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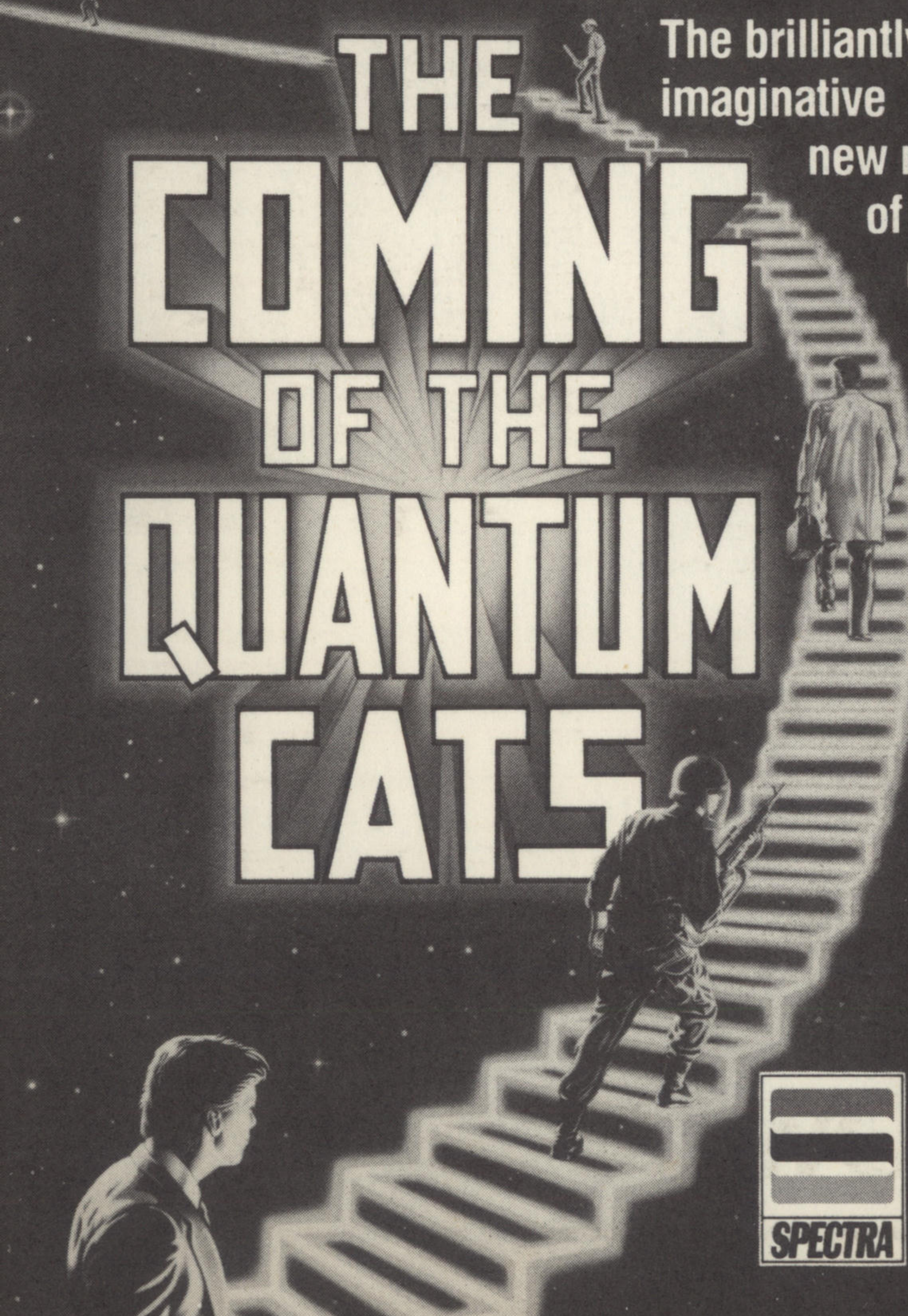

