. It hadn't been enough, as Ed had more than half expected. There was another way.

A last finger's touch slowed and stopped him in front of panel VV47. All coolant controls, including main memory's, were behind that one panel. He only had to reach for a tool with one hand, steady himself with the other, while he . . . did what he had practiced so often in his head.

Quickly, smoothly, he plucked the little reactionless bolt driver from his kit and shoved it into one of the hexagonal wells in the corner of the panel. Through his hands he felt the socket inside the driver's nose fit over the head of the bolt in the well while the outside of the nose gripped the sides of the well. One hand easily squeezed the two halves of the handle together, and the bolt came loose.

The computer tie-in, as always, was working very well. Ed felt he need only begin the operation, and the hands would take it from there, almost automatically. They plugged the driver into the second well, squeezed, and repeated the operation for the other wells without Ed having to think about it. Ed was sweating heavily. He could feel drops growing on his forehead, fat drops with no place to fall.

With a grace that was almost poetry, Ed's hands pulled the panel away and stuck it to a velcro patch nearby. Four eyes peered into the crowded space behind the panel. Stack upon stack of tiny mi-

circuit boards filled the half-meter-wide hole. A sour taste of tension came into Ed's mouth. Nothing but circuit boards. No fat bus lines, no husky switching diodes, none of the components that his memory told him were also behind VV47. The manuals had betrayed him in his own betrayal. And the centrifuge bearing was still full of chewing gum.

*Lots of ways to die, he thought, and I bet they know some I don't.*

He closed his eyes, forced panic away, and hoped his hesitation would not be noticed by Rector and the hands. When he opened them he found himself looking at the panel immediately above the one he had opened. It read: VU47.

Something in his subconscious started screaming: *A U can look like a V.* It was there, only one panel away. Perhaps a quick check; preventive maintenance? Hardly; that was what computers were for. It would smell like a month-old egg. That left only the hard way. And he had better start soon.

The reactionless bolt driver was hanging in the air where he had parked it. Ed reached into the hole without hurrying and pulled a stack of boards free of its connector. As it came loose, he let his elbow nudge the driver gently upward.

Ed glared at the drifting driver as it approached his face. He wondered if his hands could hear as well as see. He leaned toward the driver, checking to make sure his palms were down. *Now I have to keep them that way.*

When his lips brushed the driver's handle, Ed inhaled sharply. He caught the tool in his teeth and worked it around so that he could work the thin split handle between his jaws. Ed bit down, felt it turn easily. The bolts would give him more of a fight.

Two intricate tasks to do at once. Madness! Ed wanted to laugh, but the driver filled his mouth. He peered down past the driver to the stack of circuit boards in his hands. The hands knew what to do. Ed privately thanked the Combine's psychiatrists. He started the hands on the action of unclipping the boards from the stack connector. The hands recognized the action and took over. While the stack came free like a deck of cards, Ed leaned forward and plugged the bolt driver into the first bolt-well on panel VU 47.

He bit down hard. The effort made his molars ache, but the bolt came free with a snap. Two more squeezes removed it. He hoped the hands would not notice the lurch as he swung his head to one side and plugged the driver into the second well. That bolt gave up easily.

His hands were smoothly riffling through the freed boards. Ed watched with one eye and half his mind. He was already maneu-

vering the driver to the fifth bolt well when the proper board appeared. Ed cautiously directed his hands to the belt kit, where they removed the replacement microcircuits and an insertion tool. Simultaneously he jabbed for the fifth well, missed, and then plunged it home. He bit down. Nothing. Another hard bite met only solid resistance and a spreading ache in his jaws. Ed glanced down and helped the hands place the insertion tool over the first bad circuit. All the time he was working the tool further back along his jaw for more leverage. Ed tensed himself and clenched his jaws in a tremendous spasm that was all he felt he could exert. The bolt released, the driver slipped, and Ed bit down hard on his tongue.

Tears welled up in his eyes, and even the hands paused. Ed tasted blood, and swallowed hard. Bad time to scream, and with the driver in his mouth he might choke. His hands effortlessly removed the bad chip. They positioned the new chip and snapped it into place. Ed felt desperation growing with the pain in his mouth. He jabbed the driver into the last well.

And knocked it out of his mouth.

First, panic. Then came the flood of cool analysis that had made him what he had been, once. *No space mechanic ever lets his tools get away from him.* Rector knew that. Convection currents could make a tool start drifting away. Ed casually reached out his left hand, snatched the driver, and parked it near his shoulder with just enough drift to carry it toward his face. Ed sucked the tool into his mouth and positioned it with a burning tongue. He had the second bad chip out and was positioning the new one. Quickly! Ed forced himself to be calm and inserted the driver into the last hole. The bolt resisted. He noticed a thread of blood and saliva creeping horizontally out of one corner of his mouth. Ed bit savagely, and felt the ragged crunch of a bicuspid chipping against the hard plastic of the driver's handle. The bolt gave way.

Ed simultaneously restacked and clipped the boards and pried the newly freed panel up and out of the way with the metal shank of the bolt driver. The hands knew what they were doing. Through tearing eyes Ed looked at the newly exposed circuitry.

It was all vaguely familiar. Several aluminum bars carried heavy currents to and from the cooling and pumping units handling the liquid helium which cooled the computer's main memory. It had to be the *right* one, and the decision would have to be made in seconds. The proper bar carried a harmless six hundred amps at five volts, but there were bars carrying two and three hundred volts. Which, which . . .



An inquiring buzz arose in the nerves of his arm-stumps. Rector had sensed something going on. The hands snapped the board stack back into place. The buzz turned into a rasping burr on the edge of discomfort. Ed's anger boiled over.

*Now!*

Ed clamped his eyes shut and plunged his head forward toward what he hoped with all his heart was the right bus bar. The steel shank clicked against the bar and the tip brushed the frame.

A small explosion echoed in Circuitry. Sparks burned Ed's face and closed eyelids. The driver was welded to both bus bar and frame, sizzling and arcing. The lights around him dimmed. Many went out altogether. Alarms began to wail in the distance.

"Go to hell!" Ed screamed at the alarms, and threw a screwdriver away into the gloom. He heard it caroming from one panel to another.

As though in answer, the hands began to devour him. Lightning coursed down his spine and ate its way back up to the base of his brain. Ed screamed. Molten lava was streaming out of his hands into his shoulders, flowing down to settle in his lungs and diaphragm. Tiny jaws were tearing at every muscle in his body. He curled himself into a foetal position, thrashed blindly between the walls, felt his heels dent the thin metal panels. A fiery yellow cloud congealed at the center of his brain and began eating its way outward, devouring his consciousness as it went. *Kill me, then, and waste your damned expensive hands!* he thought through electronic agony.

The pain gradually died away. Every muscle in his body ached at its passing. Ed shook his head and slapped his cheeks to clear his mind. Was the computer finally dead? It had to be! But the hands maintained a coarse rasp that pulsed every so often into pain. He knew what they were telling him: *Go back to the centrifuge.*

Rector's face was at the comm console, angry.

"Sabotage of Combine property is a capital offense, Ed. You'll probably have to prove insanity to save your life now."

Ed's tongue lay thick in his mouth. He swallowed blood. Speech was painful. "Shove off. I've never been saner in my life. If you decide to kill me, I'll just crank open a hatch . . ."

Ed saw the foolishness of that. Rector was impassive. "I doubt that."

Ed shrugged. "So I didn't kill the computer?"

The small shrewish face never showed hatred; Ed thought it had grown more intense. "Main memory lost cooling, and blanked when

the plates went ohmic for lack of helium. We will beam back what was lost after you've replaced a few more parts."

"Then why do the hands still work?" Ed flexed his fingers. The strange expertise provided by the computer was gone, but they followed orders, from both Ed and his employers.

Rector smiled. "They have an independent radio link to R&D through the Cislunar Repeater Network. We put more into those hands than we mentioned. Now get to work."

The hands pulsed one hot pang for emphasis. Ed's eyes watered, and he turned away from the comm console.

For two days Ed worked without daring to scratch his nose. He knew the Combine had a five-man crew watching every move he made, each with his own individual pain button. Ed had felt it more than once. Sometimes it made him smile. They were frightened of him, based on what he had done. It was a shame he could do nothing more.

He had been a careless saboteur. With a little more planning it might have worked, and he could have been on his way to the Iron Republic of Mars. For bringing in the *King Lear* he could buy citizenship and a thousand hectares of land—not that he wanted or needed the land. The Iron Republic had nearly as few spacemen as it had ships. Even if Ed had only his nose to guide a ship with, they would let him stay in space.

Now, after repairing his ship, he would report to Curie Station, be arrested, tried, and probably executed. He continued to work only because work was as much a habit as living.

"You know, Rector, I think you're as crazy as I am," Ed said once before beginning a short sleep period. "You spent a fortune making me three-quarters of a superman, and then drove me insane with the fine print of a contract. Is a contract worth the life of a good worker?"

Rector answered without video. "You're not insane, Ed. You're an Earthman. Earthmen don't respect contracts. And contracts are the only things that make the Combine work."

Before dropping into sleep, Ed thought: Yes, he is absolutely right.

Sweating heavily, Ed removed the last bolt from the top plate of the superconducting memory unit. A hiss of helium gas sang around the loosening gasket. Ed pried with a screwdriver. A last gasp of gas, and the lid swung upward.

The unit was a Dewar flask filled with microscopically etched tellurium, chilled to zero resistance by liquid helium. The temper-

ature controls had been ruined, and the unit could not keep itself colder than one hundred degrees Kelvin. Still, a blast of arctic cold met his face as Ed sized up the huge squat pressure tank. The tellurium sheets were arranged like the spokes of a sparkling wheel around the hollow at the center of the tank. That was the liquid helium reservoir, empty now. Thirty centimeters down were the ruined controls.

Ed pulled some tools from his kit and parked them in the steaming air over the reservoir. Pliers in hand, he leaned over the empty space and peered downward. He backed off very quickly.

Wobbling up to meet him was a half-meter bubble of liquid helium.

Ed gasped in surprise. It was the last of several thousand liters of helium which the device was meant to contain. Most had boiled into gas and had bled off into space. The bubble rose on convection currents, cloaked in a veil of condensing water vapor and atmosphere gases. It started to bubble and froth as heat from the air reached it. As much as Ed had depended on liquid helium for computer functions, he had never before seen it. The cold air biting his cheeks seemed almost hot. Cold could destroy as well as flame. Better.

Ed screamed a choking scream of defiance, and plunged his arms to the elbows into the sphere of deadly cold.

Instantly the fires began, roaring out of his arms to wrench and twist his body in unbearable agony. He screamed again, biting his wounded tongue, but focused every jot of concentration in his body on keeping his arms within the steaming bubble. His legs kicked involuntarily. His whole body throbbed to the tune of pain the hands were playing on his body. He closed his eyes and tried to shut out the pain, and kept thinking: *Die, freeze, die!* The yellow cloud of oblivion began to condense in his head again. He could not allow that to happen. *Die, damn you!*

The feeling crept in from his fingertips: a crawling numbness that devoured the pain which was devouring him. It spread up the tiny golden wires and steel shafts inside the hands. The fingers twitched and twisted for a moment as sudden superconductivity sent false pulses racing through freezing motors. He saw the hands bend in a grotesque clawlike position, and freeze.

The pain was gone. Only cold numbness remained. Ed was breathing fast as he pulled his hands from the boiling helium and stared at them. The pink plastic was frozen a brittle white. Quickly, quickly!

The bubble, much smaller now, had drifted off to one side. Ed

raised his right arm over his head, and brought it down as hard as he could on the edge of the thick-walled memory unit. The arm cracked off and continued downward, smashing the delicate tellurium plates. Bright fragments tumbled about in the air. He raised his left arm and brought it down even harder. It shattered into several pieces, which caromed off the memory tank and hit his face. They burned him with their coldness.

Ed stared at the jagged plastic stumps steaming on the ends of his arms.

He was free.

## V.

Ed laughed. They were offering him amnesty in return for the *King Lear*. He had held a video two-way with Rector and Sussaine, the Earth-specialist PR man, for more than twenty minutes. Behind them Ed could see the computing machinery and grey-uniformed tacticians of a Conflict Center. Ed realized grimly that the Combine was a lot for one unarmed man in an unarmed tanker to take on.

But after thinking for a moment, he stopped worrying.

"Come on, Herb," he told Sussaine, who was doing all the talking. "The moment I step clear of my ship I'll get a twenty-one gun salute right through the head. And while we're talking promises I'll make you one: As soon as whatever you have tailing me gets within boarding range I'll blow myself up. Seventy percent of my mass is liquid hydrogen, kerosene #3, LOX, and assorted hypergolics. I'll make a nice fireball, and do my damndest to take any followers with me."

Sussaine tried to look smug. "We have three S-class Greystingers on an intersecting course. Their laser cannon are lethal at two hundred kilometers."

Ed shook his head. "Greystingers chasing old *Lear*? Let's do a little Combine arithmetic. I've been boosting at a constant quarter-G for almost four hours. I have enough fuel to do that almost forever; hell, I'm *all* fuel. Bringing a Greystinger up to Battle-Green takes two hours, and for three ships costs maybe ten percent of what I'm worth. To catch me with that head start would take two solid strapon boosters per 'stinger, at a cost of another ten-percent per booster. Paying a 'stinger crew battle grade for a week is another ten percent of *Lear's* net value. Fuel, wear, and refitting the 'stingers after a long chase would probably be another fifteen or twenty percent. Right there you've already got 120% of what my entire ship and

cargo are worth. The Combine would sell its own mother to make a profit, but your contracts forbid you to incur a penny's loss for revenge. That's listed as a 'Nonproductive expense, never justified,' Article IV, Section 14, Paragraph 141 of the General Contractual Regulations. Give up. You lose. I win. Admit it."

Sussaine's face reddened. "You're not going scot-free . . ."

"Stand aside, Herb." Rector pushed ahead of the PR man and looked wearily at Ed. "It'll be a long time before we trust an Earthman again. Yes, you've won. The course you're following is optimal to several decimal places, and you did it in your head. You will get to Iron Republic space hours before we can do anything about it. We lose, and I'm in trouble. It won't happen again." Ed saw Rector begin reaching to terminate the connection. Herb Sussaine caught his arm and pushed back in front of the video pickup.

"Graczyk, you don't have any arms! How in hell do you expect to fly a tanker all the way to Mars?"

Ed chuckled. "Ask Rector," he said, and switched the screen off with his big toe.

Ed sighed and spun his chair around with his other foot. The centrifuge was turning again, more slowly, but enough to keep him comfortable in the long weeks ahead. His stumps were beginning to hurt and his tongue still felt twice its size, but *Lear's* medconsole would keep him alive long enough to reach Republic space.

His course was perfect. Now there was nothing to do but kill time following it. Ed would be doing a lot of painting before he reached Mars. He slouched in his chair and picked up a brush with his toes. With his other foot he squeezed a bright orange worm of paint onto his palette.

On his easel was the canvas he intended to present to the President of the Iron Republic of Mars upon his investiture as a citizen: A study of Venus de Milo in a space helmet.

Ed Graczyk got to work.



# THE DAY OF THE TRIFLES

by Jon L. Breen

art: Karl B. Kofoed



*After concluding a busy summer playing full-time professional writer (kept from the grindstone only by a one-week vacation cruising in Alaska), the author is now back at the Rio Hondo College Library preparing to teach a course on how to do legal research. He is also going to give a talk at the Bouchercon (a convention for mystery fans) in October. He adds that his wife Rita and he try to get to England every other summer to visit her family, and he hopes that—in spite of this story—he will be allowed back in the kingdom.*

It seems odd to speak of the coming of the Trifles, for of course they were always there. The trifle was a popular English dessert over many years, though trifle-making never reached the proportions of a fad until that one terrible summer. Of course, no one makes trifles any more, though there is no good reason why that should be so.

In my youth, there would have been no need to enumerate for anyone the ingredients of a trifle—a real trifle, I mean, not the railway buffet version—but now perhaps such an accounting is necessary. A trifle consisted of a layer of sponge cake mixed with jam and sherry, followed by a layer of fruit and gelatin (say, raspberries in raspberry jelly), followed by a layer of custard, and finally a layer of cream. Whatever rude things could be said by foreigners about the limitations of English cuisine, surely no dessert was ever more delicious than a real English trifle.

Persons of abstemious dispositions might leave out the sherry. The railway buffet chefs, if such they have, surely would, along with some other ingredients as well. But the sherry was an indispensable component of a genuine trifle.

I remember my good friend Jeremy Ormsby-Fogg discoursing on trifles that memorable August morning. "To begin with," he said, "a trifle is in no sense a trifle. Its success is in direct proportion to the extent to which it belies its name."

"Too true," I replied.

"I once knew a woman who proudly boasted she used only Harvey's Bristol Cream to make a trifle. Mindless ostentation, that. Any good sound medium-priced sherry will do. And the trifle she served was an unmitigated disaster. She had put the custard on when it was still too hot, and it had dissolved the jelly. Expected her snobbish grandstanding to carry the day, I expect."

We were seated in the parlor of Ormsby-Fogg's bungalow that morning. I was a house guest of Jeremy and his wife, a round and quiet woman named Alma, who had just cleared the breakfast dishes.

Jeremy showed me a bottle of Marley's Bridlington Cream. "I tell you, Clive," he said, "this is just the stuff for a trifle. Spot on! Wouldn't use any other."

"Done quite a bit of advertising, haven't they?" I remarked. "A fairly new firm, though the name creaks. I've often been to Bridlington and don't recall a sherry works there."

"No, I've never been round. Been round Harvey's, but no samples, worse luck. Don't know what this stuff tastes like on its own. Don't

care really. Soaks into that sponge like a champ."

Apart from the fact that trifle-making had reached the proportions of a national craze, it was a typical English summer to that point. Inflation was galloping along as it had for lo these many years, it seemed. Strikes were rife, the workers always wanting more, more, more. At the Conservative Club, we did a good bit of grumbling to one another about how the British were unwilling to work, just wanted the government to see to them from cradle to grave. It started, we said, the day the Second War ended. We'd done a dirty job and done it well, and now we wanted to enjoy ourselves. And so we loafed for thirty-odd bloody years, you'll excuse my French.

I remember the papers were full of the country's latest sporting humiliation, England's crushing loss to Pakistan in the Test Match at Lord's, by an inning and three hundred runs. The new V registration license plates on cars had just come out, and it was a status symbol to own one. A queer custom, that; long forgotten now, of course.

As the incredible national interest in trifles grew, we came to talk less and less about the fall of a once-proud empire and more and more about the precise way to make a truly great sherry trifle, as if the satisfaction of our stomachs was more important to us than the future of our nation.

These were some of the thoughts I had as I watched Jeremy Ormsby-Fogg prepare his custard and whip his cream. The other parts had been seen to the night before, including the application of the sherry, and been left to set in the fridge overnight. Watching him do his custard, not so different from the way my mum did so many years ago, it occurred to me to think that Alma could have been doing this. But no, she had been banished from the kitchen. Trifle-making was a serious business that summer and, in a time still not entirely sexually liberated, a man's business.

When Alma served us our midday dinner a few hours later, I praised highly the roast beef, Yorkshire pudding, new potatoes, and fresh peas from their garden. But Jeremy, his mind on his trifle, seemed distracted. At the end of the meal, he sprang from his chair to deliver his masterpiece, which he had left in the pantry, in his view a more proper place than the fridge for a trifle to await its cue.

What Alma and I heard coming from the pantry was not precisely a scream, more a gasp of horror. We rushed to see what was the matter, but before we reached the door to the kitchen, Jeremy had come to meet us, his face gone pale.

"Something rather unusual has happened," he told us, in a parody



of his customary phlegm.

"What's that, old man?" I inquired.

"The thing's growing."

"What thing?"

"The trifle, man, the trifle." As he spoke, the door behind him pushed open, and a seeming mountain of custard and cream filled the doorway and began oozing into the room.

Alma screamed; and the three of us, I fear, ran.

When we reached the garden and what seemed a safe distance, we saw the ingredients of the trifle were already pouring out of every door and window of their little bungalow.

Alma cried, in unaccustomed animation, "Jeremy, you bloody twit, what did you put in it, yeast?"

"I put quite the normal ingredients, my dear," Jeremy said. Then he assured me, rather unnecessarily I thought, that this had never happened to him before.

The following hours are a kaleidoscope of barely assimilated sights and reports. Jeremy's, it seems, was not the only trifle to have acted in this unusual way. All over England, Scotland, and Wales, trifles were growing, destroying houses, bringing down power lines, undulating through main streets and bringing all traffic and commerce to a halt.

The fragmentary radio reports were terrifying. Television service was interrupted. Bingo was cancelled. At the traditional cricket match between Lancashire and Yorkshire, a banana trifle enveloped the pitch and made a shambles of the tea interval. There were scattered reports of pub customers complaining of tainted beer. A monster peach trifle overran the theatre during a matinee of *The Mousetrap*, sending the audience screaming into the streets. Most of them seemingly were American holiday-makers who didn't even know what a trifle was, let alone had ever been menaced by one.

Gradually, we came to think of the Trifles in upper case.

Jeremy, Alma, and I, along with many others, sought high ground. Transistor radios clutched to our ears for the latest bulletins, we watched unbelievably as the Trifles ran all around us, not unlike a cool volcanic eruption.

The radio reported that the center of the greatest concentration of the sweets-gone-mad was the seaside resort of Bridlington. The significance was not lost on Jeremy.

"The sherry," he mused. "It must have something to do with the sherry."

We heard frightening reports of bathers being forced into the sea

by the ever-spreading tide of jam and spongecake.

Even more frightening was the report that the Trifles seemed to be joining together to surround London, as though there were some keen intelligence behind the diabolical desserts.

Jeremy was convinced that the proper course was to send the Army into the Bridlington Cream sherry works to break up all the remaining bottles and be sure none of them got near any sponge cake. He cursed the lack of a phone or radio transmitter to relay his idea, but fortunately others made the connection as well.

The smashing of the bottles would be part of a two-pronged attack on the Trifles. The other part of the strategy it would be up to every Briton to carry out.

The voice of the Prime Minister that day will never be forgotten by any who heard it. "We shall eat in the cities, we shall eat on the farms, we shall eat on the shore. We shall leave no Trifle uneaten."

For a moment, we stood on that hilltop, stunned by the words, nearly overcome by the formidable challenge. I remember Alma saying, "But we had such a big dinner."

It was left for the oldest man among us, an octogenarian I should think, to say, "Let's go to it then," and trot down the hill to take the first bite. But even as he was taking that bite, the Trifle was growing. He could not do it alone, but if we all ate our share, just maybe we could win. Thus began several hours of the most conspicuous consumption it has ever been my privilege to be a part of.

It took hours to turn the tide. The Trifle continued to grow, but not as fast as the squads of ordinary people could eat, and finally we prevailed. Other groups of everyday citizens all over Britain were doing the same. And soon it was clear the Day of the Trifles had passed.

We huddled by our radios as a bland, vaguely bored voice from the BBC explained it all. Our scientists theorized that intelligent but malevolent beings from some far distant planet had decided to conquer Earth, starting of course with Britain. Their advance troops had been living in the form of bacteria in the vats of the Marley's Bridlington Cream sherry works. Using a sophisticated form of telepathy, they had first influenced the sherry makers to expand and advertise, then influenced the public at large to go on their mad round of trifle-making.

Extraterrestrial chemists, whose knowledge was far beyond that of their earthly counterparts, devised a formula whereby, when the sherry from the Bridlington works reacted with the other elements of the trifle, the resultant desserts would grow with a yeast-like

effect and thus carry out their invasion. The combination of the Army's efficient bottle-smashing, which prevented further invaders, and the indomitable courage of countless ordinary British men and women, citizens drawing on patriotism thought abandoned at the close of the last war, in eating the undulating Trifles as they spread, at last halted the invasion and brought ultimate victory.

The announcement that television service would be resumed shortly was scarcely heard. No one cared to watch television. We wanted to finish the job of reclaiming our country from the jelly and the custard.