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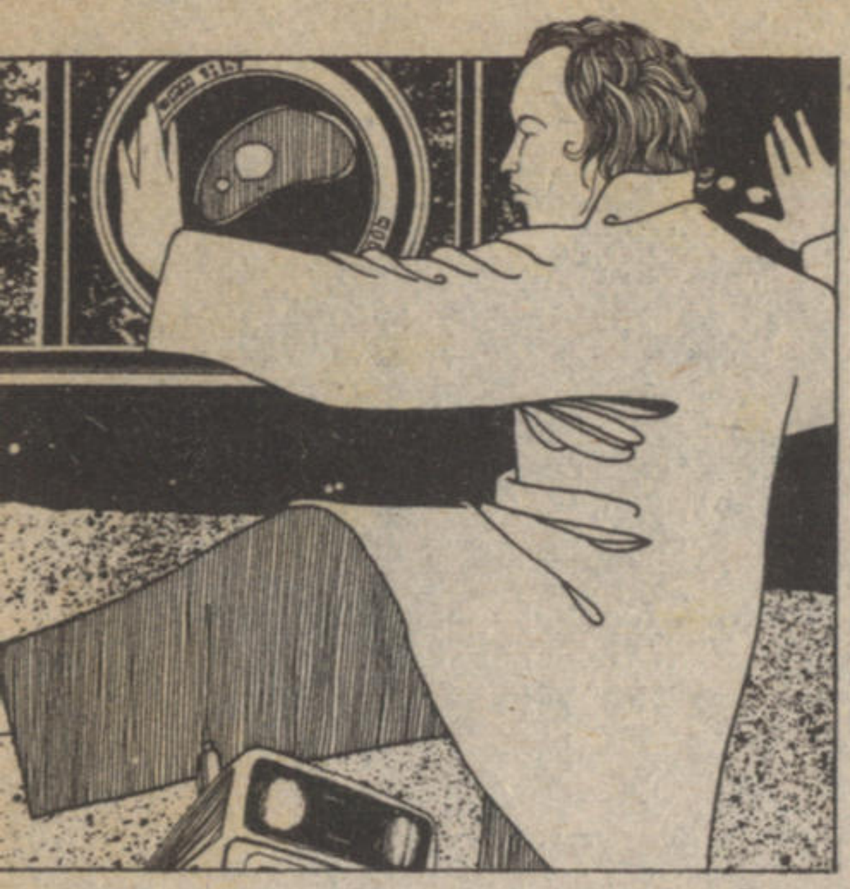

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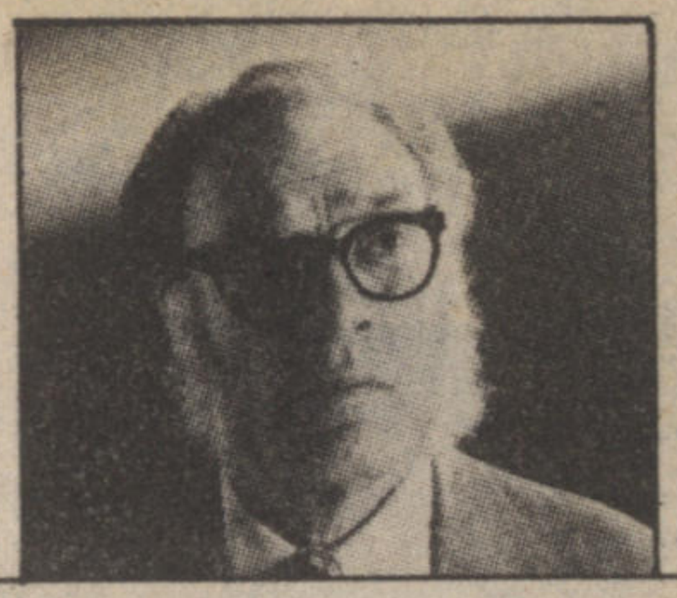
EDITORIAL



by Isaac Asimov

DEAR JUDY-LYNN

(Judy-Lynn del Rey was, with her husband Lester del Rey, the guiding genius of Del Rey Books, the outstanding personality in the science fiction publishing world, and a dear friend of mine of seventeen years standing. She will never read this letter, but I must now write it. Please bear with me.)

Dear Judy-Lynn:

You were born some forty years ago with a genetic deficiency that meant you would be unusually short all your life. Fortunately, you were born to loving and supportive parents, who were determined to treat you as though you were a perfectly normal child in every way.

The result was that you never asked for sympathy or expected to be treated in any favored way. You met the world on its own terms, completed college brilliantly, made your mark afterward as well, and won the admiration of all who knew you.

In this you were helped, of course, by the fact that your intelligence was far above average. Of all the women I have ever met you were the keenest, the quickest, the most brilliant. All it needed was a little time and that characteristic of yours drowned out everything else in anyone's estimation.

You were also a happy person, an uncomplaining one, and a loving and giving one. I never heard you whine or grouse. And you had a sense of humor—but I'll get to that.

I met you at a science fiction convention in April 1968. I was delighted with you and, for the next few years, we were inseparable at conventions. It was a pleasure to be able to extend myself in bantering conversation, knowing that you could take care of yourself perfectly well. In fact, only once did I really manage to get past your guard.

As you well know—as everyone knows—I myself have a peculiar deficiency. It consists of a total lack of common sense; a dreadful propensity to believe people. In fact, I am what is commonly known as a "jerk," or, in the non-sexual sense, a "prick," and I have been frequently told so by any number of dear friends who felt I ought to learn to be worldly-wise.