I sit now in an upstairs window overlooking a garden. There is a broad lawn bordered with multi-hued flowers, the high branches of an apple tree tantalizingly showing its fruit to my left, an old weeping willow to the right. Birds are flying and chirping, and the sky is alternating between sunny blue and threatening grey in the manner of an English summer's day.

The memory of that monster sherry Trifle undulating across the countryside, an all-enveloping cloud of custard and cream devouring the landscape, the scarlet quivering jelly crushing houses and automobiles in its path, the sickly sweet smell overpowering and mesmerizing all, seems so remote and distant, though never really forgotten, as to belong to a fairy tale rather than to reality. The Britain it has left behind is the same, though subtly changed. Once more hard work and pride in a job well done are the order of the day, and cheerful industry has replaced grasping indolence. The Day of the Trifles has left its mark, left a better, stronger England in its wake.

## **SECOND SOLUTION TO OFF WE'RE GOING TO SHUTTLE** (from page 48)

It may be hard to believe, but the big hand passes the small hand only 21 times during the 24-hour period!

Back to Lunar shuttles. Each ship travels a constant speed of 20,000 m.p.h. On one tragic occasion, when two ships were exactly 83,000 miles apart and going opposite ways, the radar system on one craft malfunctioned. This put the ships on a straight-line collision course. How far apart were they 15 minutes before they crashed? See page 98 for the answer.

# THE SF CONVENTIONAL CALENDAR

by Erwin S. Strauss

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School will soon be out, and you'll have the time for social weekends with your favorite SF authors, artists, editors—and fellow fans. Check out a con(vention) in your area soon. For a longer, later list, and a sample of SF folksongs, send an addressed, stamped envelope (SASE) to me at: 9850 Fairfax Sq. #232, Fairfax VA 22031. The Hot Line is (703) 273-6111. If my machine answers, leave your area code and number CLEARLY, and I'll call you back. When writing cons, enclose an SASE. There's no charge to list your con. Look for me at cons at Filthy Pierre.

**WhatCon.** For info, write: **Box 2802, Sta. A, Champaign IL 61820.** Or phone: (217) 344-4718 (10 AM to 10 PM only, not collect). Con will be held in: Champaign IL (if location omitted, same as in address) on: 23-25 May, 1980. Guests will include: Larry Niven, Doug Rice. At the Ramada Inn. A relaxed Midwestern convention, away from the big city.

**VCon, (604) 684-4846.** 23-25 May. Roger (Amber) Zelazny, Ted (Heavy Metal) White. At Delta's River Inn. The theme this year is "graphic interpretations of science fiction."

**AmberCon, (316) 722-6593.** Wichita KS, 6-8 Jun. F. Pohl, W. Liebscher, V. DiFate, W. Tucker.

**Ad Astra, 2010-88 Bloor St. E., Toronto, Ont. M4W 3G9. (416) 636-4214.** 13-15 Jun. James P. (Inherit the Stars, Genesis Machine) Hogan, Steve Simmons. Masquerade, film contest.

**SFRA Con, c/o Hamilton, Wagner College Planetarium, Grimes Hill, Staten Island NY 10301.** 18-22 Jun. The SF Research Association convention for school & college teachers of SF.

**MidSouthCon, c/o Purcell, Route 1, Box 322-A, Leoma TN 38468.** Huntsville AL, 20-22 Jun. Fred (Gateway) Pohl, W. A. (Bob) Tucker, Kelly Freas. A 24-hour-party-room Southern con.

**MidWestCon, c/o Tabakow, 3953 St. Johns Terr., Cincinnati OH 45236.** 27-29 Jun. The original "relaxacon," where the old-timers meet & talk about how it was in decades past.

**EmpiriCon, Box 682, Church St. Sta., New York NY 10008.** 4-6 Jul. Hal (Mission of Gravity) Clement, Samuel (Dhalgren) Delaney, Freff, Barry Malzberg. There's nothing quite like a Manhattan con. EmpiriCon has taken over the Big Apple since LunaCon left.

**MystiCon, Box 12294, Roanoke VA 24024.** Blacksburg VA, 4-6 Jul. Gordon R. (Dorsai) Dickson, Nelson Bond. Masquerade. That part of the Appalachians is beautiful this time of year.

**WesterCon 33, Box 2009, Van Nuys CA 91404.** Los Angeles CA, 4-6 Jul. Roger Zelazny, Bob Vardeman, Frank Denton. The 1980 edition Western con. A good warmup for NorEasCon II.

**Archon, Box 15852, Overland MO 63114.** St. Louis MO, 11-13 Jul. Bob (Psycho) Bloch, Tucker.

**High Plains Con, 1206 W. 18th, Amarillo TX 79120.** 11-13 Jul. Kirk Alyn, Jackie Bielowicz.

**OKon, Box 4229, Tulsa OK 74104.** 18-20 Jul. A. D. Foster, Gordon Dickson, Jack Williamson, Robert Asprin, C. J. Cherryh, R. A. Lafferty, Lee Killough, Shelby Bush, M. K. Jackson.

**AutoClave, c/o Drukowski, 2412 Galpin, Royal Oak MI 48068.** Detroit MI, 25-27 Jul.

**NorEasCon II, Box 46, MIT PO, Boston MA 02139.** 29 Aug.-1 Sept., 1980. Knight, Wilhelm, Pelz, Silverberg. The 1980 WorldCon. Join by July 15 for \$30 and save \$15. See you there.

**WesterCon 34, Box 161719, Sacramento CA 95816.** Held over the July 4th weekend in 1981.

**Denvention II, Box 11545, Denver CO 80211.** 3-7 Sept., 1981. C. L. Moore, Clifford Simak, R. Hevelin, Ed Bryant. The 1981 WorldCon. It's not too early to start planning vacations.

# BROKEN TOYS

by Gordon Dykstra

art: Janet Aulisio



*The author makes miniatures for sale; some of his customers (for the non-SF pieces) are historical societies and museums. He's also employed by a construction company in Kentucky. Mr. Dykstra is 25; this is his first sale. While he hopes to become a full-time writer, he sensibly expects that it'll be some time before the time is ripe. The author's twin brother binds books by hand, leading to thoughts that they may eventually become a small, in-house writing & publishing firm.*

Doctor Graham was fidgeting, his hands darting in and out of the pockets of his white medical jacket as if he were unsure of where to put them. Actually he *was* unsure of where to put them. A lot of people behave like that when they first meet me—something I've never really gotten used to. Superficially, Graham was a reasonably presentable man, dark hair brushed away from the narrow forehead, clean jaw; but his eyes had a tendency to slide away from my face and fix on some indefinable point in the distance. He didn't like me. I'm not saying that as a judgment. It's just a fact.

Doctor Birmingham, the man who had met me at the entrance, handed me over with little ceremony and was on his way, glad to be rid of the burden and the nagging presence that I Knew. I'd almost come to look on it as a game of sorts whenever I met a Normal. First thing off, they'd be thinking about how you Knew what they were thinking; then they'd be trying to mask the embarrassment that came with the fact that I Knew they were thinking about it; then they'd be trying to pretend that they hadn't thought that at all . . . it gets confusing at times, for both them and me. Eventually they become numb to that kind of merry-go-round in the mind, but they never get over their resentment at the foolish behavior they think I've forced them to exhibit.

I'd drifted off. Doctor Graham was saying, ". . . but I'm sure you've heard all this before. Would you care for a cup of coffee? It's such a long drive from the airport."

"No. Yes, maybe that would be nice. I'm rather tired, actually. Been a long week, busy."

"Yes," the doctor said after a pause, "I suppose they keep you ESPers busy in the capital. It's a new business?"

"Little over a year, thanks. Where's that cup of coffee?"

I didn't look at him when we talked. It's part of the protective mechanism. I'd been belted too often as a kid for staring at people. I can read them in any case, even without looking at them; but it makes them feel more comfortable if I behave like I'm not interested. The talking helps a lot as well. I'm pretty good at small talk, even though I'd rather not waste the time. It's too much bother.

It was beginning to snow again, with that imperceptible rise of white in the air that spells a gentle November nightfall. I could see it through the immense windows down at the end of the hall. To my relief, Graham didn't particularly want to talk to me as we went to the cafeteria. As we passed a set of large blue doors he commented, "Uh, this is the Lesion section, set up, uh, last July I think it was. Want to have a look around?"

"No," I said, "at least not until I've gotten my head cleared up."

I shouldn't have made that last remark. Graham stiffened and a dark cloud crossed his pretty face. Too bad, I thought. I can't waste all my time catering to the moods of Normals. I'd never say a thing if I did.

We had some coffee and toast in the nearly empty cafeteria, eating and drinking in silence. I usually gab to ease people's minds, but it was apparent that Graham wasn't going to like me no matter what I did. So to hell with him. I'd do my survey and get out of here in time to catch the 10:37 to Minneapolis.

On the way out of the cafeteria he started up again as if we'd never had five minutes of dead silence between us.

"Of course," he said in a boisterous voice, "it's largely research so far. We don't have that many cases here as yet. In fact, we haven't had the chance to do anything but research, since most of the cases here have no plausible hope for complete recovery. However the information we cull will certainly be of use at other locations."

As we passed another door down the barren hallway he waved in its direction and muttered, "Apoplexy lab. The usual stuff."

"I see. Doctor Graham, what might be the possibility of me having a chance to see your work, rather than just get the usual tour? I'm not going to get any kind of feel for the place unless I do. I mean, this touring is good for visitors but my job is more on the funding survey line, you know."

He turned and looked at me.

"You want to see my *work*? Why would my work fascinate you, Mister Aldous? Do you know anything about the technical side of the research here?"

No more than I can read from the pages of your silly mind, I thought. What I said was: "Enough so that I should get a pretty clear idea of what you're up to, Doctor Graham."

"Well, Doctor Birmingham made no mention of this. I don't think it would be wise at the moment, since my work falls under certain classified categories. Besides, I still think it might be too technical for you, if you don't mind my saying so, Mister Aldous."

"I think this should be made as plain as possible, Doctor Graham," I stated with a sigh. "I'm not some kind of thrill-seeker, looking for a cheap gawk. You and I both know Congress sent me here for a specific purpose. They want the funding for the installation checked, and they know I'll do the job well. I'll be able to see more clearly what's going on here than anyone else could, excepting other members of the guild. There is no way that you or anyone else can

sidetrack me without me knowing it, and there is no research or facility that I cannot inspect. Besides," I concluded, "I don't like you any more than you like me."

"I suppose not," he said in a bitter, fragmented voice. "Well, in that case I suppose we should get this over with. I've got a wife and two children who are probably wondering where I am right now. But I suppose you rooted that out of me some time ago."

"That's right," I said, not being gentle about it. "Shall we?" I waved a hand in what was the direction of his labs, courtesy of his mental map.

It took us another couple of minutes to get to Graham's wing of the hospital. We finally went through a doorway into a small room, to face a massive machine which the doctor explained to me was a new design of electroencephalograph, designed by his team and capable of obtaining fine imprints from both voluntary and involuntary neural functions, keying them on various spaces on the graph sheet.

After I'd grasped the function of the thing I inquired, "What, if any, practical purpose does this thing have?"

"Brain damage studies. That's what this ward is almost—"

"I know. Advent of medical capabilities to sustain life and all that. What kind of brain traumas do you tend to get?"

"Well, uh, out of some thirty-odd beds about twenty are—"

"—resulting from nerve diseases or age, with some serious accidents thrown in. How many do you cure?"

I had to stop cutting in on his answers like that. A few more like that and he'd be at my throat. But my last question actually amused him.

The only way, he was thinking, anyone leaves this place is through the morgue. Grim sense of humor. What he said was, "Well, actually, this ward isn't so much the kind of place where we can expect a complete recovery. Attrition accounts for . . ." He paused to see if I was going to cut in on him again. When I didn't he continued, ". . . most of the turnover in this establishment."

He leaned on the electroencephalograph, tapping an aluminum panel with a finger. "We lose about four or five a month due to failure of the physical systems. The others, after we're finished with them, are usually shipped off to more permanent locations where they can be cared for adequately."

"The ones that die," I said, "Doctor Birmingham told me you could keep almost anything alive indefinitely if you wanted to. How come some die?"



"Well, we sometimes attempt to restore functions in the line of research. This usually doesn't happen to the patient's advantage. . . ."

He unplugs them to see if they'll start breathing again, I read. Pure frustration on his part, the fool.

"So none are ever really cured."

"Uh, well, I'm afraid I haven't seen a recovery since I started working here. No." A wash of shame crossed his thoughts, overlaid by the same damn grind I always get: *Who the hell is this jerk to question my job?* I didn't know, or at least he thought I didn't, the frustration, the pain, the lousy nights living with himself this job forced on him. I slipped a bit off my pedestal, but not much.

How much, after all, did he know my pain and frustration and fear? As a kid, lying awake night after night listening to your parents hate and lie to each other. As an adult, every day watching the same untruths, deceptions, panics, torments—as well as the tormentors: the killers, torturers, rapists, snipers, flashers, kinks, perverts, and abominations, most of whom go about in the guise of normalcy. It's enough to make you sick. What could this Graham character possibly feel that could compare in the slightest? I stepped back up onto my pedestal.

"I think I'd like to see some of the cases," I said coldly.

On the way into the corridor I began to get unpleasant feelings, things not quite like ordinary thoughts tickling the back of my cerebellum. Well, it was part of my job. My first brain-damage ward, but not my first hospital. I was inevitably hired, like most of my guild, because I'm snoopy. I can find out what other people want to know. I've investigated used-car salesmen, politicians, messiahs, lawyers; I can usually find something interesting about them. But I'd never felt like this before. I swallowed hard and followed the white form of the doctor.

"This is the section with the worst cases," the doctor said with a note of sadism directed at me. "Here are total incommunicados, comatose cases, shock victims, and some are so far gone they're more machine than not. Still want to look?"

"It's my job," I said.

"Medically-oriented, Mister Aldous?"

"No, and quit trying to sidetrack me, Graham."

He shrugged and turned into a doorway.

My face contorted with the discomfort I was feeling. Although mind-touch can go anywhere, most solid objects can slow it down a bit. When I went through the door and past the protection of the wall . . .

I found myself leaning against a hamper of some sort, rubbing my temple.

"Are you all right, Mister Aldous?" Doctor Graham inquired politely.

"I guess so."

He nodded without malice, but there was a private satisfaction glowing behind his eyelids.

"It's the pain," I elaborated, "I can feel the pain again. Do you see now why no ESPers ever work in places like this, even for what they could contribute?"

"Um . . . yes, I suppose so. But you have to be more objective about the whole thing, I think your problem is."

I stood up and considered punching that bland mouth in. Objective, hell. He didn't feel the pain . . . but I realized he was goading me. So much for bedside manner.

"I'm fine, really," I said calmly, straightening my shoulders.

"All right. Let's proceed then, if you like. This way."

The entire hallway was lined with doors, all of which were closed, unlike other parts of the hospital where doors might be casually cracked open or left gaping. Through another window down at the end of the hall I could see that it was snowing still, more heavily than before. It was quiet here, I thought.

Graham went to the first door to his right and opened it. Within the shuttered interior I found myself amazed by the lack of frills there. There were no bedside tables, no TV, not even a screen to hide the hideous machinery from the patient. There was only a bed under the equipment.

The doctor switched on the overheads and walked to the bed, passing the tiny emaciated figure huddled there under the white sheets. Picking up a clipboard from the foot of the bed he perused it rapidly.

"Here we have, um, Susan Carter, age sixteen. Been here for . . . let's see . . . three years or so. Automobile accident, it seems, yes."

"What's wrong with her?"

"Oh . . . uh, had a broken collarbone upon admission, but that healed up a long time ago, of course. Lacerated kidneys, healed but nonfunctional. We've got a unit for that hooked up to her. Heart failure, but we've got a heart-lung machine for that. Collapsed left lung; not important. She's got some chest tubes for that now, as her breathing functions are inoperable."

"What about her brain?"

"Oh, frontal lobe was crushed, it seems. The spinal area near the neck was impacted, so the trochlear nerve and trigeminal are gone. Motor cortex impacted . . ." He let his voice drift off and looked up at me. When I refused to say anything he moved over to the machinery and adjusted a dial while I regarded the figure under the sheets.

Finally I said, "Could she possibly live without all this equipment to maintain her, doctor?"

"No, not for a minute, Mister Aldous. We've got the finest life-sustaining equipment in the country. I guess we can thank Congress for that," he added as an afterthought.

"Wouldn't it be more humane to let her die? I don't know anything about medicine but I can see the logic of that anyway. What do you say about that, Doctor Graham?"

"Oh, that can't be done, Mister Aldous. As long as she shows any mental activity at all she's legally alive. Nobody here is eager to get into trouble with the law, if you see what I mean."

"Oh yes. The electroencephalograph, right?"

"Uh-huh, that's the law. Something shows; ergo she's alive."

On the graph bright spots of light dipped across the dark blue background. A few followed straight unwavering lines while others described a range of ragged peaks. Some alternated between the two, shooting madly across the graph, then dying between the dashes for several seconds.

"This chart isn't normal, of course; but as long as she shows any kind of activity at all we can't kill . . . let her die, you know."

I stared at the bright lines, trying to see some correlation between what was going on in this girl's head and what was being presented on the graph. I didn't really know how to read the machine, even with Graham's help, but it didn't seem accurate in the slightest. This doctor, so clean, so sharp and on the ball, had absolutely no concept of what alienness was going on in this girl's head, none at all. Egocentric in the worst way. A Normal. They're all like that to some degree or other. The bastards.

He wanted to know what she was thinking and was hoping I'd provide the information. I grinned at him and gave no quarter.

After a moment he stifled his pride and said, "Does she feel any pain?"

"I get the impression," I replied dryly, "that it's always been assumed that brain-damage cases like this don't feel pain. Isn't that right? In which case your question casts a lot of doubt on the in-

tegrity of the medical profession, doesn't it?"

"Well, does she?"

"What do you care?"

"I suppose I was trying to be social," he said at last, "but I guess you're right. I'm not that interested."

And the fact of the matter was he wasn't. He was hungry and bored and wondering how long this was going to take. I don't know how he was picked to deal with me, but for him it was way past hours and he simply wanted to go home. Right then I don't think it would have mattered much if his own mother had been under the blankets.

I nodded in resignation and we left the room.

What was she thinking? Depends on what you mean by thinking. Sure, she felt pain, of that indefinable something's-wrong-deep-inside sort, but she didn't have enough left to ponder the pain with. She was thinking of a horse—a horse with three legs. Even the complete image of the horse was damaged and wavery, like a bad tape spinning around and around a closed loop. It wasn't pleasant and it certainly wasn't human. I was sweating heavily under my suit, but I didn't reach for a handkerchief. Damn the man! Damn this place!

"Shouldn't you give that girl a pain-killer of some sort?" I said.

"Why? You said she didn't feel anything, Mister Aldous."

"No, I didn't say that. I said that you, meaning the medical profession in general, assume that she can't. I didn't say the other thing at all."

"You're right. We do assume that."

Bastard. He was taking a chance walking in front of me at the moment. I was about ready to haul off and level him there. Someday my temper is going to kill me, and I'll land up in the park hanging from a tree like Jos. But the arrogance of the man was galling. On the other hand, he thought I was arrogant. So we were both right.

There was another victim, this time male. Tubes ran from his abdomen, his remaining arm, a nostril, trailing up to a chuckling gray machine. A nurse, uncomfortable in the starched whites, bothered about the machinery between pages of a magazine.

"This's a pretty bad one," the doctor said. "We had to operate on the brain to prevent hemorrhaging. The parietal lobe is still there in its entirety, as is the medulla complex."

"Of course."

"This was part of the crack-up they had at Kennedy last week." My hand went to my forehead unbidden and began rubbing.

"He doesn't look like he's in particularly good shape," I said inanely.

"Oh that doesn't mean a thing. He'll be healing up fine, maybe within a couple of months."

"But not cured."

"No, I'm afraid not."

"He lost too much gray tissue," I said, repeating what was in the doctor's mind.

"He's lucky," he said. "He was the only one to finally survive that crash. Everybody else is dead."

"You call that survival?"

Doctor Graham didn't respond to that one. I decided to push him one step further.

"You know he's not registering a thing."

"That's not true. The electroencephalograph—"

"—isn't telling the truth, doctor. All the theories behind it are untrue, guesswork."

"What . . . ?"

"I Know."

"So what? And when has ESPing been considered reasonable evidence in a court of law? I mean, what do you really know? The only people who take your damn word are companies checking up on employees and government bureaus. What the hell do they know? What do you know? It took me years to make this thing, to perfect it from the crude contraption that it was. How hard did you have to work for that gift of . . ."

The nurse was watching the two of us from the top of the magazine she was holding in front of her face. Graham sucked in his breath and concluded, "Let's keep this on a business level, Mister Aldous. Let's assume, uh, we both know our respective jobs."

"All right, doctor. However, I think you should keep your mind open to the fact that I'm making the survey, and your behavior is going to play in my report."

"Fine. Just fine. Shall we continue?"

As we left the room I took one last dip into the man on the bed. I felt a sense of existence, but nothing more. The part of him that had given him a personality had long since departed.

I'd been in a conference in New Mexico some years back. During one session a man seated down the table from me had slumped over from a brain hemorrhage. I felt him die then. It was sort of like sinking into a pool of black water, cool, soothing, forever. When he was dead, really and truly dead, and all the others were rushing

around the room as if there were something they could do, I had received much the same impression I did now. The remaining electrical charges had darted out through the skull and a dullness had come over the cells. He was at peace then, but he was dead as surely as a man can be.

There was an older lady in the next room. We came into the gloom and stood by the bed like mourners at a funeral. She had a shrunken face from intravenous feeding and her hair had been falling out for some time so that her scalp was raw. She was ugly, this stranger. The doctor reached for the chart at the foot, but I didn't wait for his spiel. I simply slid into the woman's head, looking for whatever was there.

She was typical of accident victims. There were layers of pain, a reaction to the violation her elderly body had endured. I warded the phantoms off and went deeper, trying to find something of more substance. She was comatose, and the shock had forced what was left of her personality to huddle somewhere I couldn't readily find.

It got darker. I was afraid to go any further. I mentally twisted sideways and prepared to emerge defeated, but . . .

From the sandbox the little girl looked up at me and smiled. It was summer and it was Indiana and the grass was restless and weedy, piled up in corners around trees and shrubs where the lawnmower couldn't reach it. Behind the girl was a lopsided two-car garage dressed in whitewash, an old 1940 tourer sticking out of its mouth into the gravel driveway. Turning, I saw that I was standing before a house of the same period and make; big, open and friendly.

*Hello, the little girl said, who're you?*

I said nothing for the moment but looked more intimately about myself. The sun was reflecting off every surface, confusing the reflection with the source in its own intensity. Each leaf on the bushes bordering the garage had its own luminescence, each blade of grass glowed. The sunlight caught the gold in the girl's hair and shot it into my eyes.

The detail was fantastic. The average person's memory has all the clarity of a murky watercolor, but this strange woman was so immersed in her childhood that for her, there was no other reality.

*Who are you?* I said back at her.

*My name is Jamie. Who are you, old man?*

I was in her mind, and was playing by her rules. I looked down at my hands and was startled by the weathered lines and veins contorting the skin. I *was* an old man, tired and gray and stooped

and covered with a veneer of gentleness that I could feel emanating from her liquid eyes.

There was pain and unpleasantness and exhaustion with the world in that look, but it was mine, not hers. She saw me that way, but the end product was a gentle, kind old man. I was gentle.

She wasn't scared of me. I stood in a hospital where people went out of their way to avoid me, where a wrong phrase could mean the rupturing of culture into a hateful, killing mob bent on my end. And she wasn't frightened in the slightest.

I walked over to the sandbox and crouched down beside it.

*Hey, I said, have you ever made a sandcastle before? With real turrets and tunnels and secret passages?*

*No, grandpa, she said with eagerness and bubbling delight.*

It took us until suppertime to make one, but it was a real beauty.

Her mother let me in the door with a smile. The man, omniscient in the padded chair by the window, nodded at me from behind the pipe and book; and I went up the narrow stairwell, fighting down the lump gathering behind my larynx.

All the wood in her room was varnished with that stuff that turns orange with age. There was creamy wallpaper everywhere, with a pattern of roses and hyacinths.

She was standing on tiptoe before the mirror over the dresser, applying the finalizing touches to her makeup. I admired the form under the satin dress and felt like a cheat for doing so. Startled by the sound of my breathing she turned and looked at me.

*My, she said warmly, but you do look fine tonight. I guess Mother really likes you if she let you come up here like this.*

Nervous like the teenager I was, I opened and closed my mouth wordlessly for a couple of times before I managed to say, *Yes, she seemed glad to see me.*

God, she was beautiful! Her hair had mellowed with growing up; and it was now a creamy auburn, lacing her shoulders with its fineness.

*Well, I'm glad to see you too, she said, and she came over and wrapped her arms around my waist, hugging herself to my suitcoat. I put one hand carefully on her waist and delighted in the curve of her spine, with the suggestion of the slope of her behind. I was beginning to turn red with adolescent embarrassment and she kissed me then.*

It was the first time I'd ever been kissed in my life. Afterwards, I gave her the carnation I'd been holding to pin on her dress and

her father relinquished the comfort of his chair long enough to drive us to the dance.

There was comfort in the fullness of her hips, the arch of her back, and the stance her body took when she had been satisfied. It was summer again and the insects could be heard serenading through the screen. She lay on her stomach, head propped on her hands over the edge of the windowsill.

*You don't have to be at work tomorrow, she said in a low voice. It's a holiday, remember?*

*Oh yes, I said, and smiled at her.*

She grinned back at me, then kissed me once more for good luck.

We were driving on old 218. She was at the wheel, tapping her free hand against the edge of the door. She'd always liked the modern tunes, had never gotten over her joy for life, for change.

Her hair was patterned in grays but the charm was still there. Her face had slumped slightly but the eyes were still sincere.

I had my hands folded between my legs and I was distinctly uncomfortable with her driving. I'd always considered her rather reckless, but today she was worse than usual.

She turned to me and said, *Can't you relax, honey? Frank will never forgive us if we're late.*

*People don't get married everyday, she finished with a laugh.*

*Do you have to drive this way?* I said. There was something disturbingly climactic about this day, this scene. I clenched my teeth and sweat started to appear on my wrinkled forehead.

She passed a blundering semi and was well out into the other lane when she saw the approaching car. I twisted my head around and looked back. Some idiot in a pickup had taken her space behind the truck. She couldn't retreat.

With deadly calm she said, *Hold on, love, hold on tight.*

We went into the ditch and rammed the opposing bank like three tons of thunder, and the last thing I heard was the sound of metal screaming. . . .

There was a little girl playing in the sandbox. She looked up at me in the bright sunlight.

*Hello, she said, who're you?*

I was sweating teardrops and my hands were shaking so hard I had to grab for the table twice before I could steady myself. Doctor



Graham was oblivious to my condition and was still talking.

"... Juanita Elwood here. She was in an automobile accident I believe; just over two and a half months ago, I think. Let's see, fractured tibia..."

"I get the point," I croaked.

"Oh," he said. "I thought you wanted to see my work. Have you seen enough?"

"More than I want to," I said.

Inside the doctor's head the roll-call of the dead and dying was still going on. He enjoyed this kind of sport.

"In fact," I continued, gathering myself together, "I think I've seen all I need to see. Thank you for all your help, Doctor Graham."

"Of course, whatever you say," he said, curiosity leaping from one crevasse to another in his head. He was worrying over my abruptness. Had he bungled the job?

You bet you did, I thought. I coughed once and straightened up. There was that presence in the room, a woman with her life going around and around in her shattered head. As fast as neural circuits could exchange we had shared a lifetime together and she had taken me wholly into that life, as father, brother, lover, husband. She wasn't scared of me.

I wanted to join her again more than anything else I'd ever done before. Then there was a roar and a hurtling shape and a brief unbelievably intense *POW* and the memory of the accident crushed that urge forever. I couldn't go through that again.

But she was. She was going through that memory several times a minute. And the fire after. And the screaming as her skin fried off her bones.

Instead, I turned on my heel and marched out the door without another word. Doctor Graham didn't follow me. I don't think he dared.

I got my coat from the receptionist's desk and went out into the cold night. It was still snowing and felt like it would snow forever.

I had to wait several minutes in the muffled snow before Doctor Graham came out of that big door with a couple of colleagues. From behind a hedge I watched them go towards the parking lot; then I went back up the shallow steps to the front entrance.

I loitered around in the shadows until the nurse at the front desk decided to stop playing games with her bladder. As soon as she left I slipped past her station and down the hall, probing forwards for interference.

Actually, most nurses don't bother you as long as you look like

you belong where you are. Still, I had to wait five minutes around a bend in the corridor for an older lady with a suspicious mind to trot off on her coffee break.

The light to the room was off, the only illumination coming from the operational lights on the maintenance equipment. I closed the door softly behind me.

*Hello Jamie, love, love, love . . .*

There was just about enough light for me to pick my way behind the clutter of boxes to find the big cable supplying the power. Delicately my fingers picked their way down the line until they touched a knot of metal leading into the wall: the plug, as they say.

I grasped the rope with both hands and prepared to yank, but I hesitated.

We are, after all, cowards in the end.



## **THIRD ANSWER TO OFF WE'RE GOING TO SHUTTLE** (from page 83)

It is unnecessary to know the distance between the two ships when the radar system broke down. That figure was given only to distract you from the ridiculously simple solution.

The two ships have an approach speed of 2 times 20,000 m.p.h. or 40,000 m.p.h. In your mind, run the scene backward in time from the crash. An hour before colliding they must have been 40,000 miles apart. Fifteen minutes before colliding they would have been one-fourth that distance, or 10,000 miles, apart.

# LAND OF THE GREAT HORSE LAUGHS

by Larry Tritten

art: Alex Schomburg



*Mr. Tritten advises us that he has been an enthusiastic admirer of Mr. R.A. Lafferty for many years and that this is indeed a parody (albeit an affectionate one) of that esteemable writer's works. As for Mr. Tritten, he came to San Francisco, where he now lives, by way of the woods of North Idaho. He has sold to a wide variety of magazines, theorizes that matter doesn't, and thinks obliquely.*

This is the here and there of it: there were seven men who traveled seven separate paths to reach a crossroads where their mutual interests converged. There was Alfred Carnitas, a sly, whey-faced man who threw a noisy shadow. There was Milho Crayons, a Gypsy who had not quite the way of a Gypsy, for he had lived all his many-numbered years in a closet on a shelf. There was Maypop McCray Fish, a not-quite-man and yet not-quite-machine, who was a tinkerer of suggestions and maker of salty hints. There was Conk Johnson, who sucked all the sweetness out of every possibility he encountered, and chewed its attendant pith. There was Gnosis Rumen, another chewer, but he of phenomenological cuds. There was Ruhmkorff Coyle, an old man gone in the wallet but a dancer in his dreams, which were full to the filling place with Mammon's passion. And last (and possibly least) there was Gilbert Halfmuch, a designer of toys for nasty genius children: he had invented the Transdimensional Whirlagig, Neuro-Clay, and the No-Deposit Klein Bottle; and we all know how cute these items were.

They met by design, if not by accident, in the Boar-in-a-Poke Bar on the Blue Moon of Bascopolis (that world where only drinkers and tellers of muscular tall tales meet) and ordered up a dozen or two of Dirty Doubles, with which they immediately set to toasting their cleverness at so meeting.

"It's a world that smells like a grandmother's figs!" swore Conk Johnson, snorting down his drink in one draught after first testing his nose on its livid vapors.

"I'll double that sentiment, and triple it later," said Gnosis Rumen, chewing on his brew. He made an Easter Island face. "Say, what is this swill? Didn't I once flirt with such dregs in the bottom of a double-damned demijohn?"

Alfred Carnitas said, in that way he had of twinkling his words, "I've had better hooch than this, but never in Spokane. And not in the Fungo Isles, where drinks are for throwing but not for taste or tipping."

A man came through a curtain to the back of the back-bar, then, and began to play a horn with strings. He was the entertainment.

"Get out, you damned hunker-shanked pusillanimous mud-gargling cuff-hugging scum-squeezing chip off a succubus's block!" Ruhmkorff Coyle roared, and threw a rusty-daggered glance at the minstrel, who ducked again behind the curtain. Coyle was a small man but his muscles and nerves were the talk of a baker's dozen of worlds, and in truth he would have ground the musician's bones to make his biscuits.

Among the seven there ensued a great deal of drinking and roistering, jiggery and pokery, and a large number of reels and schotisches, after which, sated, they fell to discussing the means and ends of the enterprize that had brought them into conjunction.

It was a world of kale and lettuce that held the interest of this high-life seven. One of them (which one, none could recall) had found it in a dream, but on waking had consulted his Finders Keepers Perceptor (a device of his own contrivance) and discovered it to be as real as rain. On this world there were gems aplenty and galore, nay, hyper-galore: alps of pearl, onyx, rhinestone, and agate rose toward skies of turquoise blue-green; there were deserts where the dust of gold was ankle-deep, and valleys where one could not walk unshod without cutting the feet on zircons. In the rainy season there were storms of tinsel, and other times when gew-gaws abruptly fell like hailstones from moody pearl-drift clouds.

So, in keeping with the spirit of zest that animates all genius kin, these seven met together for the purpose of getting the proverbial goods.

"I say we rent a space bomp," proposed Gilbert Halfmuch. He pulled out a celestial chart on which the stars glittered like scattered dazzle. His rowdy forefinger poked a fussy-looking star cornerwise on the chart. "Here's our goal, this sire star's foal. A mere hop, skip, and jumping bean bounce past the Loop De Lieu. We can drink and snicker our way through a fortnight of whiskey wherewithals, set down, and then heave to a hearty mining life. I've an itch for a diamond as big as the Hyatt Ritz; and I'll have it, too, or know the blankety bice blazes why not!"

All nodded, and all struck down their hands in common concurrence. Who was to know that one hand was of the red-handed sort and would tickle the fates of all?

They leased that space bomp the next morning and shipped the following eventide. It was a fine craft, they were on a fine chase, and they went aboard in high fine fettle, though to be sure Maypop McCray Fish did grouse a bit about having to leave behind a dilly of a doxy named Margaret Kate Scotchwater, who'd filled his head with heady thoughts about what a fine swaggering swain he was, prone or standing, and wanted to know where and why he must go. Yet he promised her a bunch of opulent baubles, tweaked her on the silk, and went his gangling way.

They went out past the Sierra Umbriago, took a hard left, chugged through the Cimmerian Shallows, and bore down on their ornate goal singing all the way:

"We once were there and now are here  
And still are just en-route.  
Our 'here' keeps turning into 'there'  
As we go further out.  
"We'll not encompass doubt or pause.  
Columbus didn't, dog it!  
We'll find a world all glitter bright  
And rape and swill and hog it!"

A few mega-weeks swigged by, and by and by the bomp came down with a boisterous bump. Its crew, having guzzled themselves into lassitude, stirred feebly, then got into suitable suits and sallied forth.

"Has this world a name?" queried Milho Crayons, wincing at the grand glitter that assaulted his vision as he stepped upon the opal sod.

"We'll name it Last Name," suggested Gnosis Rumen, "as it is the last world to be named."

The seven set out, monkey-quick and wincing in the glare of all the gem-bright tarn and turf both near and slightly far. It was a world like a pirate's chest opened and shaken out.

"Don your shades!" Maypop McCray Fish suggested.

"Yea, hey!" the others agreed. They donned their shades and squinted with greed and glee. Milho Crayons slipped on a loose bijou but caught himself and stepped aright, ever-cocky.

That night they drank a magnum firkin dry in the twilight glow of a lapis lazuli sunset and spoke of how their fortunes would be spent.

Alfred Carnitas said he would buy some acres on a limestone isle and build a lemonade stand upon them. How much lemonade he sold was no important thing.

Milho Crayons declared that he would take a Berlitz course, learn pig Greek.

Maypop McCray Fish knew what he pined for: red-light women, ruby-gaused and garbed in hot red satin, the color of their trade.

Conk Johnson figured that he would thenceforth buy matches only from Little Match Girls, and tip like a drunken duke, thereby heartening every waif who made a living selling sulphur.

Gnosis Rumen, dozing, fell into the fire; but all present knew that he would buy himself a pair of better pants. (His current pair needed laundering, and fit him like a catcher's mitt engarbs a monkey's paw.)

Ruhmkorff Coyle had in mind a new wallet, one with several unfolding windows in tiers and secret compartments where lumps of gold might be concealed.

Gilbert Halfmuch thought he would have his sex changed, for the amusement of the thing and its experimentation, but not until he'd parted company with these six sots.

If only they had known: an alien world cares not a jot for interlopers. The next morning, while all took their picks to the ground, gravity warped, as it did there often, so that every step and gesture was a taffy pull, a tug of war. Then a keening wind brought with it a peppering cannonade of icy trinkets. The seven fled over a landscape of tarnished silver toward their ship; but one, and only one, reached the portal. We will not speak his name, not now. That is for later, when the jury has been chosen, if not bribed. Yet we will say that he was a monkey-jogging greedy man, so greedy that the night before he had gathered quartz rosettes, clinquants, and chrysolite shards in the dreamlight while the others slept, and now had a bagful. He was the meanest man; he left the others on Last Name and watched through the viewscoop as they slipped and grubbed in the wabe.

But this is not the end of it. A greedy man needs friends—or sooner than you can say Raphael Aloysius he is undone by his greed. So when this fellow found himself alone with the ship's computer (which Gnosis Rumen had programmed to speak only Tagalog for his own amusement) he knew he was in for It.

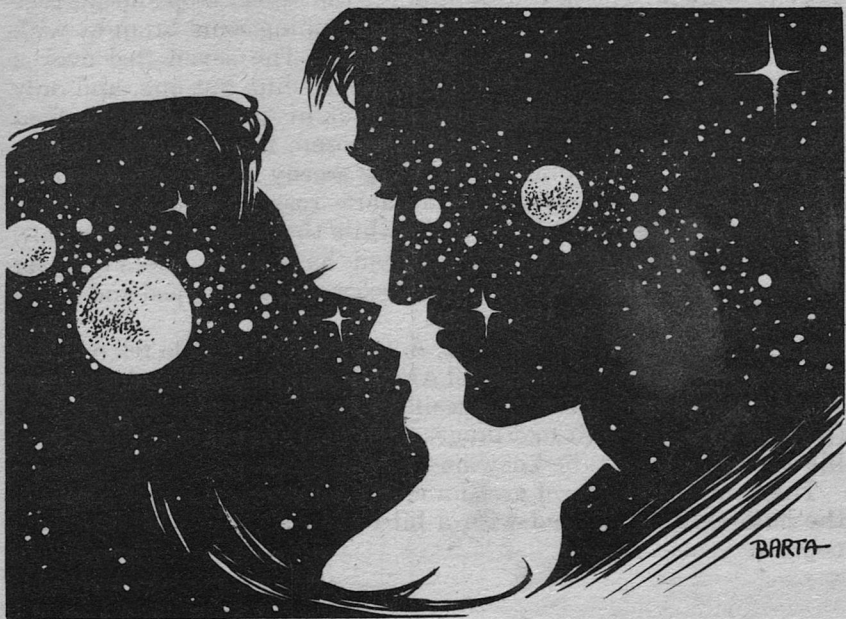
This is an old story, of greed and doom, but old stories are often the best ones when read with a bit of relish and a bowl of salty popcorn.



# ALIEN LOVER

by Ted Reynolds & William F. Wu

art: Hilary Barta



*People wonder about collaborations: who does what? Each jointly-written story is different; in this particular case, Mr. Reynolds (he of the archipelagoes) wrote the first version, and Mr. Wu (an about-to-be-PhD) did the final version.*



The semester had finally ended, but Alyne Wong and I both had jobs for the summer here at Belmont. She was a junior and I a sophomore, but we would both be waitresses when our jobs started during summer school. We had a week before that, though; and I spent most of the time gazing out the windows of the old house we shared. My favorite part of our college town was the immense Ohio greenery in June.

One evening I sat on the rim of the bathtub watching my housemate brush her hair in front of the mirror. Outside, groups of students moved up and down the street singing and calling out to each other, celebrating the end of the term.

"I," said Alyne, "have an alien lover."

"You," I said, "are out of your mind."

Alyne looked at me scornfully. "I wouldn't expect *you* to understand, Maggie." She flipped her straight black hair in dismissal and turned back to the mirror.

"There is no such thing," I stated flatly, "as an alien lover. If there were, he certainly wouldn't be at Belmont. And *if* he were, why do you think he'd be interested in you?"

Alyne's smile was a trifle chilly. Her brown eyes met mine in the mirror. "You think maybe he'd be more interested in *you*?"

I squirmed and looked down at the tiles on the floor. Alyne is moonlight and flowers; I'm all gawks and blotches. "Let's not quarrel, Alyne. I'm sorry. But you sound so serious, and really, it's all so silly."

"I *am* serious," said Alyne, unmollified. "Strek is not human. For one thing, he's far too good to be human." She brushed her shiny hair in angry sweeps.

Outside, a car passed honking continuously. Drunken revelers whooped and yelled.

"It's natural you attract him, Alyne." I was anxious to make up with her. "You're a really lovely person."

Alyne knew that. She went on brushing.

"Oh, don't be like that," I said. "I guess I'm just jealous, you know."

A wide smile bloomed on her face at last, and she swung to face me. "Poor little Maggie," she crooned. "I keep forgetting. You do have your troubles, don't you, getting any man to look at you; and here I am, parading my triumphs in front of you. Do forgive me. I *am* sorry."

She didn't look sorry. I forgave her.

"No, I'm sorry," I repeated, nervously flipping the tub drain on and off. "You wanted to share something very important and I just

tried to cut you down. Maybe he is an alien. How should I know? But if he's a superior being from outer space, how come he's only an undergraduate at Belmont?"

Alyne placed her hairbrush carefully on the sink and perched beside me on the bathtub. She reached out and patted my hands. "Poor Maggie," she said. "I am hard on you, aren't I? I'm just so excited. Listen, dear. Strek is just too good to be a mere man. I mean, *you* know what men are." She smiled conspiratorily, knowing very well I don't. "I admit I'm very lucky," she added unexpectedly. "He could have about any woman he wants. Oh, Maggie—it's my *dream*, to be loved by someone grand and mysterious—it's what I've lived for. To be loved by an alien!"

This was new. Even with the Schenectady trombonist and the Manhattan literary agent, she'd always made it quite clear that it was their privilege, not hers, which I thought might be one reason they weren't around any more. For a twenty-year-old, she was strong. She had always seemed to take relationships with men casually, but deep down she wanted an old-fashioned permanent one. This time I *was* worried.

"Tell me about him, Alyne. I won't interrupt."

"Come back to my room. He's due any minute."

I tagged along to her bedroom and flopped onto her pink bedspread. Little stuffed elephants and bears bounced around me. I noticed she'd replaced her picture of Wales with one of the Andromeda galaxy.

Alyne bent over her toiletry. "I met him in Hawkes's class. I'd noticed him from the beginning, because . . . well, he's different. You'll see. But I admit I never dreamed—"

"He *told* you he was from outer space?" I'd forgotten about not interrupting.

"Of course. Oh, not at once—just after he got to know me and trust me, one evening when I was at his place, helping him with his class notes."

"Helping him? The superior being?"

Alyne glared at me.

I pantomimed abject apology.

"All right. He hasn't been here long, and of course he still has to pick up all the little details, like how to spell a lot of words and human history and Earth geography. Even our math. Strek says it's not quite as accurate as his. But considering he's only been on Earth for six months, I should think you'd be more amazed at what he *has* picked up, than joke about what he hasn't learned yet."

"Where does he come from? Which star?"

"It's not a star, it's a galaxy," she replied smugly. "And I don't know which one. It's too far to see from here." She tossed down her puff and rose. "He'll be here any second. You'll see."

"I don't suppose," I said, "that he's got any old photos from home I could see, does he?"

"Well, no," said Alyne. "You've got to realize that he's here more or less in secret. Ours is such a primitive world that it has to be carefully checked out before open contact can be made. So having hard *evidence* of where he's from would be plain stupid."

"And I suppose he can't give out any cancer cures or faster-than-light drives to us hicks, either."

"Of course not. He's not crazy."

I was silent a while. "Alyne Wong, I'd be the last person to try to run your life," I said quietly. "But it seems to me that you have no evidence except Strek's word that he is what he says. And if, just maybe if, by a weird chance, he happened to be lying . . ."

Alyne wasn't angry. Instead, she laughed merrily. "Oh, silly Maggie, don't be . . . well, silly. Aliens aren't capable of lying."

And as she made that astounding assertion, the doorbell rang. She waltzed to the door of the room, pausing to toss back, "Besides, he's told me things no human could ever know."

"Such as?"

"Oh, how the fifth planet of Capricorn looks from its innermost moon . . ." Her voice faded as she hurried down the hall.

Alyne was the older sister I had never had. Now I was afraid she was in too deep for me to haul her out again. I didn't want to lose her to some fast-talking con man. And I didn't want her to be hurt. I wandered into the front hall. The muffled thumping and whine of raucous music drifted from the house across the street. Alyne and her supposed alien lover were entangled together in the doorway in a manner I found all too disgustingly human. I cleared my throat.

"Oh, Maggie," said Alyne, as they unwrapped. "This is Strek."

"Good evening, Ms. Smythe," said Strek, smiling at me.

Strek was tall, well-built, blond. Well-groomed, well-dressed, and suave. A seducer if I ever saw one. And, as far as I could see, Earth human to the *n*th.

This was her dream alien, the one she had lived for.

"Good evening," I said, and stopped, making a sort of face. I didn't know if he was Mr. Strek or Strek Betelgeuse. Oh, hell. "Strek."

"We'll be late for the party," said Alyne.

"Not quite yet, Alyne," he said quietly, without looking away from

me. "I must have a few words with Maggie." He came down the hallway and smiled faintly. "Alyne has told you about me, I believe."

Alyne squirmed. "Oh, no, Strek, I wouldn't—"

Strek turned and looked at her, rather sadly, I thought. "Alyne. You compound the error by lying about it. No matter; I am sure Ms. Smythe is a discreet woman. More discreet than you, Alyne? Do you wonder now that I cannot tell you . . . many things, when you cannot keep private even the simplest?"

"Oh, please forgive me, Strek, I didn't think. . . ."

Strek looked at her sternly and my soul wrenched to see Alyne, proud Alyne, so humbled. "You must *learn* to think," he said evenly. Then he smiled warmly in total forgiveness. "You will learn," he said magnificently. "I shall teach you."

"Oh, will you?" Alyne was overcome.

I felt sick.

Strek turned to me again, with the same confiding smile of warmth. "Maggie," he said softly. "You do not believe what Alyne has told you about me."

"Uh . . . well, it does seem unexpected that someone from some other world would be such a dead ringer for us Earthlings, look like us and talk like us . . ." and enjoy necking in the dark with us.

Strek laughed lightly. "Come, Maggie, with some seven billion inhabited worlds to choose from, we surely don't have to send some nine-headed hydra from the seas of Alpheratz to mingle with humans. My people are merely the nearest to your own from a very wide spectrum."

Okay, so he was ready for that particular question. Not a bad answer, of course. I didn't bother to ask my next question, knowing he would say that standards of beauty might easily be the same in such a similar species, too. Hence his admiration of Alyne would be no different from mine. Besides, I was afraid he'd hand out the usual crap about inner beauty being more important. Alyne has more inner strength than I have, too.

Strek reached out and placed his hand very lightly on my shoulder. "Maggie, to you it shouldn't make any difference where I come from. I know you wish her well. We love each other, Alyne and I." He smiled again, squeezed my shoulder, and turned back to Alyne. And then they were gone.