In any case, I was sitting next to

you at a convention dinner and you said to me, sardonically, "You're all heart, Asimov." To this, I replied, just as your napkin happened to slip from your lap to the floor, "No, I'm not. I'm part prick."

You bent to retrieve the napkin and as you straightened up again, I said, innocently, "Were you checking to see if I was correct?"

You turned a very pretty magenta and said, "Damn it, Asimov, you've made me blush," which was something, apparently, you hadn't done since you were fourteen.

It may have been that which caused you to embark on a campaign designed to prove I was indeed what I had called myself. At that time you were working at *Galaxy* and you used its facilities to plague me.

You sent me the proofs of a cover of an issue in which I was to have a story, and you made sure that my name was horrendously misspelled. Naturally, I was on the phone in half a second in a fever of concern, and you promised to correct the situation.

On another occasion, you sent me a review of a television special I had written, a review that had been printed up in such a way as to appear to be a newspaper clipping. The review was incredibly insulting in a dozen different ways, for it was written by Lester del Rey who aided and abetted you in your design to teach me a lesson and who (devil that he is) knew all my buttons. I was again on the phone

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demanding to know the name of the newspaper so that I could write them a nasty letter. It took a little while to calm me down.

Each time you pulled one of these tricks, someone in your vicinity would warn you that I would never fall for it. You would bet a dinner that I would and later on you would go out for a meal at the doubter's expense. I don't know how you managed to get anyone to bet on my worldly wisdom twice. In any case, you had lots of free meals.

Once I got a letter telling me that you had been fired. It was signed by Fritzi Vogelgesang, who introduced herself as your successor. I was dreadfully upset but Fritzi was so pleasant and so innocently flirtatious that a correspondence was quickly set-up and in no time at all I was being suave all over the place. And then, when Fritzi had me jumping through hoops, she disappeared forever, for she had been you all the time. "So, Asimov," you wrote, "how quickly you forgot all about me."

But your most elaborate trick came on April 1, 1970 when I got a call from the secretary of Larry Ashmead, my editor at Doubleday. The news I got was that Larry had eloped with you and that the two of you were married. I was certain that that couldn't be, but when I called you, you weren't at work. I couldn't locate anyone who could give me information. I was on the phone all day, calling different people without satisfaction (you had everyone properly primed), and the fact that it was April 1 made no impression on me.

You felt it to be your masterpiece, I think. On April 15, 1985, I took you out, along with Lester, and Larry, in order to celebrate the fifteenth anniversary of that "wedding." We had a wonderful time rehashing all those old tricks.

Lester's wife had died in January 1970, and you, who were a dear friend of both, made sure that Lester bore up under the strain. The two of you grew closer with time and (with my enthusiastic encouragement) were married in March of 1971. I was at the wedding grinning all over the place, quite triumphantly convinced it was all my doing.

Long afterward, you said that when the ceremony reached its climax, you had the impulse to turn to me and say, "Fooled you again, Asimov. This whole thing is just a set-up."

You said you wanted to watch me turn green and faint. I said, "But Judy-Lynn, I might have had a heart attack."

You said, "I was willing to chance that. The only trouble was that my mother might have had a heart attack, too, and I didn't want to chance that."

I suppose you always regretted your inability to pull off that perfect practical joke on your favorite patsy.

That marriage was the best thing that ever happened to you, Judy-Lynn, and it was also the best thing that ever happened to Lester. The

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two of you were perfectly matched. Lester had his encyclopedic knowledge of science fiction and fantasy and his unparalleled editorial ability; you had your drive, your genius for spotting worthwhile material, and your sure touch at promotion.

You were working with Ballantine Books at the time, which had been bought by Random House. You were promoted steadily by people who understood your worth, you were given your own imprint "Del Rey Books," and you became a vice-president. And you were worth every penny to Random House. There was scarcely a moment when the New York *Times* didn't have at least one Del Rey Book on the hardcover best-seller list and another on the softcover best-seller list.

It is impossible these days for any one editor to dominate the field in the way that John Campbell did in the 1940s; however, you came the closest to doing so, and it may be that no one will ever come so close again.

On the personal side, you bought reprint rights to my new generation of science fiction novels, beginning with *Foundation's Edge*, and when Ballantine House took over Fawcett, you put out new editions of all my Fawcett paperbacks. It was such a pleasure to find myself side by side with you again, looking at possible covers, writing up new introductions, going over old books to correct old typographical errors.

All this time, too, we had been socializing. On my fiftieth birthday, you had arranged a surprise party for me with the help of Austin Olney, my editor at Houghton Mifflin. Ever since, it became traditional that on my birthday Janet and I would host a dinner out with you and Lester. Even on January 2, 1984, when I was two days out of the hospital after my triple bypass, I managed to make it to the nearest restaurant to celebrate my 64th, and you were there.