Strek was right that it didn't matter where he came from. He was a smooth talker and a slick operator and whether he came from L. A., California, or NGC 999, he was no good for Alyne. I had to get rid of him, if it wasn't too late.

My light was out, and I had been in bed for hours when Alyne returned, but I wasn't asleep. She tiptoed into her room and the light flicked on, a thin horizontal under her door. I rose quickly and crossed to it. She was moving things around with small thuds.

I knocked and opened the door simultaneously.

Alyne was on her knees in front of an open suitcase, clothes and personal articles piled about her. She looked back at me over her shoulder and froze a long moment. Guilt in beauty.

"Without telling me?" I said at last.

"Oh, Maggie, don't be angry. Be happy for me."

"Happy! You're wrecking your life, destroying yourself, abandoning me, over that . . . that . . ."

"Oh, Maggie, he really loves me. An alien loves me, out of all the billions of worlds. He wants to take me with him."

"Where, Chicago?" It was the nastiest place that came to mind.

"Space," she breathed. "To the stars."

"To a flea-bitten motel on the edge of town, more likely," I snapped. "Well, I—"

Alyne rose stiffly to her feet, black hair swaying, her fingers twitching as if they were considering strangulation. Her eyes spun fire. I felt ill with fear of her disapproval.

Alyne stabbed a forefinger with firearm intensity at where she figured my heart to be. "Maggie, you stay clear. You are *not* going to queer up my life, see? What's between me and Strek is our business. I'm not *about* to throw away this chance because of some narrow-minded little Earth female and her scrawny little terrestrial comprehensions." She posed there in her bedroom, tall and proud and magnificent, already a citizen of the cosmos in spirit. Arrogantly, she stared down at my little miserable self. She did it so well I squirmed. Her style had sure improved since the guy from Schenectady.

She turns it on like a switch, I know, but I just can't help it. She's so stupid, but she's so real, so alive, so *Alyne*—and I knew she was getting into serious trouble. I started to cry.

"Please, Alyne, don't go. I'm sorry. Is it my fault if I can't believe? I want you to have your alien lover, but . . ."

She remained standing stiffly in anger, self-righteous indignation personified. In counterpoint, some reveler outside smashed a bottle against the pavement.

"Alyne, what would an alien lover want from a human woman? Haven't you wondered? Even if you're right, Alyne, think! What is he really after? Your body? Your soul? Why would aliens come *here*?"

"No!" Alyne said sharply. She was furious and I shrank before her wrath. "You're wrong, Maggie. You are hopeless. You have no imagination, Maggie, no poetry, no romance, and so you have no insight into the true romance of what does exist."

All I could do was sit on her bed, my head in my hands, listening. And take in her beauty and her strength and her nonsense.

"A year from now, Maggie, I shall be gone. I shall be with my lover, staring down with him from orbit around far worlds, seeing the interplay of shapes and colors no one on Earth has dreamed of in their wildest moments, leaping across the currents of emptiness to meet incredible wonders. And you, Maggie, will be back here on Earth telling yourself that I'm married to an investor in Newark or shackled up with a haberdasher in Gary, Indiana. Now get out of here and let me pack. Strek's waiting."

I crept back into my room and paced, bit my nails. Even if I could save her, I wouldn't get any gratitude. Especially if he really was an alien.

Every time I reached the far end of my dark room I stared out into the night. The damned sky was lousy with stinking stars. I cursed them all, individually and collectively.

I stopped in front of the mirror on my dresser and suddenly hit the light switch. In the bright glare, I looked at my pale and blotchy face. Standard genes where I come from. I tugged at the tight collar of my blouse and brushed back my stringy hair. Comparing what I saw to Alyne, I looked at myself for a long time and felt hot tears press against my eyes. We were similar and yet not. Separate gods had made us, and now I was about to lose her.

Ready to talk, ready to gamble if I could think of a way, I went outside where I could intercept her one last time. I wiped away the tears before I opened the door.

Strek was sitting on the front porch steps, looking up at the stars. Nostalgically? Faking it? Who cared?

"Good evening, Maggie," he said pleasantly. "We thought you were asleep."

"I know," I said. I plopped down on the step beside him and we waited without speaking. The party across the street was still going strong and sent sharp laughter and electronic sonics washing over us at a mild volume.

Alyne swung out of the house with her suitcase and stopped cold when she saw me. "Maggie," she hissed, "go upstairs!"

"Not until we have settled things," Strek broke in smoothly. "Please be quiet, Alyne. How can I help you, Maggie?" He gave me

a confident smile.

"Uh . . ." I was playing it by tone-deaf ear. "Well, Alyne is my friend, even if she doesn't think so at the moment. I can't help but worry about her, out in the intergalactic vastnesses and all. I'm sort of *in loco parentis* for her. Can you really take good care of her?"

"It's no business of—" Alyne started.

Strek stopped her with a curt wave. "No, dear, Maggie's quite sensible to ask. I assure you that all will be well for Alyne. I love her very much."

"What are your prospects, Mr. Strek?"

For the first time, Alyne's alien lover looked blank. "I beg your pardon?"

Alyne theatrically turned away and shook the hair from her face.

"What are your chances for social and financial advancement in universal circles? A woman like Alyne must be assured—"

"I see. I see what you mean. You mean . . . well, you need not fear on that score. I am . . . well, the nearest equivalent would be a prince of the blood."

"Oh, *darling*," squealed Alyne, "you never told me. . . ." She shut up as we both jumped and looked at her suddenly in surprise.

"Only a prince," I said. "In an entire cosmos, mere princes cannot be rare. Why, even this little barbaric planet boasts dozens, mostly indigent and impotent. . . . However," I said loudly, as he began to defend himself, "since Alyne loves you, that will suffice." Time to switch tracks. "What will you feed her?"

Alyne fumed silently at me, but stayed under his command for quiet.

Strek beamed handsomely. "Oh, Maggie, you can have no conception. I envy Alyne the delicate delight of her first taste of the savor of Denebolan bluhan-steak, or the faintly rich tang of Magellanic frettage. Oh, she will eat magnificently, Maggie."

"I see." I paused. "How many XH-negative enzymes in a serving of Magellanic frettage?"

Strek stared at me in the dim porchlight. "How many what?"

I made a meaningless mark on my pad. "Mr. Strek, if you do not take proper account of the distinctive nature of human dietary needs, you are not likely to keep Alyne alive very long, now are you? And what about medical care?"

Strek started to answer, so I hurried on, suddenly realizing my mistake. If he really was an alien, he would have answers for scientific questions. I needed something to reveal how much of a jerk he was, alien or human, before Alyne ran out of patience entirely.

"Never mind, I trust your medical care. How about legal—"

Strek opened his mouth again, so I dropped that one, too. "Say!" I interrupted him. "This is delicate to expatiate upon, but in the absence of prior agreement upon which it is obviously impossible to be certain . . ." In my excitement, I had gotten tangled up in my own syntax. "Will the match bear issue?"

"Maggie," cried Alyne. She isn't usually shocked by these things.

"Obviously," I said, "Alyne may someday desire offspring. Is the proposed union viable? Will your meeting prove fertile?" He tried to respond but I added nastily, "*Could* you enumerate and describe your chromosomal arrangement?"

Our man from the stars was capable of emotion after all. He was on his feet, glaring at me, saying, "Enough of that! I love Alyne. . . ."

"Good, good. Love is very important for a marriage, at least as we conceive of it, though discussion of children is, too. But never mind. I agree to the marriage. When will it take place?"

Strek just gaped at me, for the moment most unheroic in appearance, caught off-balance by my reverse jiu-jitsu. Alyne turned to look at him for the first time since coming outside.

"Strek?" said Alyne quietly. "What *are* we going to do, exactly?"

Surprised, I backed off. Strek was still fumbling.

"Strek." Alyne's voice had a strange edge to it. "How long do you mean us to be together?"

I piped up. "A small human ceremony will meet Alyne's human moral code for marriage and—"

"Shut up, Maggie," snapped Alyne. "Forget about marriage. I want to know about this relationship."

Strek flung his arms out desperately. "Smythe," he said through his teeth, "you must understand that your local marital customs, in view of the sweep of galactic culture, are highly insignificant."

"Stop dodging me," Alyne yelled. "Do you love me? What does that mean in your galaxy? Are you saying you *wouldn't* marry me, even if I wanted you to?"

"I do not have to take this." Strek reared up.

"Answer me!"

"No—"

"*No'?*" Alyne shrieked.

Strek inhaled deeply and steeled himself. "Come with me, Alyne, to taste the wonders of all the universe." He held out his hand imperiously and gave her a gentle smile.

"Go away," said Alyne, quietly and firmly. In control again, she was the Alyne I had lost and now found once more. "Go away, Strek.



Don't come back."

He took one long look at her, and knew it was over.

Alyne stood staring into the night long after her dream alien had gone, the muscles of her jaw clenching spasmodically. The party across the street had finally died and the night was black and quiet. "Liar," she said, over and over. "*Damned* liar." Her humility at being loved by a traveler between the stars was gone forever. Finally she turned back to the house. Without looking at me, she said quietly, "I never want to see you again, either, Maggie."

She said that when the literary agent left, too.

I sat on the porch for a long time, thinking about what I'd done, while she cried herself to sleep. The young June leaves of Ohio whispered from the darkness, keeping me company. I didn't feel very guilty. I'd had to do it for Alyne, and whether Strek was really from outer space or not meant nothing. I wouldn't be surprised if he really were—he had all the earmarks—but that just wasn't the point. Alyne has never been very marriage-minded, but that wasn't the point either. His refusal to take seriously her concern about a long-term relationship wasn't consistent with all his claims. Aliens can be selfish bastards, too.

When her sobbing grew fainter, and finally ended, I came into her room, where I watched away the night. Her lamp was still on and I could see the damp stains on the pillow case under her relaxed and peaceful face, framed by her smooth black hair. She would get over it fast. I never could have.

I sat on the rug beside her bed and gazed at her and thought directly to her sleeping spirit.

—Foolish Alyne. Love strikes across souls, true. And, as you have dreamed, others do come to this speck of rock across space, across time. And yes, Alyne, one has been drawn to an alien mortal here, so drawn that love has sunk into her soul, a hook that will never let her go.

—But a being of the perfection that you imagine, why should such a one cast an eye on you, dear Alyne? You are worthy of love, not from the strong and beautiful, but from the weak and marred.

—My human love, you are all that I am not . . . open and spirited and unafraid. And you will never know.

And, my own cheeks wet, the alien lover turns out the light.



by Peter Payack  
art: Mark S. Haskett

I just finished mopping the dust into little piles  
in the various rooms of the house  
when it dawned on me it was scattered heaps of cosmic dust,  
in many ways similar to those  
that first aggregated into the stars, galaxies, and nebulae  
which make-up the substance of the universe.

As I was musing on the cosmic spark  
that set such a wondrous process into motion,  
I realized I'd better finish up as it was almost dinnertime.

To my utter astonishment  
when I re-entered the parlour,  
the pile of dust was swirling in such a fantastic fashion  
that the cobwebs condensed, glowed, and then burst into flame  
in the form of a twinkling yellow sphere!

Sunstruck, I fled into the library  
only to find a miniature moon whirling  
about the globe of earth kept in the corner.  
I then meekly ventured into the bedroom  
when, with a sudden start, I took a flying leap  
under the covers to avoid being struck by a streaking comet!

Later that night  
while still shuddering behind a pillow  
I peeked out and saw one of the most spectacular displays  
of shooting stars ever to be witnessed by humankind;  
I suspected the comet strayed into the parlour and broke-up  
while passing too close to the sun.

At long last,  
I looked upon all the work that was done  
and was not done, and saw that it was good.  
Then I rested.

Tomorrow,  
I promised myself,  
I'll clean up the mess with a vacuum.



## LAST QUARTER

On Jupiter's second moon, few  
Of the folks are at all well-to-do.  
They work and they sweat  
But they're always in debt  
For their kids all attend Io U.

—Cam Thornley



**SKINNER**

by **Richard Sean McEnroe**

art: **Jim Thomas**



*The author's future plans include becoming a boat bum (providing the government doesn't go after them once it has all the guns and bikes), more writing, and producing the definitive TV SF series, which will move mass media SF up to at least 1957. He also claims to be up to his neck in cats.*

"Chavez, I think you're in trouble."

Joni Thorson's pale, blonde face was done little justice by the distorted image projected by the battered, third-hand phone. Blackstone Freight was not exactly a blue-chip enterprise, however, and it was the best Chavez could afford. At least its battered, grimy, permaplast casing blended in well with the Early Squalor décor of the rest of the office.

"How so, love?" They had met at a party thrown by her father, the System Justice. Up until then His Honor had been on a heavy salt-of-the-earth trip about the pioneer roots he'd risen above. He used to take pleasure in inviting a few of the smaller farmers and businessmen of the colony to his parties for a spot of rustic atmosphere and a little rough trade. His taste for atmosphere had faded after he found two colony senators in the fountain where Chavez had thrown them, and Chavez and his daughter behind the imported rosebushes, all of which Chavez hadn't needed much effort to arrange at all.

"Tovas was in my father's office today."

"What's a Tovas?"

"He's Eli Santer's agent here on Wolkenheim."

"Uh-oh. What did he want?"

"I think they were drawing up a writ against you for insufficient solvency."

"Oh, Christ." 'Insufficient solvency' were ugly words to the financially-strapped in the Hansen System, as they qualified one for the state assigned-labor pool and an indefinite term of indentured service. It wasn't quite the same as slavery. Slaves could be freed.

"I'm sorry, Chavez."

"So am I. Look, love, I'm going to have to cut you off now. I've got some things to do and not much time to get them done."

He switched off, said "Christ" again, and went to work.

First to the bank, to close out the meager savings account. Then

to the lot, to dispose of the battered groundvan that was the sole asset of Blackstone Freight, at an insultingly low price. That put a bit less than twelve thousand Wolkenheimen marks, equivalent to something less than five hundred Confederacy credits, in his pocket.

Then he headed for the Dragon's Den.

Moses Callahan's face fell when he saw Chavez enter the bar.

"Hammer's comin' down, huh?"

"Yeah. Looks like Hizzoner's the jealous type."

"What're you figuring to do about it?" Moses Callahan's greatest claim to fame was his captaincy of the *Irish Missed*, the most modern of the intrasystem freighters working the Hansen System. The *Missed* had been the ship Chavez took passage aboard for the three weeks' trip from the passing starliner to Wolkenheim. Chavez and Callahan had struck up a mild sort of friendship when Moses noticed that Blackstone was not the average starry-eyed, steerage-fare space pioneer. In fact, Chavez Blackstone seemed to have such an uncommon quantity of that misnamed commodity, common sense, that Moses Callahan had wondered how he ever wound up on the ragged edge of the Confederacy in the first place.

So Chavez had told him how the Sinic Premier's yacht had run aground in the Lesser Antilles. The Premier and his niece had been busy chasing Chavez around the foredeck with boathooks because he wouldn't take the Premier's niece—six inches shorter and she had fifteen pounds on him—when offered. Hearing that story, Moses Callahan, who had been run off New Eirinn for wearing an orange sweater during Easter Week, promptly decided he'd found a friend.

Recalling the tale, Chavez wondered if he was falling into a rut.

Wolkenheim had seemed like a good change from Earth, if only in its absence of Sinic Premiers. At first. Then his mortgaged farmstead had produced exactly nine-tenths of a crop before it dried up and blew away; and the smiling, friendly bankers stopped smiling and became very polite, rather than friendly. Politeness is a bad sign in a banker. In the end, it had required an enervating amount of haggling and cajoling and signing of notes before the bank had agreed to let him keep the groundvan. It took him three months to pay off the notes by setting up a light freighting service hauling goods out from Hansen's Landing to luckier farmers. Since then he had been coasting, looking for opportunities and staying more or less on the right side of the sufficient-solvency line to avoid the labor pool. Rather, he had until Judge Thorson threw his party and

caught him in the middle of his flagrant, fragrant *delicto*.

He laid the Wolkenheimen currency down on the table before Callahan.

"I want off," he said.

Moses looked down at the money. "Where do you hope to go on that?"

"As far as I can. Inbound or out, Earth or elsewhere."

"Uh-huh." Moses leaned back and took a pull at his mug of local beer, studying the small, wrapped bundles of banknotes. "Well, now, that's a fair enough sum. It should take you just about anywhere you wish to go. But there's a problem. The next starliner's not due for another month yet."

"Dammit," Chavez said. "What can I do?"

Moses looked down at the money on the table. Then he pushed it back towards Chavez. "You know where the *Missed's* docked. Get onto the port grounds and we'll put you up. But, if there's a writ out on you, they'll be looking for you. You'll have to get there yourself. Don't worry about passage."

Chavez looked at him. "Oh, come on, Cap'n. You've got to let me pay my way."

"No, I don't. I'd be going out to meet her anyway; it won't break me to carry you as supercargo and you'll need money wherever you're going. Besides, those assigned-labor bastards have shanghaied the *Missed* a time or two and I wouldn't mind a chance to return the favor." Also, though he didn't mention it, by not taking Chavez's money, he stood a better chance of avoiding indictment for criminal conspiracy.

"I appreciate this, Cap'n. I mean that."

"Don't thank me until you're aboard," Moses said, "I can't help you until then."

He'd just started across the street as the court limousine pulled up at the Port Gate.

Chavez stepped back quickly into the shade of a doorway. The Port Security Police manning the gate weren't terribly impressed with the civil marshals, but sharpened up smartly as the third man, smallish and well-dressed, emerged from the vehicle. Chavez assumed that to be Santer's agent, Tovas. The on-planet representative of such a powerful merchant would rate considerable respect.

Now Tovas was showing the police on the gate a faxcube. Chavez knew his picture was in it. It was the logical move. The safest place for a fugitive who had friends there was the extraterritorial zone



of a Confederacy spaceport. It would be the first place they would look.

Tovas and the police talked a moment longer, then the agent returned to the car. The civil marshals remained by the gate. Chavez stepped through the door he'd been sheltering in. It turned out to be a trashy gift-shop specializing in overpriced junk for ships' crews on liberty. He bought a lucite desk ornament that he had no use for and stepped back into the street, letting the package wave in plain sight of the marshals as he turned away from them. They were looking for fugitives trying to get into the port, after all, not consumers walking away from it.

He rounded the second corner he came to and turned right, moving along a street that ran parallel to the port fence. Several blocks down he turned right again and headed back towards the port.

There was no sign of the perimeter patrol. Chavez looked harder and finally saw the flashing blue lights of the police agrav sled winking between a warehouse and a grounded lighter far across the field. He swung himself over the fence and started across the wide, empty stretch of permaplast towards the corner of the port reserved for the intrasystem freighters.

He got perhaps halfway.

Suddenly a rectangle of a shadow engulfed him. He spun and looked up, to see the featureless shape of an agrav sled silhouetted against the glare of Hansen's Primary. Another sled was settling to the ground. From the powerful winch and tackle mounted on its prow, it looked to be a cargo handler from a freighter. The markings on its side identified it; it was from the *Abilene*, one of the two freighters Eli Santer operated.

Three spacers had dismounted from the grounded sled, the blunt potato-masher shapes of heavy bass stunners in their hands. The one in front carried a faxcube, as well. Chavez started to back away from them, trying to circle and get the port fence at his back. The junk ornament was heavy in his pocket; he clutched at it hopelessly.

The nearest crewman spoke.

"All right, friend, just take it easy now. This is business, right?"

"If you say so."

"Sure, it is. So why not just come along and get it over with?" He grinned. "What else is there to do?"

"Well, you could let me go, but I'm not counting on that."

"That's not what we're paid for."

"No—" Chavez snapped the ornament at the nearest crewman, turned and bolted for the fence—

—the sequence never progressed that far. As the ornament left his hand, there was a triple impact deep in his chest, like a massive bass-guitar riff from the biggest speaker ever built. The world was shaken into a featureless blur as something picked him up bodily and slammed him into the ground. Then the darkness came.

“We’ll understand each other before you leave here.”

Eli Santer looked down at Chavez from his raised desk. Chavez studied him, interested. He’d never met a man who owned his own planet before.

Eli Santer was a tall, rawboned man with close-cropped, silvery hair that had been blonde once and teeth that flashed startlingly white in his long, seamed face. He spoke in a deep, measured voice, with a quiet undertone that suggested that he was capable of pulling your arms off if it suited him. It was the kind of voice that one quailed before or bridled at. Chavez had never been very good at quailing.

“Now, you’ve read your writ,” Santer said, “and you know why you’re here. Hansen’s System is a growing colony and we haven’t got any room for people who don’t pull their own weight. So, that’s what you’re going to do, friend. You’re going to give me all the work you’re capable of.”

“And what’s in this arrangement for me?”

“Money. You work; you get paid. You work hard enough, hell, maybe you can even buy your own way out of here.”

“That may not be easy.” Chavez pulled his empty wallet from his belt-pouch and tossed it onto Santer’s desk. “I seem to have trouble hanging onto my money lately.”

Santer picked up the wallet, studied it indifferently. “Oh, yes, your money. Eleven thousand, nine hundred and thirty-six Wolk-enheimen marks, to be exact.” He tossed the wallet back. “We’re holding it in escrow, as an advance payment against your initial outfitting and supplies. That leaves you with a balance of—” He consulted the readout on his desk. “—some two thousand marks and change. I’d hold onto it, if I were you. You’ll probably need it.”

“That was a little premature of you, wasn’t it?”

“This isn’t a charitable institution, friend.”

“I didn’t think it was.”

“I’m so glad. Now, until you’ve got your feet under you, we’re going to pair you with an experienced skinner. Rafer Stone, I think. You watch him, you learn from him and maybe you’ll be making quota before the year’s out.”

"What's my quota?"

"Five hides a month, local time, in good condition. Anything else?"

Chavez looked up at Eli Santer, who looked back down at him with all the expression of a bust of Oliver Cromwell. Chavez could feel the presence of the two big men with the bass stunners at his back.

"No. So I guess I shouldn't be wasting my time standing here."

"Uh-uh. You got that wrong. You shouldn't be wasting *my* time. You'd better get used to thinking that way."

"I'll make an effort." Chavez turned to leave. Santer spoke again.

"You know, Blackstone, you really aren't very smart. It wasn't smart to fight back at the port. It wasn't smart to get Judge Thorson mad at you. It wouldn't be smart to get me mad at you. You *work* for me, now. It would be smart to remember that."

Chavez left.

Eli Santer was a smart man, too smart to monkey around with something that already worked.

Eli Santer's grandfather had been part of the 'prize crew' left behind by Fricjk Hansen to establish occupancy in the newly discovered Hansen System, while the ramscoop starship *Valkyrie* drove on outward on its mission of exploration and colonization, never to be heard from again.

The fifty-couple colonies left behind on Trollshulm's sister worlds Hansenwald and Wolkenheim had thrived on those amiable, terrestrial worlds, although there were some who wouldn't have called the muted, arboreal culture evolving on heavily forested Hansenwald 'thriving.' "Zen with chlorophyll" was how one observer had described it.

By the time the first of the following FTL starships, retracing the original courses of exploration, had reached the Hansen System, the colony on savage Trollshulm, on the other hand, had been reduced to the Santer clan, seventeen humans grimly clinging to survival with the help of obsolescent, worn-out equipment desperately nursed along since the original landing. Had the ships come thirty years later, they might have found nothing on Hansenwald; had the commercial prospects of Trollshulm dragonhide, its polychromatic iridescence like fine, flexible, color-case-hardened steel, been less immediately obvious, the Santers might simply have been evacuated off-planet and the Trollshulm colony declared a failure. But as it happened, the dragons and their precious skins left the Santers, and Eli Santer in his turn, with a planet to run and profit to make.

The problem was finding people to make the profit for him.

Not unexpectedly, the number of people willing to leave fertile Wolkenheim for the rigors of life on Trollshulm could have been counted on the fingers of a quadruple amputee, and the foresters of Hansenwald *never* went anywhere else; the leafy depths of their world more than satisfied them.

The sufficient-solvency legislation passed on Wolkenheim had been a help, but even assigned laborers would quit and ship out again as soon as their terms were completed or they saved up sufficient capital. It was difficult to build up a stable work force under such conditions. So to run his planet Santer had looked to the past, borrowing from the earliest legends of industrial civilization, from Fisk and Carnegie and Morgan.

To run his planet Eli Santer had reinvented the company town. If you ate on Trollshulm, you ate food you bought from Eli Santer (and you couldn't live off the land, Trollshulman biochemistry was violently homotoxic). If you drank, you drank his booze; dressed, you wore his clothes. The hides you brought in, shot with the gun he sold you, were bought by his company at his price.

And, of course, since it was so expensive to bring food and guns and supplies in by intrasystem freighter—at least, it could be if you figured it properly—the prices Eli Santer paid for prime hides were never all that much higher than the prices he was forced to charge for these essentials, so if you fell behind quota . . .

Of course, you could always arrange for credit. Eli Santer would be happy to tide you over. Not surprisingly, this policy seemed to encourage people to stay on. Indeed, there were dozens of men and even whole families on Trollshulm who had stayed on long past their original terms and who never gave a thought to leaving. Not before Eli Santer dropped dead from the strain of carrying their debts around, at any rate.

Nine thousand marks didn't go as far as it used to. Chavez said as much.

The dark, attractive Hindustani girl with the disconcerting green eyes of an Anglo ancestor grinned and lifted the shirt part of his field leathers.

"What are you talking about?" she demanded. "Where else are you going to get all this—" She indicated the rest of the pile, underwear, toiletries, field gear, boots and the long knife all dragon skinnners carried. "*—and* a complete set of dragonhide originals for a lousy nine thousand?"

"Yeah, but they're irregulars," he said, taking the shirt and opening it to display the thick scar that marred the iridescence of the back. "It should be marked down."

The girl managed to look offended without meaning it. "Nine thousand is marked down," she said archly. "You don't think we sell the good stuff to the help, do you?"

"The help?"

"You and me, friend."

"Somehow I never considered myself as 'help'."

"Well, I suppose you could consider yourself a convict, but that puts things in such a depressing perspective, doesn't it?" The small red dot of the *bindi* caste-mark on her forehead worked slightly with her quick changes of expression. "Besides, this isn't necessarily such a bad place if you go about it properly."

"Mm-hmm. And what is 'properly'? You have any special tricks for getting along with the management that I should know about?"

She looked him up and down. "None that you could use, I don't think. He's mean, but he's straight."

"Ah. Really."

"It beats mucking around with the bloody lizards, doesn't it?"

"I'm not arguing. But, uh, speaking of mucking about with the lizards, don't I get a gun or something to do my mucking around with?"

"Well, as long as you've paid for one—"

"I did?"

"—I don't see why not." She disappeared back into her shelves. She returned carrying a rifle, still wrapped in its original government-issue plastic. "This is a Kalashnikov/Kern two-by-fifty assault rifle. It takes the standard military sliver and fires it at a muzzle velocity of eighteen hundred meters per second. It has a three-shot-burst and full automatic capability and a burst dispersal area of thirty centimeters at a range of one hundred meters firing from a fixed rest, whatever that means. It doesn't make much difference anyway because a two-by-fifty sliver won't pierce dragonhide at that range."

"Oh, wonderful. Then why do we use them?"

She leaned forward, propping her arms on the counter-top and looking up at him. Her green eyes were bright and startlingly direct against her dark complexion.

"Do you want to try killing a dragon without one?"

"No, no, no," Chavez said quickly, "But why use this model if it's no good?"

"The company got a good price on them when the Wolkenheim militia went over to a new model with a more powerful accelerator. Besides, they'll do the job; you just have to use them properly. That's part of the free lecture."

"Oh, good, I get a free lecture."

"Enjoy it, it will probably be the last free thing you get on this planet. Sit down, sit down." Chavez looked around and took the single chair on his side of the counter. The girl sat on her counter, swinging her legs over to face him. They were very good legs, Chavez noted.

"Free lecture," she began. "As dutifully memorized for newcomers by Ms. Shasti Keane, chief and only quartermaster clerk."

"Dragons are the primary predator in the Trollshulman ecology. They feed mostly on the rooting animals out in the flats and the young of other dragons—"

"What do the rooting animals eat?"

"Sand."

"Sand?"

"They filter the sand of the flats through their digestive tracts and remove the minerals they need. Rather like earthworms with legs. And please don't interrupt; it makes me lose my place."

"Sorry."

"Dragons average some eight meters in length, two meters tall at the shoulder, and some seven tons in weight. Unless hungry or provoked, they're rather lethargic."

"What provokes them?"

She looked at him, somewhat annoyed. "Shooting at them."

Chavez began to deeply resent Judge Thorson.

"There are two problems in dragonskinning. First, a damaged hide is worth less at market. Second, as I mentioned before, a two-by-fifty sliver won't *do* much damage to a dragon's hide. The best technique anyone has worked out so far is to get the animal's attention with a short burst and then try to get the brain through the roof of the mouth as it charges."

"What if it charges with its mouth closed?"

"It eats you, I'd imagine."

"Oh." Chavez considered the matter. "How did I get into this?"

"Eli says you're not very smart."

"I know, we discussed that."

"You *discussed* something with Eli Santer?"

"Well . . ." Chavez shrugged. Then he looked at her, sharply. "*Eli* said?"

She nodded. Chavez snorted with amusement and shook his head.

"I've got a knack, I really have."

"A knack for what?"

He grinned. "I was going to ask you what you did when you weren't giving lectures."

She smiled back, then looked serious. "Pretty much whatever Eli Santer wants me to, really."

"I see."

"Well, it bloody well beats—"

"—mucking around with those bloody lizards, I know," Chavez chorused. "I'm sorry; I wasn't making any judgements."

"That's all right. I do all the time," Shasti said.

"Yeah." Chavez began loading his gear into the pack provided. "What about ammunition?"

"They give you that when they drop you at your camp. For some reason they don't want heavily armed employees wandering around the depot."

"I can't imagine why."

The camp was deserted when the agrav sled that made the regular supply run dropped him off there. The pilot had handed him a single box magazine for his rifle holding a hundred slivers, good for some thirty-three bursts.

Chavez stood in the middle of the 'camp,' which consisted of a single prestoplast hut and a maze of tread prints where a ground trac had come and gone. He looked down at the magazine in his hand. The pilot's assistant had watched him the whole time the pilot had the small munitions locker open, a bass stunner ready in his hand. Chavez didn't like what that implied about Trollshulman labor relations.

The trac prints eventually sorted themselves out and headed off up a narrow pass and out into the flats. Chavez wasn't about to head out there after them, though, not alone and on foot. He entered the hut.

The interior was bare save for two cots, a pair of foot lockers, and a combination microwave-oven/vapor-still connected to the small monopole generator outside. Cartons of foodstuffs were stacked around the oven, most of them open.

Chavez kicked both footlockers to see which was empty, then sat down on its cot and thought about his situation. It didn't require much thinking. Through the good offices of the sort-of cuckolded Judge Thorson, Chavez Blackstone was stuck on Trollshulm for the

next several years or until he achieved financial solvency, doing the equivalent of hunting Kodiak bears with a twenty-two rifle. And there wasn't a damned thing he could do about it. Except survive it.

His mouth tasting as though he had bitten the archbishop of Canterbury and forgotten to spit, Moses Callahan tried to sit up. He couldn't. Further investigation revealed that he was strapped to his bunk, the zero-g restraint webbing securely fastened. *Oh, my*, he thought, *I must have had a good time last night*. It didn't bother him that he could remember nothing of it; if he'd done anything really memorable he was sure to hear about it.

He fumbled open the catches of the webbing and sat up. Moses Callahan was fifty-three years old, with a solid peasant's body whose slightly soft gut belied its own inherent vigor. He didn't feel vigorous, though. As he did every morning after he'd bitten the archbishop, he felt as though he'd aged forty-seven years overnight and arthritis, rheumatism, gout, and the New Ulster pox had conspired to fuse his joints and liquify his flesh in one single, cowardly, mass assault.

He lurched into the head and regarded himself through the maze of ruptured blood vessels surrounding his irises. It's impossible to *like* yourself when you wake up after a serious drunk, but he felt a little better after he rinsed the taste of archbishop out of his mouth and washed off the depilatory salve.

He reëntered his cabin, towelling his face. As he straightened, he noticed the receipt still lying on his desk where he'd left it the day before.

It was a standard receipt from one of the pharmaceutical wholesalers in Hansen's Landing, for the cargo of medicinal herbs the *Missed* had brought in from Hansenwald. Moses stared at it unhappily. Oh, they had won the bid on the contract, all right, and secured the rights to the run; but to beat out the other independent freighters Moses had been forced to cut his own bid to the bone, leaving a wholly unsatisfactory margin of profit. At that, he could never have offered the low price he had if his crew hadn't signed on on a profit-sharing basis rather than straight salary like the local crews. And they'd had to miss the latest rendezvous with the starliner *Hegira* as it passed the Hansen System, as well. At least this was steady work, though, albeit low-paying, and would help to keep the docking fees paid and the writs of garnishee away from his door. For now.



The problem, of course, was progress. As more modern, more efficient ships began to filter out from the more advanced center of the Confederacy, the older vessels working the colonies had been driven out before them or faced lessened commercial viability in competition with the newer ships. The *Missed*, a fusion/magnetics hermaphrodite brig, had possessed an advantage in that until recently, she had moved outward under the impetus of her master's personal difficulties rather than encroaching obsolescence. But more ships were drifting into the outer systems all the time, and the marketplace was getting crowded.

Moses left his cabin and headed for the primary personnel lock, pausing at the galley to draw a cup of coffee. Caffeine and fresh air were a good cure for archbishop.

The hatch slid open. Moses sipped at his coffee—  
—and spat it out. "What in the hell is *that*?"

There was a building in the middle of the dock area that hadn't been there the day before. He knew it hadn't been there. He might see things that weren't there sometimes when he was drunk, but he never *didn't* see things that were.

It was there now, though, a squat and ugly congeries of metallic boxes grown up inexplicably between the slender spires of grounded freighters and shuttles. Quite aside from the impossibility of its being there in the first place, it was the stupidest place to put a building that Moses Callahan could conceive of.

Unless . . .

"That's not a ship," Moses said to himself. "That can't be a ship."

"That's a ship, Captain," Maureen O'Shaunessy said. Moses turned. She was wearing a sloppy, faded robe and carrying her own cup of coffee. Her red hair was tied back away from her fine-boned face. When she was on her own time and not concerned with holding the *Irish Missed* together she looked to be about nineteen years old. Every time Moses Callahan saw her like this he fell hopelessly in love with her all over again, just as he equally uniformly cursed her green eyes before God and man every time she insisted on the expense of making a repair or modification the right way.

"What do you mean, calling that a ship?" he said. "That thing wouldn't fly if you stuck a tactical thermonuclear device under its arse and gave it a good swift kick into the bargain."

"You wouldn't have to go quite that far," Maureen said. "All you'd have to do is push a button. That is the A.S. *Albatross*, formerly of Proxima Centauri."

"The A.S.—?"

"Antigravity Ship." She nodded at his expression. "Evidently they've finally made the process practical on a ship scale. More than practical. According to her captain, she has four times the hold space of any other ship out of this port and she can operate at less than one-third the cost."

"God help us. How is she on performance?"

"For us, awful. She uses a total enclosure drive field, acceleration limited only by duration."

"Good Lord in Heaven. You know what that means, don't you?"

Maureen O'Shaunessy nodded.

"We're broke again."

The *sound* came on the second day, sort of a cross between a submarine klaxon and a senile beagle suffering the death of a thousand cuts. Chavez had no idea what could make a noise like that, but the thin plastic walls of the hut suddenly seemed terribly confining. He took up his rifle and left the hut for the tumble of rocks that backed the camp.

Rafer Stone came streaking into camp, disheveled and unarmed. He was making part of the klaxon/beagle sound.

The dragon was making the rest. A long, bloody scar marked its jaw where Rafer must have shot it. It flowed along the ground with a low, scuttling stride, looking like a great, moving boulder with eight-inch teeth.

Chavez lost a second gaping, then fired. His first shot with the unfamiliar weapon went wide, kicking up dust beyond the charging behemoth. His second caught it in the nearside claw.

The dragon sounded "crash dive" and fell, rolled, and came up facing Chavez. He snapped a burst into the wide stretch of bone between its deep-set eyes. The dragon shook its head and bellowed angrily, revealing the twin half-moons of teeth set three deep. Then it charged, wobbling as it tried to keep its weight off its injured foot.

It was ten yards from Chavez when he fired again and the other front claw went out from under the beast. It slammed head-first into the ground. Chavez thumbed his weapon to automatic. The dragon lurched upright before him, impossibly tall on its hind legs. The great mouth opened and the dragon-sound filled the world as Chavez brought the weapon up and pulled the trigger, not aiming, just pointing the weapon into that gaping vivisectorium and firing.

The massive head slammed back into the ground six feet in front of him. The dragon gave a single, violent shudder and died.

Rafer Stone came gasping up, long-faced and gangly, a Titian

*American Gothic* sort of man. "Jesus, God, thanks, friend—"

"Where's your rifle?"

"Out there, somewhere, with my trac."

"What happened?"

"What the hell do you think happened? I missed."

Chavez said "Christ" again and popped the magazine from his rifle. There were only three slivers left. He shook his head disgustingly and pocketed them. He hadn't meant to fire so profligately, but his first dragon had been a little more impressive than he'd thought it would be.

"What are you doing out here, anyway?" Rafer asked.

Chavez sighed.

"You're supposed to teach me how to hunt dragons . . ."

He learned, gradually.

Rafer Stone had been a farmer himself on Wolkenheim, until the drought before the one that broke Chavez. For the last three years, he had been eking out his own living off the great predators of the south flats. Rafer Stone knew his dragons. He just didn't know much about teaching, which was a sort of backhanded blessing: if you could survive training with Rafer Stone you could survive anything on Trollshulm. Chavez half-seriously suspected that that was why Santer had sent him there. He was wrong in this; Eli Santer would never let a rookie get killed before he'd made some money off him. But still . . .

They were working about fifteen kilometers from camp one day, about two kilometers from the trac, since dragons had quickly learned to avoid the noisy machines. Chavez climbed a small dune to scan their surroundings for dragon sign.

There was a bifurcated geyser of sand and the dune stood up. Sand rained away in all directions, and Chavez went sliding with it down a broad expanse of dragonhide.

A head the size of a horse's chest swung around towards him. Chavez snapped a burst into its face and it flinched away, protecting its eyes. Then he was rolling desperately aside as a clawed hind foot dug into the sand where he'd fallen.

The dragon came whirling around with impossible speed for something so huge. The great maw parted and Chavez and Rafer blew the back of its throat out in one long, concerted burst.

"Yeah, they'll do that sometimes, bury themselves like that," Rafer said, as they watched the dying beast thrashing in a gully. "They gorge themselves and then they dig in to digest, I guess. I

think they like the cooler sand underneath, too.”

“Thanks for the warning,” Chavez grumbled.

“What do you want from me? I can’t think of everything. Why don’t they tell you anything back there?”

“Christ.”

That was how you learned with Rafer Stone.

Progress brought poverty.

Not everywhere, of course. The *Albatross* was making money hand over fist, her income limited primarily by the number of runs she could make, and with an easy capability for travel at three or even four gravities acceleration without undue wear on crew or systems, she could make a great many more than any other ship on Wolkenheim. She didn’t even have to travel fully laden; she could charge enough for the advantage of her speed to offset any unused, unpaid-for holdspace. The asteroid mining companies profited by her existence, to name one example, as did a pharmaceutical combine that hired her into one-sided competition with the *Irish Missed* and her contractors, who found themselves in a situation where their competitors were both underselling them in price and outselling them in quantity to the compradores of the central Confederate companies. That left them one sensible alternative.

Moses Callahan stared at the notice of termination in his hand. It was perfectly legal; the original contract had allowed for termination after six runs and the company was merely exercising its option—and costing Callahan his ship in the process.

The best course of action would have been simply to lift off Wolkenheim and latch the *Missed* to the next passing starliner. The only problem with that was that it didn’t take into account the fact that if the *Missed* left the Hansen System unofficially, she would forfeit the hundred and twenty thousand mark bond she had been required to post as a transient commercial vessel. Moses couldn’t afford that, but if he attempted to file for return of bond, it would be a sure sign that he was going to cut and run; and there was no way that the local government would willingly let a splendid fusion/magnetics brig like the *Irish Missed* out of its hands so easily. Obsolete she might be in comparison with the *A.S. Albatross*; she was still far superior to the antiquated collection of fusion sloops and magnetic cutters engaged in government service. Moses Callahan knew the ways it could be done, any captain in the outsystems knew them: there were only so many starliners coming only so often. It would unfortunately happen that there would be some sort of insurance

question or tax problem or spaceworthiness inspection, and by the time the starliner had passed, the meaty runs to and from the rendezvous point would be over. Then, with the impossible competition of a ship like the *Albatross*, a whole order of performance superior, competition for the in-system subsistence runs like the pharmaceutical contract would become too great. Then would follow steadily increasing groundtime with steadily increasing dock fees, insurance premiums, and operating expenses with steadily diminishing income. And after that would come impoundment for debt, and Moses Callahan would lose his ship.

He crumpled the notice in his fist. It wasn't going to be that easy.

Progress brought unhappiness elsewhere.

Lakim Tovas faced Eli Santer across his desk in his office on Wolkenheim. It was a measure of the seriousness of his news that he had asked Santer to make a rare trip off Trollshulm to hear it.

"The arrival of this ship, the *Albatross*, could actually work in our favor" he said, "We've been running the *Tucson* and *Abilene* at the break-even level or at a slight loss, due to our retaining them on an exclusive-service basis. But with the *Albatross* in-system now, we can probably claim a hefty tax break on a basis of decreased net value."

"We might even consider selling one or both of them to the government," Santer said, "and buying space on *Albatross*."

"We could," Tovas agreed. "It depends on whether or not you want our shipping options under outside control. Also, I think we might do better in the long run with the depreciation deduction over several years rather than with a one-shot sale."

Santer nodded. "All right," he said. "Figure on going with the depreciation, then."

"All right."

Eli Santer leaned back in his chair, studying Tovas. "But that isn't why you dragged me all the way back here, just to talk about taxes. What's wrong?"

Tovas exhaled heavily. "I've been in communication with Johnson, the TerraCo compradore."

"So?"

"They're cutting their purchase price on hides."

Santer sat up slowly. "Are they out of their minds? *They're* cutting the price? How the hell do they think they can get away with that?"

"Evidently, a lab on Earth has claimed that it can reproduce the silicate chains that make dragonhide marketable."

"That's ridiculous. It takes the *dragons* three years to do that properly, and they're claiming they can do it on an industrial basis? That's garbage."

"I know, I know," Tovas said, "and, privately, Johnson agrees with us. I got him to show me a copy of the lab's results. Their product is superior to dragonhide in tensile strength, but hide has better abrasion qualities. Also, their product is more vulnerable to industrial and environmental corrosives and is more permeable to medium intensity radiation."

"So what they've come up with is a flimsier, short-lived substitute for hide, and they're trying to force our price down with this?"

"They claim that the substitute can be synthesized for thirty-percent less than hide price, and that savings approaching that level have been reached in prototype."

"Prototype!" Santer snorted.

"I know," Tovas said again, "but evidently such a potential saving is enough to make TerraCo think it worth their while to put a considerable investment into this process—"

"—and they want to cover this investment by taking it out of my pocket. Well, to hell with that. If they don't want to meet our price they can do without our product. The *Northwest Passage* is the next liner due through—when?"

"In a month and some days."

"Fine. No hides are going out on her."

"And how will we cover the cost of that? You'll still have to pay your skinnners for the hides they bring in; even if you don't, you'll still have the expense of feeding them."

"What do you suggest? Pay them or feed them free?"

"Pay them, by all means. If they have money, we can still justify charging for supplies and that will at least keep *some* capital coming back into the company. But you cannot pay full price on hides, not and miss the *Passage*."

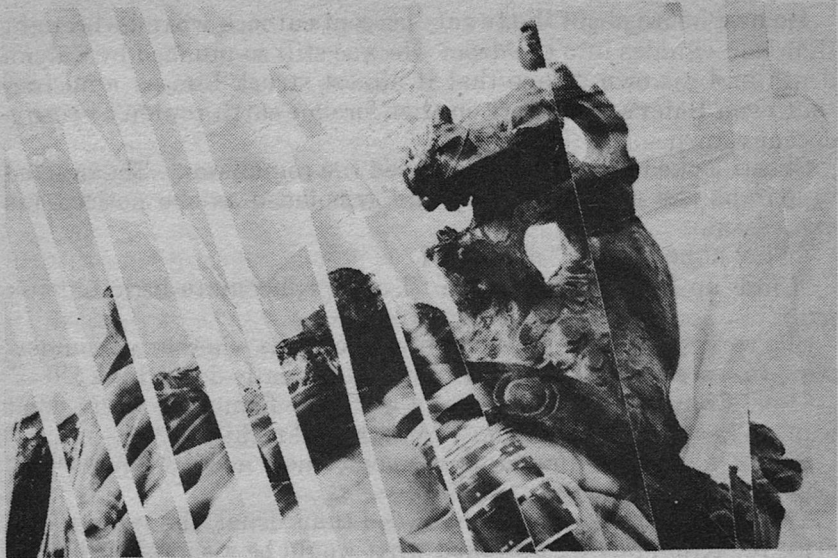
"Don't we have sufficient capital to miss one delivery?"

"Regrettably, no, not at the current rate of expenditures. I'm afraid our outside investments have not been doing as well as they might. The harvests are off somewhat this year, and the arrival of the *Albatross* has thrown the pharmaceuticals market into a confusion from which I fear we will not emerge entirely unscathed."

"We have money in the *Irish Missed*?"

"Unfortunately."

Santer scowled. "All right. We'll reduce the payment for hides received by twenty per cent, then."



"Will your people on Trollshulm stand for that?"

"They'll have to. We'll offer better terms on credit to keep them happy, though. Besides, where the hell else can they go?"

Rafer Stone died the way he taught: sloppily.

Their trac crested a dune and slid down the opposite face—right on top of a burrowing dragon. The little machine was tossed into the air and Chavez landed heavily on his back. His sight blurred on impact and cleared just in time to see the massive jaws close on Rafer. Stone never screamed; he never had time. The dragon just shook its head, and he came apart like a gory straw mannequin.

The great, sanguine head swung around towards Chavez. His rifle was nowhere in sight. He clawed the heavy, useless knife from his belt—he'd once asked another skinner what good a knife was against a dragon and the skinner said, "When it corners you, cut your throat."—and raised it over his head, clutched in both hands, hopelessly. The dragon started towards him—and spasmed on the alien poisons in Rafer's body.

It was several minutes before the dragon finally died from Rafer's tainted flesh, and over an hour before Chavez could bring himself to start skinning it.

He first heard about the twenty percent cutback when he brought that load of hides into the depot. He was still so numbed by Rafer's death and his own escape that it almost struck him as amusing, that even Rafer's last effort on that foreign earth couldn't bring a decent return.

Shasti looked up as Chavez entered the commissary. She started to grin as she recognized him; the grin faded as she noticed his expression.

"What's the matter?" she asked.

"Close up here," Chavez said. "I need someone to have a drink with."

She smiled again, a little weakly, uncertain whether she understood his mood. "I'd like that, Chavez, but I really don't think Eli—"

"No," Chavez said, very quietly and very firmly, "I *really* don't want to hear about Eli Santer right now, all right?"

Shasti looked at him for a moment, then nodded. "All right, Chavez."

The depot canteen was less crowded than usual, the news of the price reduction having provoked what would be a short-lived burst of economizing among the skimmers. They would be back, though. Alcohol was too central a necessity for dealing with the realities of life and dragons.

Shasti sat across from him at a table in the corner of the low permaplast building, sipping sparingly at her drink. Chavez had already finished his second and was pouring his third.

"Tell me something," he said. "Just how many people ever get out of here?"

"I couldn't say for sure," Shasti said. "I've only been here a year and a half myself."

"What happened to whoever was here before you?"

Shasti shrugged. "At any rate, since I've been here, I think I've seen maybe four skimmers leave. Of course, one of them had no legs."

"Oh, well, that's just wonderful," Chavez said.

"Chavez." He looked up from his brooding at the tone in her voice. "You *can* get out of here," she said. "Most of them around here have accepted the way things are; they've accepted the debts and the price fluctuations and always being behind. You don't have to, I think. I really believe that you could hold back enough money to get away from here in a year or so."

"You do, huh?" Chavez swallowed half his drink. "Rafer Stone's dead," he said.

"Oh, no—"



"I went over to Accounting, to take care of his effects and all," he continued. "And do you know how much he needed to declare solvency and lift out? Five thousand marks. You know what he had on account? Four thousand, three hundred and seventy-five. And do you know how he died? Lousy, stupid bad luck. That was all there was to it, just luck." He finished his drink and began to pour another, then swallowed a portion of it. "So maybe I can get out of here, I don't know. I do know that I'm not going to knock myself out trying for it. There's too much luck involved . . ."

"And you don't trust yours?"

Chavez finished his drink and reached for the bottle.

Chavez's new partner dropped off the sled three days later.

Duncan Joubouline was a short, stout little man with a round face and prominent teeth that he showed in a constant, nervous grin. His partner had lifted out with his legs gone a month ago, and it had been decided to consolidate the two short-handed teams rather than add to expenses by bringing in fresh men. He was extremely voluble, with a quick, rather high voice, but after a while Chavez learned to more or less tune out his constant chatter, much as he might have tuned out a dull threedee program in the background as he went about the day's work. It was a necessity. Otherwise, the incessant good-natured chatter would have driven him to wring Duncan's neck in a week.

"Been here three years," he was saying. "Doing pretty damn good for myself, too, if I don't say so myself. Another three years and I'll be out of here, that is, if they don't decide we have to work for nothing instead of twenty percent off, right, hey? Right?"

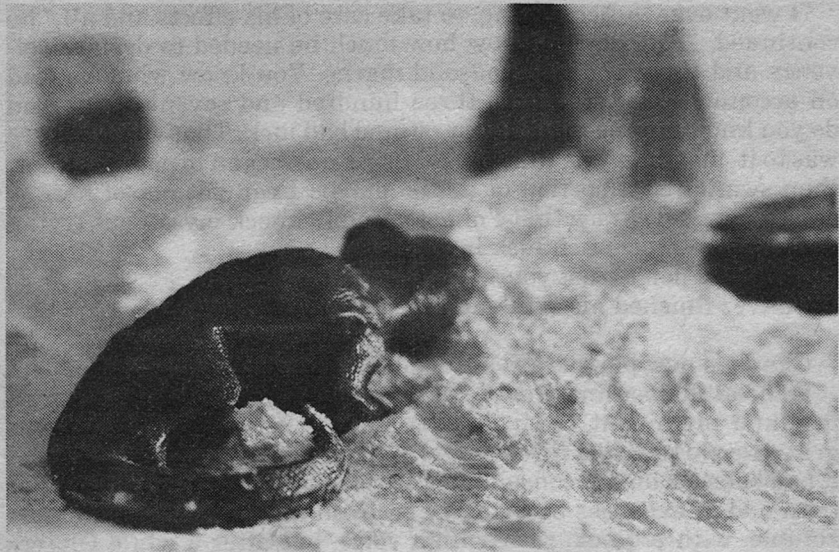
"Right." Chavez made the least committal answer possible. It didn't make any difference to Joubouline, apparently, but if he didn't say *something* the little ass would keep on trying to get his attention.

"Damn right. You know—"

"Quiet." There were sounds coming from further up the wash they were moving along, great whoofing and chuffing noises.

"Dragon hunting," Chavez said.

He unslung his rifle and scabbled up the side of the wash to higher ground, squatting when he reached the top to make less of a mark on the horizon. Ahead he could see gouts of sand being flung into the air around a bend in the wash, tan surface stuff and the darker, moister sand found below. He could not see the dragon, could not tell which way it faced; in its turn, it was too busy pursuing its burrowing prey to pay attention to its surroundings, otherwise it



would probably have heard their approach.

Chavez slid back down the slope to the waiting Joubouline. The little man was standing in the middle of the wash, nervously shifting his weight from foot to foot and fingering the stock of his rifle. His eyes were fixed in the direction of the dragon-sounds.

"I found it, but I can't see how it's positioned," Chavez told him. "There's a branch about a hundred yards behind us that looks like it rejoins this wash just past the dragon. You go that way, then at least one of us should be able to get behind it without being seen."

"Yeah. Right." Joubouline didn't move. Chavez suddenly noticed the sweat beading up on the man's forehead.

"Hey, are you all right?"

It was a moment before Joubouline seemed to hear him. "Huh? Oh, yeah, I'm all right, I'm fine."

"You're sure?"

"I'm sure, I'm fine." He turned and started back the way they had come. Chavez watched him out of sight, then began to move towards the wash.

The dragon had captured its prey, a many-legged burrower, species impossible to determine from the gory ruin wrought by teeth and claws. It was not exactly facing him, but rather more quartered

towards him so that he could look down its entire length. He set his rifle to his shoulder and took aim.

The sound of gunfire came from beyond the dragon. It reared up and whirled, and as it rose Chavez could see Joubouline, his face a blind, ghastly mask of fear, rifle at his hip, firing at the beast on full automatic, hosing it down with useless slivers up and down its body. He wailed and spun away as the dragon lunged forward in pursuit.

Chavez cursed and snapped a burst into the creature's flank, but it had an enemy in sight before it and would not be diverted by such a feeble sting.

Chavez quickly slung his rifle and clawed his way up the side of the wash again. He sprinted across the open ground towards the path Joubouline had taken. If he didn't flee the way he'd come there was no way Chavez could help him. If he did Chavez would have to put himself square in the path of a charging dragon.

There was a dragon-roar, then another, closer. Chavez altered his course appropriately, to cut them both off. Rifle in his hands, he practically ran straight off the lip of the gully. He slid down its side and rolled, coming to his feet just as Joubouline and the dragon rounded a bend towards him. Joubouline yelped as he saw the levelled weapon and threw himself aside. The dragon had built up far too much momentum to do the same. The lethal mouth opened in a roar and Chavez fired.

It was too close. There was nothing for Chavez to do but keep firing but the dragon was too close and it wasn't going to stop in time—

—the impact threw him back and to one side. He struck the wall of the gully and dropped like a wad of sacking. The last thing he remembered was a massive gleaming body crashing down in a cloud of dust.

When he regained consciousness he saw the corpse of the dragon sprawled beyond him. He opened his eyes and saw the tip of the still-twitching tail. Automatically, he followed it up its length. The dying dragon had thrashed itself onto its side, and Chavez could see the gouges of gunfire along its left flank. None of the slivers had penetrated the tough hide far enough to do any injury; all of them had ripped up enough surface tissue to make at least half the skin unmarketable. That wasn't good, Chavez thought dazedly, that was very sloppy work. . . .

He stood up, stiffly. There were no sudden stabs of pain to indicate broken bones, but the ribs on his right side were very sore. Probably

tore some cartilage, he decided, and was very pleased with himself for making such a clever diagnosis. He found his rifle—and congratulated himself for thinking of it in spite of how confusing everything was—and started back for the trac. It wasn't there. That struck him as being remarkable, until he finally figured out the funny way the tracks curved back away from where they'd left it, parallelling themselves. Then he started off along them.

It was a very long walk, and Chavez didn't remember very much of it. It was dark out when he reached the camp again, and he stumbled towards the hut, his way lit only by the cool green light of Hansenwald overhead.

He held on long enough to stumble over to the vapor still, where he drank down more water than he ever thought he could possibly have held, and then he dragged the drunken Duncan Joubouline off his bunk and beat the holy living hell out of him before he passed out again.

It was daylight when he woke up again.

Evidently he had been right about how much water he could hold; he came to lying in a treacly puddle of his own vomit. His head said all manner of rude things to him as he dragged himself to his feet and lurched over to the radio.

The infirmary surgeon was a model of the type. Was Chavez coughing up blood? No? Then he probably hadn't broken any ribs. It sounded as though he had a pretty fair concussion, though, so if he began to feel drowsy, he should call in quick—what? Well, in that case he'd probably live, then.

Through all this Duncan Joubouline sat on his bunk, staring at him miserably through a purpled and puffy face. The doctor switched off at his end and Chavez set the microphone down, then looked at Joubouline as though just noticing him for the first time.

"You still here?"

"Where the hell was I going to go?"

"That didn't seem to be a problem yesterday."

"Yeah. . . ."

Chavez drew a mug of water and rinsed his mouth out. He nearly vomited again when he swallowed some of it.

"Start packing," he said, "I'm putting in for a new partner. You're going out on the next sled."

"I'm afraid not."

"What?"

"There aren't going to be any new partners, not for a long time."

Word around the depot before I came out here is that Santer's hurting for money—that's why the cut in hide prices. He's not going to bring in any new men when he can't afford to pay the ones he's got. So, it looks as though we're stuck with each other, my friend."

"Oh, well that's just wonderful," Chavez said, slumping down on his bunk. "Christ. I can't believe you've been here three years. Did you ever see a dragon before?"

"Not a moving one, not but the once."

"Then where have you been getting your hides?"

"We used to—my partner and I, his name was Ch'uan-hsi Cheng—we used to wait until they'd gorged themselves feeding and dug in to sleep it off. Then we'd dig down to their heads and get 'em through the eyes."

Chavez was impressed. "That's not a bad idea."

"Mister Cheng was a very inventive fellow. And it was a very good idea indeed, except for the one time it didn't work. Either we started digging too soon or this particular dragon was a light sleeper."

"It woke up."

"It woke up, and that was when friend Cheng lost his legs. I never hoped to see anything like that again, and then you went *looking* for it."

Chavez nodded. "I see." He understood the little man's panic now. He didn't regret beating him up for deserting him, but he understood it.

"Well," he said, "If I'm stuck with you, I'm going to work you. I'm out here to skin dragons, friend, and that's what we're going to do. Just one thing: if you ever run out on me like that again, I'll kill you. All right?"

"Yeah." There was nothing else he could have said.

Duncan Joubouline never ran out on him again, but he never woke up sober again, either. He'd brought a bottle with him in his luggage, and he ordered a case on the next sled. Whiskey fetched more than forty marks a liter back in depot. A case would last him perhaps two weeks, which gave him a four hundred and eighty mark a week habit.

Chavez tried to talk to him about it, tried to point out that at nine hundred marks a shot he was putting himself so deep in the hole that he would never get off Trollshulm. Of course, there was no reasoning with a committed drunk; he knew what his money situation was; he kept track of it with all the diligence of a wino hoarding

up his spare change for a pint. He knew what he was doing, god-damit, so just leave him the hell alone. The bill mounted.

The price of medicinal herbs on Wollkenheim fluctuated wildly. Fascinated by the cheap transport offered by the *Albatross*, the companies contracting with her had overbought dangerously; and the in-center Confederate companies were working to push their prices down with the lever of overstocking. The combine that had hired the *Missed*, that Santer had invested in, was forced to lower its prices right along with them, to stay competitive. Santer reduced his hide-price by twenty-five percent instead of twenty. There were grumblings on Trollshulm and he was forced to cut the interest on his credit to the bone.

The bottom fell out of the herb market when news leaked out that one of the Confederate compradores had been systematically looting his company's accounts, and that there was no money to back up his purchases. The sudden influx of unsold herbs drove prices right through the floor.

Santer cut the rate on hides by half.

"What the hell do you *mean*, six hundred marks?" Joubouline squealed. "We're bringing you six prime hides! Are you trying to tell me you're paying a lousy hundred marks a hide for prime?"

"That's the new rate," the clerk said.

"Well, to hell with that! I won't take it! *We* won't take it! We're not going to take it, are we, Chavez?"

"I don't see anyone else making us an offer," Chavez said.

"There, you see? He understands," the clerk said. "Look, friend, we can't pay you with money we haven't got. It's a bad deal, I know; but if you're tight we can open up a line of credit for you. No interest until the prices go back up." The clerk knew his job. He had a bass stunner within easy reach under his counter, but he still didn't want any trouble. It was easier to make the customer think you were on his side, that you were trying to help him. That way you could get him to do most anything you wanted.

Only this time it wasn't working. Duncan Joubouline had just had his whiskey economy shot to hell, and he couldn't see beyond that. He turned from the counter and practically ran from the accounts office. Chavez sighed and signed over the hides.

Since he couldn't afford to drink anymore, the first thing Joubouline did was rush to the canteen and buy a bottle. Chavez caught up with him there.

He had settled into a steady rhythm by the time Chavez came in, tossing off shots of whiskey and muttering "goddamit, goddamit, it isn't fair, goddamit," while he refilled.

"Well, that's sure going to help," Chavez said. He was past making allowances for Joubouline's failings.

"Oh, ain't nothing going to help," Joubouline said. "They got us right where they want us. We gotta take what they feel like giving us, that's how they figure; and *if* they ever decide to raise the price again, we'll be so far in the hole we ain't never gonna get off this mudball."

"So buying that dishwasher won't help."

"At this point, friend, it can't hurt."

Chavez had made his token effort at reformation; his conscience was clear. He turned away from Joubouline and nursed his own beer.

He was brought out of his reverie by a blurred after-impression of sudden movement at his side and the sound of breaking glass as Joubouline smashed the empty bottle against the back of the bar.

"Goddamit, it ain't fair!" he screamed, and bolted from the canteen. There was an embarrassed silence as the few occupants of the canteen stared at the bits of broken glass on the shelf.

Then they heard the shots.

Everyone rushed outside. The scene was surprisingly normal. There was no panic; there hadn't been time. No one was sure yet which direction to panic in. Everyone in sight around the depot was frozen where they stood: a cluster of skimmers where they had been talking by the trac-train loading dock, looking around themselves, another crouched immobile over the bundled hide he'd just wrestled off his trac, still gripping the baling hooks thrust through the cording. Then came the tearing-canvas sound of high-cyclic automatic weapons fire, and the street cleared in a mad scramble of bodies. Sprawled in the doorway of the canteen, Chavez then saw the crumpled bodies of two men before the sliver-ripped door of the accounts office and one of Santer's private guards slumped against the wall of the commissary, staring at the bloody mess Joubouline's skinning knife had made, of his gut. Then the gun fired again and Chavez rolled to safety as slivers gouged the permaplast above his head.

The siege of Duncan Joubouline was three hours old.

As sieges went, it worked both ways. Of course, Eli Santer's pack of headhunters had swiftly ringed in the commissary, but even so, the knowledge that Joubouline had several windows and a Kalash-

nikov-Kern with a full, thousand-sliver drum magazine kept most people from going about their business unless they could do it where they stood.

The two bodies in front of the accounts office had been removed. The headhunter sprawled by the commissary door had been left there and had finally died about an hour after his stabbing. The headhunters held that job because they had proved more adept at killing men than dragons; that was not the kind of qualification that spawned the sort of camaraderie that would lead one headhunter to risk himself for another in a situation like that, in spite of the fact that Joubouline had called out to them several times and told them that they could pick the man up safely.

The headhunters didn't really know how to handle this situation. At first, when Joubouline was still firing, still working on his booze-fueled rage, the appropriate response seemed simple: grab a corner or a trac fender to hide behind and shoot back. That had stopped when Anders Trebig, the headhunter captain, had realized that most of the stuff in the building they were blowing the hell out of, up to and including Shasti Keane, was Eli Santer's property. Then they had tried saturating the building with bass stunner fire, again until Trebig compared the expense of that tactic in exhausted enerpac's with the probable results through ten centimetres of permaplast. So the salvo was reduced to an occasional potshot or three.

Then somebody had struck upon the bright idea of sending in Chavez. After all, he was the man's partner; he should be able to talk him into surrendering. And if he couldn't, well, that was one less stomach on the budget. Eli Santer was fast reaching the point where that was a valid consideration.

It was an awful long walk across the empty street between the massed guns on the one hand and Joubouline's uncertain reception on the other. Chavez halted ten feet from the door to the commissary.

"Joubouline? Duncan? It's me, Blackstone," he called out. He flinched as a bass stunner's fringe effect brushed him and the wall of the commissary shook under the impact, and braced for the shock of a sliver-burst in return. When it didn't come, he turned and bestowed a vicious glare on the assembled headhunters. One of them offered him an upthrust finger in reply. Chavez shook his head and looked back to the commissary.

"Duncan? I'm gonna come in. I'm not carrying." He had no rifle. He pulled his knife from its scabbard and laid it down carefully on the ground, then opened his shirt to show that nothing was concealed there. "I'm clean, I'm coming in, all right? Duncan?"



There was no answer. Chavez waited. So did Joubouline, apparently. Chavez turned and look back at the headhunters' positions again. He could see Anders Trebig and a new face, Santer himself, watching him impassively. He shook his head and started forward.

Duncan Joubouline was leaning against one wall as Chavez entered. He didn't look at him. Broad patches on every wall that opposed a window had been chewed up by sliver-fire; and one shelf had been shot to scrap, its contents, some kind of canned foods, dripping stickily down the wall.

Shasti Keane was sitting huddled in a corner, knees drawn up. There was a triple-thud as another volley of stunner fire struck the walls. It wasn't so bad through the permaplast, not more than twice as painful as sticking your head inside a bass drum, but Shasti curled in on herself as though she'd been electrically shocked and the muzzle of Joubouline's rifle swung through a foot-long arc. Evidently sustained exposure to even such an attenuated barrage was no picnic. As she straightened up she mumbled something foul in fluent Pushti.

Joubouline was no longer drunk, at least not violently so. The flesh seemed to hang slack on his face, as though the task of maintaining any expression wasn't worth the effort to him any longer. His eyes were bleak eyes, haunted by a fatal certainty.

Chavez looked at him, and had no idea what to say, at first. He felt terribly clumsy and conspicuous standing there in the doorway, so he moved inside and out of sight of the waiting headhunters and, parenthetically, out of the line of fire.

Joubouline did him a favor and broke the silence first.

"Well," he said. It was a sentence in itself. "I guess we've got us a problem here."

Chavez repressed the urge to say that *he* didn't. "Yeah. I guess so."

"Yeah. I suppose they sent you in here to talk me into surrendering."

Chavez suddenly felt sick at what he was being asked to do. "Yeah, but that's crap and we both know it. Man, you crossed Eli Santer; you caused him trouble. You can stay in here, or you can come out with me; either way you're dead. He won't let you get away with this."

"No, I didn't really think he would. I *had* to do it, though," he said. "I had to, Chavez. Them robbing us like that; I never would have caught up again, you know? I'd never have gotten home. And now I'm stuck in here." He smiled, as much as he could without

moving his face. "I'm always stuck somewhere."

A sudden wave of identification washed over Chavez. He couldn't see Duncan Joubouline anymore; he didn't see him leaning wearily against the wall there. He saw himself, Chavez Blackstone, and he knew he was seeing truly. Maybe not very soon, maybe not that year, or the next, or the next after that; but he would be there, with the same slack, beaten expression, destroyed as utterly as the little man in front of him by his complacent acceptance of his domination by others out to further their own ends regardless of what happened to him.

He would not let that happen. But in the meantime there was something he had to do, the only thing he'd really hoped to do when he entered the commissary.

"You're dead, man," he said, and if it was possible to say something like that sympathetically, that was how he said it. "But there's no reason to get us killed with you. At least let the girl and me out of here before they come in after you."

"All right." It clearly made no difference one way or the other to him.

Chavez helped Shasti to her feet and moved towards the door. He cautiously extended one arm into the opening and waved, calling out—

—before he could say anything his arm was thrown violently back at him, numbed by the first shot in the thundering volley of bass stunner fire that seemed as though it would jolt the building right off its foundations. As he threw himself down, dragging Shasti with him, he could make out the thin, whistling sound of high-velocity slivers threaded through the basso detonations that shook the air. The room filled with a powdery cloud of shattered permoplast. He looked up and saw Joubouline thrown against the wall by the impact of a sliver-burst.

Duncan was still on his feet when the first of the massed headhunters burst into the room, his shoulder ruined and dripping blood, staring stupidly at the rifle he still gripped by the barrel. Evidently that was a threatening-enough gesture; the lead headhunter shot him again point-blank through the chest.

Then the room was full of headhunters, crowding them so closely that they couldn't stand up, so eager to make sure that they were all right that none of them noticed that they kept stepping on Chavez's numbed arm.

Santer and Trebig watched dispassionately as Duncan Joubouline was carried from the commissary. Chavez and Shasti followed the

headhunters carrying the body.

There was an odd light in Shasti's eyes, a strange expression on her face that couldn't entirely be explained by the prolonged stunner bombardment. Or perhaps it could, at that.

Santer looked down at her and grinned as she walked up to him. The grin went away but the teeth stayed very much in evidence as she snapped her foot straight up between his legs. Trebig grabbed belatedly for her arms as Santer folded and she went for his eyes.

Chavez felt a prickling on the back of his neck, like you would feel in the air just before a thunderstorm on a humid day. He looked up to see the pregnant knitting-needle shape of the *Irish Missed* drifting down out of the sky on magnetic drive.

Dragonhide leathers didn't suit Shasti Keane. Neither did the spreading bruise on her cheek. Santer had eventually recovered.

Chavez studied his new partner as he thought back on his meeting with Moses Callahan in the depot canteen. The *Missed* had ended up on the Trollshulm run through some elaborate maneuvering on Santer's part. Evidently he could gain some kind of tax benefit by keeping his own ships grounded due to the price dispute with TerraCo, and shifting the *Missed* over to his supply runs to honor the six-run clause in the contract he been a party to signing. It didn't change a thing as far as Moses Callahan was concerned. Work was still going to be very, very thin on the ground once the contract expired.

He wasn't thinking about that just then, though. He was too busy being angry over the Judas Goat gambit Chavez had been duped into.

"This whole bloody system is falling apart," he complained. "Bas-tards like this Santer press-ganging honest folk right and left, and the government going right along with it, mind you; it's getting to the point where a man can't even hold on to what's his anymore."

"Yeah, well, there's a lot of that going around, Cap'n."

"Don't I know it. Why, do you know that on the last run I made from Hansenwald, some swine of a customs officer demanded a bribe to clear my hold invoices? Demanded! The son-of-a-bitch didn't even wait for me to offer it."

Chavez nodded. "It's definitely time to be moving on, I think."

"Sure and it is, but how are we to do it? You can't get out of here until you've credit to your name again, and that's never going to happen, between the arrangement they have here and Judge Thorson after you back on Wolkenheim. And if I leave, I'll either lose

five thousand Confederate credits I can't afford to lose or have my ship tied up in paperwork until it's too late and the government takes her. Honest men like us can't win, my friend."

Chavez thought about that one for a moment. "Yeah, they can't at that, can they?" He drained his beer. "Cap'n, I've got a suggestion. . . ."

Shasti proved to be quite a good dragonskinner. She was careful about choosing her positions and placing her shots, but not so cautious that she wouldn't hold her place and fire until she dropped her kill. And in the skinning-out itself she excelled. She would wade—literally—right in, working the heavy knife and muttering to herself in a steady monologue of Pushti, with an occasional Anglic "sonofabitch" thrown in. Chavez doubted that her mind was entirely on her work.

They were escaping. Gradually.

For every two hides they turned in at depot, they had another buried in a cache at their camp. Into other hiding-places went the stray slivers they hoarded from depleted magazines, the canned and concentrated foods they stashed away a can or a packet at a time. But perhaps their most important resource wasn't one that could be so easily concealed, but only contained. It was anger, anger reserved for Eli Santer, for getting them shot at and taking money from their pockets to pay his own bills, anger that fueled their plans for burning him right where he'd feel it most.

Right in the wallet.

The *Irish Missed* rested in her cradle at Hansen's Landing, towering over the older, smaller *Tucson*, sistership to the Santer freighter *Abilene* grounded on Trollshulm. Moses Callahan sat on his throne at the back of the control room, surrounded by his screens, which repeated in digest the information displayed before engineer and pilot.

He touched the intercom stud. "Lady Macbeth, are you with us?"

"The name is O'Shaunessy, sir. I'll thank you to remember it." Maureen O'Shaunessy was probably the only person in the Hansen System who could *sound* redheaded, even over a tinny intercom speaker.

"Listen, O'Shaunessy, ship's engineers are supposed to be Scottish. I'll not be breaking an honored tradition just for the sake of such as yourself, ma'am. Now by any chance, might our engines be ready?"

"They're readier than you deserve."

"Now, how can that be? I deserve the best." Prudently, he switched off. "At your convenience, Mister Hallorhan," he said to his pilot. "I believe everything is in order."

Hallorhan shifted his spare frame in his seat and straightened, a movement suspiciously like that of a man waking up. He threw several switches and murmured into the microphone hung in front of his face.

"All set, Captain," he said. "Control confirms our course and acknowledges ETA Hansenwald one four four hours Greenwich."

"Well, it'll be a shame to disillusion them, but that'll do for now. Take her out, Deke."

Deke Hallorhan pressed a final button and the atmospheric drive hummed into life. The *Irish Missed* twisted gently in her cradle, then began to rise gracefully as the drive gripped the magnetic flux lines of the planet and tried to push them away.

So slowly at first, and then faster and faster, she climbed away from the docks and groundside law. The scream of rushing air began to penetrate even the insulated control room, then just as quickly faded away as the *Missed* rose serenely above the complaining atmosphere.

"Legal distance," Hallorhan called out.

"Lady Macbeth, you can light your candle."

Pale fusion fire blossomed behind the *Missed* and she continued to accelerate at a constant one gravity, egged on no little by O'Shaunessy's grumblings.

"Mister Hallorhan, how long before *Natchez* reaches the earliest possible rendezvous point?"

"On our current timetable?" Buttons punched. "Nine days Greenwich, sir."

"Very good, Mister Hallorhan. Steer on."

"Aye aye, sir."

"Then you can resume your nap. But do remove your microphone. I still have that reprimand from the Port Authority for the last time you jammed all the approach frequencies."

"Sir?"

"You do snore, Mister Hallorhan."

"Oh."

"It's been a disappointment," Shasti admitted.

They were sitting in their little plastic hut, nursing drinks poured from a bottle she had found in the bottom of Joubouline's locker. It

was night; the only sounds were their voices and the muted buzzing of the generator outside. The single light-plate in the hut was never intended to provide full illumination, but it did cast a warm, rather subdued light, oddly well-suited to drinking and talk.

"I didn't come out here on my own, you know," she went on. "I was sent. The government came to our village and told us that we'd have to contribute so many people to the colonization program if we were to qualify for any government assistance. So we did, and of course the little half-Anglo bitch got chosen to go along.

"So, we all wound up on Ramayana Three, and then the plague hit, and when it had run its course, the survivors were scattered all over colonized space. I wound up on Wolkenheim, looking for work; and I didn't find it in time, so I wound up here."

She paused to sip at her drink. She could be nearly as talkative as Joubouline had been, sometimes, but Chavez found that it didn't bother him. She never talked to hear the sound of her own voice; if she said something it was because she needed to say it. And Chavez found that he wanted to listen.

"It's a disappointment, though," she finally said. "I always thought I was worth more than one-eighth of a tractor; I'd hoped my price would run a little higher out here. Guess it doesn't, though."

Not realizing what he was saying until he'd said it, Chavez said, "I guess that would depend on the what the buyer thought he was buying, wouldn't it?"

Shasti looked at him. "Yes, I suppose it would, at that."

The *Irish Missed* drove on towards the binary worlds Trollshulm and Hansenwald, silent and graceful. Even within her, the loudest sounds were the ventilation fans and the muted burbling of the fusion flames in their magnetic pinchbottles.

Moses Callahan was proud of his ship, in spite of her age. All right, so perhaps fusion-and-magnetics hermaphrodites were not very economical next to an agrav freighter, but she was sound and faithful, and Moses wouldn't have traded her sweet lines for one of those boxy newcomers if you'd threatened to shoot the Pope-In-Absence. It was the same feeling, he supposed, that the sail captains must have felt while they were losing the seas to steam, or the dirigible masters as they watched a clunky trimotor blunder past.

Progress was a spiteful mistress, however; and sooner or later her more faithful suitors would emerge from their labs and classrooms and factories to elbow Moses aside for her affections once again. It

was as good a time as any to be moving outward, he decided, to another world where the *Missed* would still be competitive.

Moses Callahan looked over at his pilot. To Moses, deep space was a place for thought and introspection, where he could pull out his soul and see if the various petty stains had grown any deeper. To Deke Hallorhan, deep space was for sleeping, a place where once he had cleared the clutter of challenging and attention-demanding orbital junk and traffic, he could lock his board and devote himself to some serious somnolence. Moses believed that Deke Hallorhan was perfectly capable of initiating a midtrajectory correction without missing a rapid eye movement. He would have been scandalized to learn how nearly correct he was.

By that time Trollshulm had grown to a distinct, brassy sphere in their screens. Green Hansenwald, their ostensible destination, could just be seen as an emerald crescent beyond it.

"Mister Hallorhan," Moses said, "it's time to send our message."

"Yes, sir." Without sitting up in his locked-back seat, Deke Hallorhan picked up the slender cassette and slipped it into the transmitter.

A recorded voice rasped out of the monitor, interlaced with carefully added static:

*"Mayday, Mayday—IF Irish Missed, Mayday . . . pinchbottle failure in starboard fusion unit . . . engineer dead, captain injured and unconscious. Mayday, Mayday. . ."*

There was a lapse of some forty minutes, the signal patiently repeating itself, before the first reply reached them from Wolkenheim.

*"IF Irish Missed, IF Irish Missed, this is Wolkenheim Control. Transmission acknowledged; what are your intentions?"*

Hallorhan quickly cut the tape, keeping the transmission frequency tuned just the least bit off to maintain the static fuzz.

*"Wolkenheim Control, Irish Missed. This is Deke Hallorhan, pilot. I've assumed command due to Captain Callahan's incapacitation. I still have partial fusion drive. I intend to make for Trollshulm under reduced thrust. I will set down there and obtain medical assistance for Captain Callahan. Over."*

This time it was a scant five minutes before a reply came.

*"Irish Missed, this is Eli Santer. You keep that ship the hell away from my port. I haven't got the facilities to delouse a hot drive."*

*"Irish Missed to Mister Santer,"* Deke snapped. "Sir, I don't believe Captain Callahan will last the extra day to Hansenwald without treatment. I'm setting down on Trollshulm if I have to land in your

rose garden. Out."

"That's telling 'em, Deke," Callahan said. "You're a stout and loyal crew, you are."

"I'm just so devoted," Deke agreed. "Do you think Mister Santer will take kindly to being argued with?"

"I hope not. It'll be a pleasure robbing him, won't it?"

"If Blackstone can pull off his end of it."

"I think he can manage. Let's just be there when he does."

The sled heaved again and almost tore off a chunk of ridge.

Gord Horvath cursed and hauled at the twin-stick controls of the agrav sled, pulling it back away from the rock as much by force of will as by any extra power he fed the drive. But that just put him right back out in the wind again, where the dust swirled and blew with such maddening irregularity that sometimes he could see for hundreds of meters ahead through a pocket of absolutely clear air, like bursting through the side of a well-shaft, solid behind him and to the sides and straight ahead, but absolutely empty in between—and then it would close right in, impenetrable, to where the goddam front of the *sled* would disappear and leave him piloting by memory. 'Dragon dust,' they called it, the meanest air on the planet named after the original meanest animal. Horvath had been way the hell out at the tail end of his run when he first saw it welling up on the horizon, but he had figured he could at least finish the outbound leg before it caught up with him. He had figured wrong.

Now the sled was lurching and bobbing in the corkscrewing gusts of wind, engineered perfectly to play games with the planet's gravity but built square and flat-bottomed, with an incredible amount of exposed surface if the wind ever caught it at the wrong angle. He had dropped a new monopole generator/still unit at the last camp he'd visited before the storm caught up with him, a heavy, bulky thing that had weighted down the sled and made it handle like a thrown brick. He missed its ballasting weight, now.

He knew he was somewhere near the Blackstone camp, for it lay right at the base of the ridge he was following, the ridge that threatened to claw him down with every fresh surge of wind and was his only clue as to where the hell he was. There was a sudden swirl of killer dust and then the air was clear, and it seemed to Horvath as though he could just make out the shape of a skinner's hut, *there*, just inside the new edge of the murk—

—the sled skidded past a slick patch of rock, a vertical face on the ridge, smooth as paper and slick as oiled glass. A gust of wind



struck at the base of the rock and was channelled directly upward, just as Horvath was correcting for another gust up at his level. The sled flipped up sideways and slashed down at the ridge.

He didn't remember what he did then. All he could recall afterward was a sudden expanse of blurred rock heaving up before him and a desperate heave-and-stomp action at the controls, as much an unvoiced protest of the impending crash as anything else.

The flank of the sled crumpled as though clutched in an enormous fist at the first impact with rock, and the sled pivoted around the point of impact and spun away from the rock face. It thudded in again, beyond the rock, and sent a shower of sand and stones tumbling down the ridgetside. The sled went with it, as Horvath cut lift to the minimum and concentrated merely on keeping the craft upright.

He touched down and immediately cut his power, letting the vehicle's weight anchor it, the sand already piling up around its sides. He was in luck. He recognized where he was, not fifty yards from Blackstone's camp. Reassured of nearby safety, he took a moment to examine the damage to his sled. Remarkably, it still seemed airworthy. The starboard forward quarter was a mess of crumpled steel, but the damage seemed to be limited to the hull. The lift-and-thrust grids of the agrav unit seemed undamaged. Horvath powered down the sled and started off in the direction of Chavez's camp.

An object stopped him, square and bulky and set solidly in the face of the ridge. Puzzled by its unnatural symmetry, Horvath approached it. Then he realized what it was. Wrapped and bundled hides, perhaps a dozen. They had been buried, and only the freak slide caused by his crash had revealed them.

He hesitated. There was no sensible reason for anyone to bury good hides. Blackstone and Santer's woman had to be up to something Santer wouldn't like, and whatever it was, Gord Horvath wanted no part of it. But whatever it was, the dust was worsening again, too. He moved on towards Chavez's hut.

Eli Santer paced back and forth in the communications shed where he'd spent most of the last nine hours. Refusing the *Missed* landing permission had been an unpleasant decision, and one that could have serious legal consequences; but dammit, between the load that had been held back from *Northwest Passage* and the hides that had been brought in since, he was sitting on top of a cargo that would put him right back in the pink of fiscal health as soon as it was locked away in *Natchez's* holds. There was no way in hell that he

was going to risk a crippled ship falling on it before then. And now he had a man and an expensive sled missing as well, in a sudden dragon-dust-blow.

"Sir," the operator said, "there's a call in from Horvath."

"Well, put it up on the screen, dammit." The picture scrambled and faded in. Horvath looked out at him.

"Mister Santer, there's something strange going on out at Blackstone's camp," he said.

"What do you mean?"

"Well, I got forced down by that dust-blow just outside his camp, and I landed kind of rough. When I hit, though, I uncovered something that had been buried there."

"What was it?"

"Hides, sir, a good ten or twelve, I'd say."

"Hides?" Santer stared at his screen uncomprehendingly.

"Yes, sir, hides."

"What the hell is he playing at?" Santer wondered. "Is the sled still operational?"

"Yes, sir, just a little dinged up."

"All right. Get back here." He switched off. "Wonderful," he said. "Just goddam wonderful. I've got a hot ship falling in my lap and now a crazy skinner goes burying fifty thousand credits—oh, God damn it!" He stabbed a finger at the comm operator. "Punch up security, fast!" The screen hashed out and cleared as the operator punched in a new combination.

"Security," Santer said. "Get me Trebig. Blackstone and the whore are trying to run some hides."

Six sleds were drawn up in front of the headhunter barracks. A dozen men emerged, carrying Kalashnikov/Kerns with full thousand-silver combat drums, their belts heavy with spare magazines. This was a serious hunting party. They climbed into the machines and flew off to the west.

As was so often the case after a serious dust-blow, the air was remarkably clear that day. So it was that Shasti saw the tiny, brilliant motes of the agrav sleds, shining brightly in the late afternoon sun, as they coursed along the ridge in the distance. She turned back to Chavez, who was wrestling a fresh hide onto the bed of their trac.

"Chavez, you'd better see this."

Blackstone gave the bloody skin a final shove and joined her,

looking off in the direction she pointed out. The sleds were circling above their camp now, hovering in indecision. Finally one of them cut away from the milling pack and dropped down out of sight behind the dunes.

"What the hell is going on there?"

"That's our camp."

"I know that."

"I think they found out we're running something on them."

"Oh, Christ."

"Any ideas as to what we do?" The sled had climbed back to rejoin its brothers; after a moment's immobility they scattered and began to peel off out across the desert.

"Get caught, I suppose."

"I was hoping for something a little more creative."

"Get in the trac."

It was a *long* ride. The trac was capable of perhaps forty, fifty kilometres per hour in a flat-out, adrenalin-induced panic, but such frantic speed would have thrown such a splendid roostertail of sand into the sky that every headhunter within a hundred kilometres would have been on them inside of an hour. So they crawled across the terrain at a maddening ten or fifteen kph, the fine sand that threatened to reveal them at any moment quickly blowing over and eradicating their treadmarks behind them. They could see the headhunters' sleds quartering the desert all around them, not on them yet, but drawing closer. The tracs were all painted a bright orange to aid in the location of distressed vehicles, but this one's flanks were thick and dull with dust. Even so, the sleds wouldn't have to get too much closer for one of them to spot it.

They found the gully Chavez was looking for. The trac lurched over its lip and slid down with a rasp of protesting gears as Chavez downshifted. He slid the trac under the opposite face of the ravine, which canted out over the ravine itself and left an area of several yards in shadow.

Chavez and Shasti relaxed, until they saw their treadmarks across the floor of the gully. They were sheltered from the wind there, and the marks stood out like a road sign.

Chavez moved quickly but Shasti beat him to it. She jumped down from her seat and ran out into the wash, peeling off her tunic and using it to brush away the treadmarks. She finished one, then the other, ducking back under the overhang just as a sled whined overhead.

There was a moment's quiet as they listened to the sled moving

off. Then Chavez looked at Shasti. She caught his look and managed to get back into the bulky tunic without seeming to move.

"That was fast," Chavez said approvingly.

"Yes, and I covered those tracks up pretty quickly, too," she said, managing to grin briefly. "What do we do now?"

"Not much we can do," Chavez said, "The *Missed* won't be landing for another day and a half. All we can do now is wait for dark and then try to get back to camp for the hides."

"They'll be waiting for that, won't they?"

"Yeah. . . ."

They stood warily in the shadow of a large boulder, looking across the clearing at their dark hut. Behind them, out on the flats, an occasional bar of light stabbed from sky to ground as the sleds kept up their search. It had taken them two hours to get that far across the sand, but the few yards ahead of them were the most dangerous. Chavez sighed and edged out of cover, working around the edge of the clearing towards the hut. There was no one in sight. He found out why.

He stepped into the hut and something cold pressed against the back of his neck. "Don't move—"

The headhunter had made a mistake in getting that close to Chavez, who jerked to the side and slammed the butt of his rifle behind him even as a burst of slivers cut past his ear. He turned and kept clubbing as the headhunter folded, dropping his weapon, trying futilely to cover up under the constant, brutal pounding—

He never saw the second headhunter where he'd lain sleeping in the corner. The man put a shoulder into him and stumbled past out the door.

Chavez saw him running across the clearing. He shot at him and missed, then took off in pursuit, losing sight of his man behind a rock.

He cut around the boulder; and the headhunter, standing by a sled hidden in the rocks, caught him glancingly with a burst from a bass stunner. Chavez's left side went numb, and he flopped forward onto the ground. He felt the pressure of a stone against his ribs and knew that that would hurt when the feeling came back. He heard the headhunter saying, "Mister Trebig, Mister Trebig, I got him, sir, I—" and then there was a short, nasty sound, like a tearing handkerchief. He twisted around and saw the headhunter slumping down limply against the side of the sled, a microphone dropping from his hand. Shasti ran past him into view, her rifle still at the

ready. She held her lips pressed tightly together and might have looked pale, in better light, as she studied the body. Then she turned and started back towards Chavez, muttering angrily in Pushti as she pocketed the wireless microphone/receiver from the sled.

"Dumb," she said, slinging her rifle and straining to hoist Chavez to his feet. "That was dumb, running off like that. How did you expect me to keep up with you? Dumb."

"I know," Chavez said, his voice a little slurred from the impact of the stunner blast, "but I think I love you anyway."

"And damn well you should," she said without even breaking the rhythm of her tirade. "Come on, you're going to have to help me here, I'm no weightlifter, stand up."

She came back into their little redoubt, carrying two jerry-cans of water, the headhunters' rifles slung over her shoulders. The recess in the ridgeface was too shallow to be honestly called a cave, but it provided cover from above and somewhat to the sides. Shasti had drudgishly hauled the bundled hides up from their hiding place and stacked them in the niche's entrance, walling it off. Then she had gone back to their camp for the supplies they had hidden, and made a second trip for more, all while Chavez had lain in the hole helpless and worrying, as the numbness in his side slowly faded. It was coming up on dawn, now; and he'd feared she would get caught out in the open.

"How are you feeling?" Shasti asked.

"Better," Chavez said, and wiggled the fingers of his left hand at her. He'd been trying to lift his arm.

"Perfect timing," she said.

"Well, I didn't want you to have it easy, now, did I?"

She said something short and pungent in Pushti and sat down by the barricade to keep watch. Chavez stiffly worked his way back down under cover again. He already knew what there was to be seen out there: the sleds had come rushing back towards their campsite at the headhunter's truncated announcement. Not ten minutes ago they had begun circling in and landing, even as Shasti was making her way back to their strongpoint for the last time.

"They'll wait for the light, I think," she said.

"If they're smart."

"Still think we can pull this off?"

"We haven't got a whole lot of choices."

"No, I guess not."

§ § §

The headhunters spread out in a ring at the base of the hill. Trebig hadn't bothered to call for reinforcements; he had everything he would need right there.

They moved up slowly, making good use of the available cover, towards the little cavelet. Then a burst of sliver-fire spattered the rock ahead of him, and Trebig hit the dirt, followed by his men.

"That'll do for now, Anders," Chavez's voice came down thinly.

"What the hell do you think you're playing at, Blackstone?" he shouted back. "You aren't going anywhere!"

"You and me both."

"Why don't you just knock this crap off and come out of there?"

"No, thanks. I've seen how you play that game."

"Then we'll just have to shoot you out of there, won't we?"

"Go ahead. It'll come out of your salary."

"What?"

"You want to shoot up fifty thousand credits' worth of skins, you go right ahead."

Trebig cursed. He could see now how the two renegade skimmers had barricaded themselves behind the stolen hides.

Then he grinned, nastily.

"Don't go away, Blackstone. We'll think of something."

"Take your time," Blackstone muttered, as he lowered himself down behind the skins again. "Standoff," he told Shasti.

Then the cavelet was full of fragmenting splinters as fire came pouring over the top of the hides. The slivers themselves passed hopelessly high because of the angle of fire, but then they struck the roof of the niche. Some ricocheted down into the sand floor, but others shattered and filled the air with tiny fragments. Chavez and Shasti ducked down reflexively, then she popped back up and snapped a burst down the hill. Slivers clawed at the air around her with renewed savagery and she dropped down beside Chavez, arms wrapped around her head as the firing went on and on and on—

—Trebig grinned as the headhunter with the long-barrelled sniper's weapon canted his rifle forward on its bipod and popped free the spent magazine. This was going to be easier than he'd thought.

"Mister Santer, *Irish Missed* has entered the atmosphere."

"Damn. What's happening with Trebig?"

"He says they have Blackstone and Keane penned up and expect to finish them soon."

"Tell him to finish it *now*. And get me Security again."

Several security men entered the sleds' maintenance hangar, car-

rying bulky cases between them. The cases bore Wolkenheimen ordnance markings. The mechanics began readying their contents for fastening at the prows of two sleds.

It was an hour later, and Chavez and Shasti were still alive. There had been two attempts to rush them, both beaten off; but both of them were bleeding in several places from stray sliver fragments. Chavez had perhaps a quarter-drum of ammunition left, Shasti's rifle was empty.

Trebig was angry. He had sent four men back by sled already, two of them dead, one of the others questionable. His last five men were concealed not ten meters from the mouth of the niche; and if he could just get them to charge a final time, he could finish it. They weren't terribly willing, though; they were unused to such stiff opposition. Stiffly, sore because he had gotten no sleep that long night, he set off to prime them to attack.

All pretense of accident behind them, the *Missed* dropped swiftly through the sky, aimed directly at a single unimpressive ridge on the edge of the great sand flats.

Two sleds rose away from Santer's depot, oddly balanced under the weight of the new additions at their bows and their heavy war-heads.

Chavez stuck his head up and quickly pulled it down as fresh sliver-fire spilled over their barricade.

"There's a lot of moving around down there. I think they're going to try again."

"And I think they'll pull it off, this time."

"Yeah, I think so, too."

"Ah, well—as I said, it's been a disappointment."

"So it has." Chavez rubbed at the back of his neck. The air seemed oddly thick, and his scalp itched.

Trebig leaped to his feet and lunged forward with a cry—and was spun and thrown from his feet as a great invisible hand snatched at his rifle and tore it away. He looked up and saw a solid wall of metal as three hundred feet of intrasystem freighter bore down on him, broadside on. Beyond and beneath the ship he could see the tangled ruins of the grounded sleds it had passed over. The rest of his men, similarly disarmed as the fringes of the *Missed's* drive field passed over them, were scrambling desperately down the hillside,

certain that the great ship meant to come down right on top of them. Hastily, he joined them.

The *Irish Missed* drifted to a halt just outside Chavez and Shasti's impromptu fort. A hatch slid open and Moses Callahan was there, throwing them a winch-line and hook. Chavez caught it and ran the line through the cording binding the hides, then slipped the hook back around its own line. Then he and Shasti hung on for dear life as the winch tugged their spoils clear of the ground and hoisted them towards the hatch. Several headhunters, weaponless but angry, came running around the bow of the *Missed* just in time to see them scrambling aboard.

"Nice of you to drop in," Chavez said.

"It was good of you to rise to the occasion." There was a muffled, booming impact deep in the ship, shaking the deck under their feet.

"What the hell was that?" Moses demanded of the air, and slapped at an intercom switch. "Deke, Maureen. What the hell's going on?"

"Sleds, Cap'n," Hallorhan's reply came. "They're shooting at us. Looks like some kind of tactical ground missile."

"That last one went off in Number Three Hold," O'Shaunessy said. "Blew up nothing but empty. I'd hate to take one in the drive room, though."

"Well, dammit. We don't have to put up with this nonsense, do we, Deke?"

"Not likely. Hold on."

Deke Hallorhan stabbed and punched at his control board. The status board in front of him was flecked here and there with scarlet, where shrapnel had plucked at 'tween-decks circuitry.

Even as he poured more power into the magnetics, several of the red motes winked out under Maureen O'Shaunessy's ministrations.

The *Irish Missed* carried no weapons save a few stunners and light sidearms in her armory. She'd never had need of more. But she was three hundred feet of steel and alloy, with a fine mass-to-thrust ratio. That was more than enough.

Santer's sleds had separated for their attack, one diving in while the second held back to observe the results. Now the second sled canted over and began its run. The driver held his fire, closing, aligning his sights on the ship's bow—and it was gone.

The *Missed* canted upwards and leaped away from the little sled, clawing for altitude. The sled brushed the fringe of its drive field and flipped wildly away, the driver fighting desperately for control.

The first sled wasn't as lucky. Coming out of a high, banking turn, it struck the *Irish Missed's* drive field dead-center. It whipped



around wildly, trapped at the interface between the drive field and the planet's magnetic field, and was cast spinning away below. A tiny blossom of fire stood out briefly against the sand behind the climbing freighter, then was obscured in its own smoke. The remaining sled levelled off and climbed half-heartedly after her, hopelessly outdistanced.

Callahan, Blackstone, and Keane crowded into the *Missed's* control room.

"Are we clear?" Moses asked.

"Of the sleds, yes."

"Any other ships on the planet?"

"Just the *Abilene*," Shasti said.

"That antique; we're clear."

The *Missed* rose above the curvature of the planet. The fusion drive flamed into pale life and Trollshulm dropped away behind her.

Two hours later, Moses and Chavez found Shasti down in the hold, staring at the bundled hides. Fifty thousand Confederate credits, at least, more than enough to bond the *Missed* at their next destination, more than enough to pay all of their passages to just about any world in colonized space, with quite enough to live on for a good while besides.

And she was frowning.

"Eli Santer has three hundred hides in storage in Trollshulm," she said.

"Well, he hasn't got these."

"So what? You think this is going to hurt Eli Santer? Stealing ten hides he never even saw? What did we hurt, Chavez?"

"His pride. . . ."

"You can't eat pride. You can sure as hell live without it."

"So what do you want?" Moses asked.

"I want to do what we wanted to do in the first place. I want to hit back at Eli Santer."

"What have you got in mind?"

"Ten hides are worth fifty thousand. What are a hundred worth, or two hundred, or even three hundred?"

Moses Callahan said, "I don't know. I've got no quarrel with Eli Santer—"

Shasti looked at him, started to say something.

"—except that he took advantage of a friend. I'll have to check our position, see if we can pull it off and still make rendezvous. Excuse me." He turned and left them there. In a little while, back in their cabins, they heard the sound of the engines increase in pitch

and a gentle hand tried to push them down into their couches.

Santer's desk tried to kill him.

It ripped itself off its brackets on the floor, spinning wildly. One corner caught Eli Santer on the shoulder and threw him against the wall. The desk smashed into the far wall of his office and hung pinned there.

He picked himself up and stumbled to the door, which flung itself open violently when he turned the knob.

Outside, he was too late to see most of the damage. Everything ferrous that had been in the street was already gone, tracs, sleds, equipment, everything scattered about by the magnetic drive-field of the massive ship that hung low overhead. A trac had been hurled through the front wall of the accounting office. The wall of the sled hanger was a mass of dents and buckles that hinted at the havoc contained within. Men were running in every direction to get out from under the vast metal shape descending out of the sky above the warehouse—the warehouse. Santer didn't need to see any more. He ran from the depot, toward the lonely shape of the *Abilene* docked a mile away.

The street was clear as the hatch opened in the flank of the *Irish Missed*, and Chavez and Shasti were lowered by cable to the ground, along with the collapsible pallet of strong aluminum tubing. Chavez set quickly to work assembling the pallet as Shasti ran into the warehouse. As they'd hoped, it was deserted. She was already dragging the first of the hides outside as Chavez finished the pallet. They worked quickly, but the pallet would only hold twenty hides at a pinch. Several trips would be necessary. The hides were heavy, but Chavez was strong, and Shasti worked with the fervor of the truly screwed-over. The pallets were filled rapidly.

When they saw that the ship was not about to crash, men began to filter back into the depot. Many of them saw the activity at the warehouse and ran forward to protect their livelihood. They were unarmed, but there were many of them.

A streak of scarlet light scored a building to the left of the mob, and seared across the street before them. Maureen O'Shaunessy stood in the hatchway of the *Missed* with a welding laser tuned for its tightest collimation. Actually, it probably wouldn't have done the men much hurt, but the scarred building and the scorched track across the street were ominous suggestions to the contrary.

Chavez and Shasti were on their fourth trip up when the *Missed* lurched violently, nearly throwing them from the pallet. They held

on desperately as the ship rocked. Their faces were pale as they finally reached the hatch.

The IF *Abilene* hovered over the *Irish Missed*, their fields locked, trying to force her away from the depot and down—and Deke Hallorhan came into his own.

Normally, piloting was a fairly dull affair; there were no currents in space, no storms. A planet's magnetic field was a predictable thing and easily coped with. Deke was almost grateful for the challenge. His hands flew over his board, matching the *Missed's* upward thrust to the downward pressure of Santer's ship. The *Missed* lurched, wavered, steadied. Stalemate. Not good enough for Deke Hallorhan. It was time to be creative. His hands flew again.

The *Missed* spun end for end, seeming to pivot almost on her own stern. Then she climbed up and out at a sharp angle, and almost before the movement was perceived, she was out from under *Abilene* and reversing her course. *Abilene* barely had time to check her own descent; she had no time to respond to this new attack. The *Irish Missed* forced her attacker down with a great, thundering impact, directly atop the warehouse. *Abilene* lay grounded, her back broken, her structure irreparably sprung out of line, among the ruins.

The *Missed* halted, hovered for an instant, and then vanished upwards into the cobalt Trollshulm sky.

Eli Santer stood, drained of rage, of ideas, of everything, staring at the wreckage. Nothing had been moved, no attempt made to clean up after the disaster. There was nothing the dozen or so men left in the depot could have done, even had they been so inclined; the only reason that even they were still there was that there really wasn't any place else they could go.

It was finished, and he knew it. It didn't matter how many hides, if any, they could ultimately salvage from beneath the dead *Abilene*. Between the loss of the ship, and the buildings, and the equipment, he was as good as bankrupt. He might have tried to hold on, through strength of will and with the backing of his guns; but his headhunters were scattered all over the desert after the rout at Blackstone's camp; and their biggest advantage, supply and organization, was lost. He had no hold over the skinnners now, none.

A trac rumbled into the ravaged depot, an unsuspecting skinner delivering his take. Santer saw the realization strike the man as he noticed the devastation. He couldn't even work up the energy to resent him as he grabbed for his microphone and began to speak.

§ § §

Four days later they passed the radio beacons that marked the limits of Hansen System Space. Ahead the gigantic starliner *Natchez* loomed like an immense stiletto hanging in the darkness. They were clear, now. There was a saying out between the stars: "System law stops at the starliner hatch"; which, considering the wild variations in colonial law, was only sensible.

They would sell the hides directly to the ship herself, in exchange for a draft on her accounts. *Natchez* would have no trouble selling the hides back on Earth; all starliners were *de facto* extraterritorial and beyond prosecution or liability. So they had burned Eli Santer for ninety-three prime hides, left him with a wrecked ship, and would probably wind up underselling him back on Earth. He should certainly feel that, all right.

"All squared, Cap'n," Deke Hallorhan announced. "We're getting barnacle rate. Just lock on aft of hatch four, they say."

On their screens a tiny blister detached itself from the *Natchez* and moved towards them, slowly growing into a blocky, efficient, dull-looking agrav freighter, hitching a ride on the starship to greener pastures.

"*Irish Missed, Irish Missed*, this is agrav freighter *Cumulus*, outbound from Caledonia Nova. Any agrav traffic in this system yet?"

"*Irish Missed to Cumulus*; one other ship, have at 'em. The merchants will love you."

"Thanks."

"Oh, hey, and *Cumulus*," Moses added, "when you've grounded, would you do us a favor and convey our deepest thanks to a Mister Eli Santer? You won't have any trouble finding him."

"We'll do that thing."

"Thank you." Moses switched off. "Just because they're the future, doesn't mean I have to make it easy for 'em."

"What are you going to do with your share, Cap'n?" Chavez asked.

"Oh, forty-six hides should buy me a pretty fair cushion, I should think. I imagine I'll just take my time and find someplace where the *Missed* won't be ready for the museum for a long time yet. What about you?"

"I think I've had enough of the rugged frontier life. I think I'll head somewhere peaceful for a change, like Earth."

"Back to His Excellency and his niece?"

"I doubt that he'll still be around by the time I get back there."

"Pity."

"Why? He was no prize, Cap'n."

"No, I mean about your going back to Earth and all. Means I'll

have to hire someone else."

"For what?"

"Groundside man, general crew, that sort of thing. Handling the shore end of the ship's affairs. It doesn't matter, though; I'll find someone."

"I'm not exactly a heavyweight businessman, Cap'n."

"No, but you do have a certain flexibility of outlook. . . ."

"As of four days ago, I'm a straight-out criminal."

"Precisely what I meant. Just the sort to deal with these infernal colonial types."

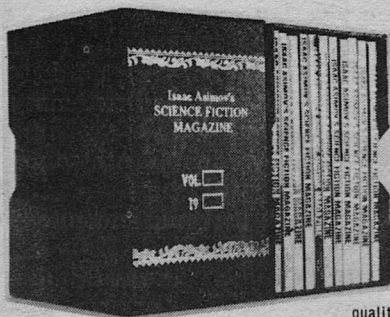
"Well—you talked me into it. But I'll want someone to handle the managerial aspects."

"I rather thought as much. Miss Keane, would you be looking for employment, by any chance?"

"Well, actually, I did find myself at liberty the other day. And I do have some administrative experience. . . ."

"Done. Welcome aboard, the both of you."

The *Natchez* gleamed in the starlight like a pile of silver coins waiting to be pocketed, as the *Missed* settled into her berth.



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# LETTERS

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Dear Sir:

I just received the January 1980 issue of *IA'sfm* yesterday. Up until then, I had seen it in only one place, on the magazine rack of a convenience store near where I work. None of the usual places where I look at and sometimes buy magazines had any. (The place where I bought most of my magazines just closed.)

The features this month were all excellent, as usual. In particular, the Index of your first three years was great. Since you've compiled an index of all the stories, my candidates for the best stories you've published so far (and not in this order) are:

Jack L. Chalker, "Dance Band on the Titanic"

Jo Clayton, "A Bait of Dreams"

L. Sprague de Camp, "Heretic in a Balloon"

Barry B. Longyear, "Enemy Mine"

Barry B. Longyear, "Homecoming"

Melisa Michaels, "In the Country of the Blind, No One Can See"

Somtow Sucharitkul, "A Day in Mallworld"

Somtow Sucharitkul, "The Web Dancer"

F. Paul Wilson, "To Fill the Sea and Air"

But the stories in this issue don't rank up with any of these. The best of the lot was "Switch on the Bull Run," but that didn't stand up as well as the others of the series. The Longyear story and the Sucharitkul story were awful. "Like Unto the Locust" was fair. Now, altogether, the series makes up a novel.

As for my list, I note that most of my reading pleasure and choice of "best" comes mostly from newer authors (de Camp being the oldest). I've heard it said that once you've got it made in the writing business, and you don't have to sweat to get published, the quality of your work goes down. Whether this is true or not is debatable, but my favorites from your first three years reflect this.

Why don't you run a poll, and see if others' favorites reflect this?

Sincerely,

Robert Nowall  
2730 SE 24th Place  
Cape Coral FL 33904

*It's my experience that the sweating never stops. If the sweating over the writing stops, the sweating over unfavorable reader comments starts.*

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Mister Scithers . . .

This is the third letter I've written to you praising your magazine. If you don't remember getting the first two it's because I never sent them. I never sent them because I was sure you'd never have time to read them. I'm sending you this one, and maybe you'll read it, and maybe you'll even print it.

First: Could you please send me your list of manuscript wants? [Yes!]

Second: Congratulations for your January 1980 issue . . . your best issue so far! I thought "Rest in Pieces" was the best story in the issue, followed by "Switch on the Bull Run." I will lay odds that Mrs. Webb's next story will be called "BITCH on the Bull Run." Mrs. Webb's story was great, and so was "Like Unto the Locust". (Let's have more serials in *IA'sfm*, please!)

Third: I loved the Martin Gardner puzzle. It was the first one I actually solved without peeking!

Fourth: The Longyear story, "Project Fear," was boring, boring, boring. I think Longyear is the most overrated writer to come along, and I know a lot of other people who don't like his stuff either. Reading Longyear is like drinking novocaine.

Fifth: Could you please knock it off with the terrible puns? You had THREE in the same issue! ("Lies, All Lies," "For Cheddar or Worse," and "The Rime of the Ancient Engineer.") Honestly, fella!

I don't like Grendel Briarton's Ferdinand Feghoot stories, because all they do is pun on ONE WORD. ("Egg-spurt" for "expert," "ill eagle" for "illegal," "left turn ant" for "lieutenant.") That's not very clever! You ought to make it challenging and insist on only printing puns that play on A WHOLE SENTENCE, preferably a well-known saying or quotation, instead of just one word, because this is much harder. You have printed puns like "They worship the walk he grounds on" and "Take me to your Leiderkranz"; and these are much funnier than the Feghoots. By the way, "For Cheddar or Worse" was the best terrible pun story you've ever printed, because it contains not one but seven (Count 'em: Seven!) puns.

Sixth: I have discovered your secret! It is totally obvious that Grendel Briarton and F. Gwynplaine MacIntyre ARE THE SAME PERSON! I know this because he stole the name Grendel from the monster in "Beowulf" and he stole the name Gwynplaine from the monster in Victor Hugo's story "L'Homme Qui Rit." Why don't you tell Mister Briarton/MacIntyre that you've caught him red-handed stealing pen names from fictional monsters and watch him try to squirm out of it? And what is Briarton/MacIntyre's REAL name? It wouldn't by any chance be Asimov, would it?

Seventh: "Darktouch" was fantastic! I want to see more stories by Somtow Sucharitkul or else!

Eighth: I like Baird Searles's column, but I think it takes too much space. Running it once every two months is plenty.

Ninth: I can't wait to read your next issue! Keep on trekking!

Live long and prosper,

Geoffrey Goodman  
New York NY

*Please. Briarton and MacIntyre are two distinct individuals, and neither one of them is Asimov. You don't think I would hide my name under a bushel, do you?*

*—Isaac Asimov*



Dear Mr. Scithers:

Some general, useless comments on your magazine: I am pleased with the mix of humorous and serious fiction being presented. I am also pleased with the variety of art styles and themes, and I just wish you published more art. I enjoy the introductions to the stories and the letters to the editor; I feel that these give a warm, human quality to the magazine that is absent in other magazines. It's like the fiction in those mags is being thrown over the castle wall and landing on my side of the moat. With yours I know there are people involved.

Continue.

Sincerely yours,

Donald Mueller  
San Marcos TX

*Warm, human quality is my specialty, as the women around me well know.*

—Isaac Asimov

Dear people,

I was glad to see another Sharon Webb story in your latest issue. ("Switch on The Bull Run"). There aren't enough female SF writers, and I'd like to see more of Ms. Webb in your pages. In fact, I'd like to see *my* stuff in your pages! Here's a S.A.S.E. Can you send me your list of manuscript wants and so on? [*Of course!*]

Let's see, what else did I like about your January issue besides Ms. Webb? Well, "Darktouch" was great, and so was "Rest in Pieces." The Pohl story was O.K. but I think this whole Horny Hake thing is going downhill. I'd rather see Pohl develop new characters than squeeze every last drop out of old ones. "Mars Masked" was merely fantastic, but after that old Horny ran out of mileage.

"Project Fear" by Barry Longyear was D-U-double L dull. I'm not even going to waste time discussing it, because I wasted enough time reading it.

Yay for Baird Searles! I love his column! Does he like short red-headed females who support ERA? If so, I'm available.

Double yay and yummy for "For Cheddar or Worse" by F. Gwynplaine MacIntyre! When is MacIntyre going to get off his butt and write another Darwin and Flanagan story? I haven't seen one in four years now! I would *kill* for a new Darwin and Flanagan! Tell him to get with it!

Triple yay and a sis-boom-bah for Christine Watson and "Lies, All Lies." Let's have more horrible puns by female authors . . . why should *men* have all the fun?

See you next issue, people!

Pam Mallory  
Boston MA

*We would accept women as eagerly as men anytime. We can't, however, unless they write and submit stories. Let's see what you can do.*

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Mr. Scithers,

Congratulations on a science fiction magazine that is at once diversified enough to be lively, well-edited enough to provide the reader with stories of both escape and food for thought, and adventurous enough to feature many new authors, some of whom are very good indeed. I have been reading *IA'sfm* since its initial newsstand appearance in the spring of 1977 and have been pleased to see the maintenance of an impressive level of quality from the beginning. There have also been many times when I could not, for the life of me, understand why you included certain stories that I considered quite poor within its pages. However, your well-deserved Hugo speaks much more for your work and ability in producing a generally excellent magazine than my few criticisms.

I am enclosing a stamped, self-addressed envelope for the requisite details on submissions to the magazine so that I too may put my money where my mouth is and show up the authors of the awful stories with my own excellent creations. [*Very well.*] Good luck and continued success in a job well done. We fans all benefit from your efforts.

Sincerely,

Tom Barounis  
Niles IL

*A Hugo does not negate criticisms. We would like to please everybody, and we listen to all criticisms to help us do that. It's a hopeless dream, I suppose, but we can try.*

—Isaac Asimov

Dear George:

Without knowing it the Good Doctor solved a problem for me. It wasn't even a problem I knew I had, but the moment I read his editorial, "The Vocabulary of SF," in the September issue, I realized he had solved it even as he revealed it to me.

I am doing a series of photo stories (the Italians call them *fumetti* because the speech balloons look like smoke) in the comic book format for *Heavy Metal*, to appear this summer. We are using a number of naked ladies (it's an R-rated magazine) and one of these is a very voluptuous female of the very opposite gender—Kitten Natividad, star of several Russ Meyer movies. She will be playing an android . . . except, thanks to Isaac, she'll be a *gynoid*.

Please tell him that the first logical chance I get I am going to name a robot (sic) "Isaac" in thanks. Ask him what kind he would prefer: world-wrecker . . . infinitely wise . . . journeyman handi-man . . . or perhaps an Erotica model that goes around patting refrigerators on the flag, flirting with TV sets and toying lasciviously with the keys of an IBM typewriter?

It's nice to help midwife a new word.

Cheers from faroff, exotic Hollywood, land of the fee and home of the rave:

William Rotsler  
Box 3780  
Los Angeles CA 90028

*I can't say much for refrigerators and TV sets; but the fact is, Bill, that I have been toying lasciviously with the keys of IBM typewriters for years.*

—Isaac Asimov

Gentlemen:

I have been reading *IA'sfm* since its beginning and I applaud certain policies. The first one is, of course, the effort to attract new talent into the SF field. I feel that most other magazines tend to rely too much on the established writers and rarely give new authors a chance. May John W. Campbell's spirit bless you for that.

I also like the lack of hard science fiction. I think any attempt to try "nuts and bolts" SF would only result in an *Analog* clone. However, sometimes I think you are too easy, as far as scientific accuracy is concerned.

I felt that the January, '80 issue was mediocre. "Darktouch" was

decent. I thought that Mr. Sucharitkul set a proper mood. But "Legend of Earth" tales have been better written before.

I found "Lies, All Lies" and "Switch on the Bull Run" suffering from terminal cuteness. The entire premise behind "Lies, All Lies" was rather silly, although the pun was clever. If you plan on publishing stories like this in the future, how about *Isaac Asimov's SF and Fantasy Magazine*.

The Terra Tarkington tale was flawed by the fact that:

- 1) A intergalactic nurse would certainly be up on what all known sentient beings look like.
- 2) Attempting to aid an alien, without any knowledge of his biology is most unprofessional. Especially when other medical personnel are able to be contacted.

I enjoyed "Project Fear." But then I'm biased in favor of terraforming tales. In fact, I hope you publish more tales about this subject from different authors.

I would also like to see more stories about Earth in the far future.

"Rest in Pieces" and "A Matter of Etiquette" were both enjoyable, but nothing special. As for "For Cheddar or Worse," let me see. Junior space cadets? Moon containing cheese? Give me a break! Talk about terminal cuteness! Better humorous stories are a must!

Sincerely,

Ron Yarnell  
Lindenhurst NY

*There's a fine line there between humor and terminal cuteness. The trouble is there's bound to be disagreement between readers as to which side of the line a particular story must be placed on.*

—Isaac Asimov

Dear George and Isaac,

First of all here's what bugs me most about *IA'sfm*. I never know when to expect the upcoming issue of my subscription. To be perfectly fair, other SF magazines—which I have previously subscribed to—were, and I suspect are, just as bad in spacing deliveries. Nevertheless, can't anything be done to send it out more regularly than plus or minus a month of the cover date?

What's best about it is its great science fiction. Most of the stories are both exciting and interesting. My favorite for '79 is F. Paul Wilson's "To Fill the Sea and Air."

Also I'm very glad you don't have any *minimum* length require-

ment for stories. Your competitors seem to think that a story isn't very good unless it's at least 2,500 or 3,500 words. That's too bad. I'm trying hard to ascend into the science fiction writing profession, but there'll be a blue muenster moon over Mars before I pad a story which the idea calls for 2,000 words or less in order to make it an acceptable length.

Sincere stars,

Robert Allen  
32-39 48 Street  
Astoria NY 11103

*Well, actually the shorter stories are harder to write. Every word has to be exactly right. Consequently, these shorter stories are harder for editors to come by.*

*We do need feedback on subscription problems (and newsstand distribution problems as well!); we hope that the irregularity of which you speak is straightened out by now.*

—George H. Scithers

Dear Dr. Asimov,

I consider the copies of your books in my library as my "classics" section. I have long been a respectful reader of many of the books you wrote (too many titles to list here) and many of the anthologies you edited. Just recently I have become a subscriber and admirer of your science fiction magazine.

Yesterday, I asked my wife what had been delivered in the morning mail. She told me that the delivery contained an issue of *IA'sfm*. She has an Oriental accent and mispronounced your name so horribly that I was still breathless with shock and laughter five minutes later.

Very gradually it occurred to me that I might also be using a confused pronunciation. Could you send a phonetic spelling of Isaac Asimov for both of us? I feel confident that although your character is untouched by vanity, you still might help me to insure that your name will be correctly pronounced in my household.

Could you also send a description of the magazine's story needs and a discussion of manuscript format? Enclosed is an SASE. [*Surely.*]

Bennett H. Titus  
1108 Alturas  
Wichita KS 67216

Say "has-him-of" with the accent on the first word. Now leave out the h's and you've got it.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Dr. Asimov and Mr. Scithers:

This is to refute Dr. Asimov's statement in the January "Letters" section, ". . . that all those women who openly confess their passion for me are always from California . . ." I am sorry if you are the last to know, but I love Asimov from Florida. Maybe it's the warm climate. I love not only your fiction but also the way in which you explain scientific fact without appearing to think the non-scientific community is composed of a bunch of idiots. Thank you for many years of reading enjoyment.

Thank you also for the only magazine in which I enjoy just about everything (even without discount coupons).

Please send me the information about your story needs and manuscript format. I have enclosed a SASE. [Done!]

Sincerely,

Bette Ann Howanitz  
Stuart FL

*Aha, we're getting closer. Anyone from Manhattan?*

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Dr. Asimov and Mr. Scithers

I am disappointed in you. The December issue was, overall, your worst one. "Written in Sand" and "The Woman Who Loved the Centaur Pholus" were difficult to get into and, so far as I was able to see, had no point. Even though I like Horny Hake, I hate serials, so "Like Unto the Locust" was lost to me.

However . . . I loved the "Web Dancer." It was, by far, the best story of the issue. "Hear the Crash, Hear the Roar" was good, though in a different way. I liked the two non-SF articles a lot. "On How Science Happens" was the first science article that I've understood in the magazine.

Sincerely,

T. K. F. Weisskopf  
Huntsville AL

*Considering how much you liked in the "worst issue" we must feel pleased at the quality of all the others.*

—Isaac Asimov



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