You were also at the publication party for my latest novel *Robots and Empire* on September 18, 1985. Then, on October 4, the four of us had dinner and we talked about the series of paperbacks you were publishing that would contain all the old *Barnaby* comic strips by Crockett Johnson.

But that was the last. On October 16, you suffered a sudden brain hemorrhage and passed into a coma. On February 20, you passed from us forever. It is a dreadful loss to Lester, and to me, and to everyone who knew you.

Most of all it is a dreadful loss to science fiction, none greater since the death of Campbell. Campbell had, it seemed, passed his peak at the time of his death, but you were still on your way up. So for many, many reasons, the parting is a very painful one, dear Judy-Lynn. ●

LETTERS

Dear Dr. Asimov:

F. Gwynplaine MacIntyre's plaintive birthday paean to your unrhymeable name, in the August 1985 issue of *IAsfm*, called attention to a problem which has not previously received the consideration it deserves.

Now that Ogden Nash is no longer available, it seems unlikely that anyone will soon discover, create, or agglomerate a really felicitous rhyme for you. Yet there will come many other occasions when your name must be celebrated in verse; this is an inevitable concomitant of literary fame.

Therefore, as a further contribution to the intersecting worlds of science fiction and poetry, I propose that as of the date of your sixty-fifth birthday the word "Asimov" be deemed to rhyme with the word "orange."

This small adjustment to the language, which your numerous readers would surely be glad to introduce, could have a tremendous positive impact on your future encomiasts and, incidentally, would finally clear the way for the appointment of a Poet Laureate of Florida (as long as he or she was a science fiction fan).

To be honest, I would have liked to have presented you with a rhyme containing the same number of syllables as "Asimov," but unrhymed English words are, as you know, quite scarce and I was lucky just to have been able to get this one.

Please accept my wishes for a happy birthday and my thanks for many years of entertainment and edification.

Sincerely,

Erica Weissman
New York, NY

I can give Gwynplaine rhymes. Here is a limerick a friend of mine wrote that I modified and improved:

A witty old lecher is Asimov
Who frequently goes through
a spasm of
Formulating light verse
That is lewd and quite terse,
Which I value the gentle
sarcasm of.
So you see that Asimov is no orange.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Dr. Asimov:

By way of worshipful preliminary, permit me to say that I have been a fan of your work for more years than will prove flattering to either of us. I first subscribed to the magazine when my teenaged daughter was selling magazine subscriptions to support some school function. I have continued since,

firmly convinced that even such annoying practices as selling subscriptions may serve a useful purpose . . .

In the September, 1985 issue, I found one cause for complaint, and direct it to the editors, though the fault lies in the author. In "Buddies" Gary Alexander's third sentence is "He looked unnatural, like a labor racketeer spruced up for a Senate hearing."

Frankly, as a labor union official, I find that fairly offensive. I have long since grown used to the absence of unions from science fiction images of the future—with a few notable/regrettable exceptions like Fritz Leiber's *The Silver Eggheads* and some sidelong slurs in Keith Laumer's Retief series. I can accept this lack—but I am a bit agitated by the revival of this sort of negative image as "racketeers."

In particular, I can understand, as a fan of hard-boiled detective stories, the desire for such a simile here. However, since the narrative is primarily from the viewpoint (though not the person) of a career soldier, in our current society, would it not make more sense to suggest, "He looked unnatural, like a defense contractor executive spruced up for a Congressional audit"? Of course, very few defense contractors go to jail when caught with their hands in the till at public expense . . . while the small number of union officials found to have been engaged in misconduct usually serve time.

In any case, had the reference been to some ethnic or religious group, no doubt the sentence would not have passed into print. In times when union official Lech Walesa has won a Nobel Peace Prize, and union officials continue to lead the fight against apartheid, both in Washington, D.C. (U.S. unions) and in South Africa (South African unions) to the extent of suffering prison, torture, and death . . . it seems sad that Mr. Alexander is trying to perpetuate this outworn, negative image.

I have little doubt that this ends up in the same class with letters indignant over some slight to one religion or another. If so, at least I've got it off my chest.

On the ever-popular question of fantasy, please keep it in. You're doing fine except for this one point.

Philip W. Helms
Milford, MI

I'm on your side, but the trouble is that there are *labor racketeers and they have much greater visibility than labor idealists do. This is true in every field of human endeavor. If it makes you feel better, I have almost never seen a rich industrialist portrayed as anything but an unscrupulous monster; at least not since Daddy Warbucks. Think of stupid government bureaucrats, crooked politicians, drunken writers, unscrupulous publishers, etc. etc. All stereotypes are offensive, but it is hard to resist them, sometimes. Still, we'll try. I promise you we'll try.*

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Dr. Asimov,

Your editorial in the October issue of *IAsfm* made me think of an article I once read in *Science* (May/June '84) about Little Red Riding Hood. The author did Psy-

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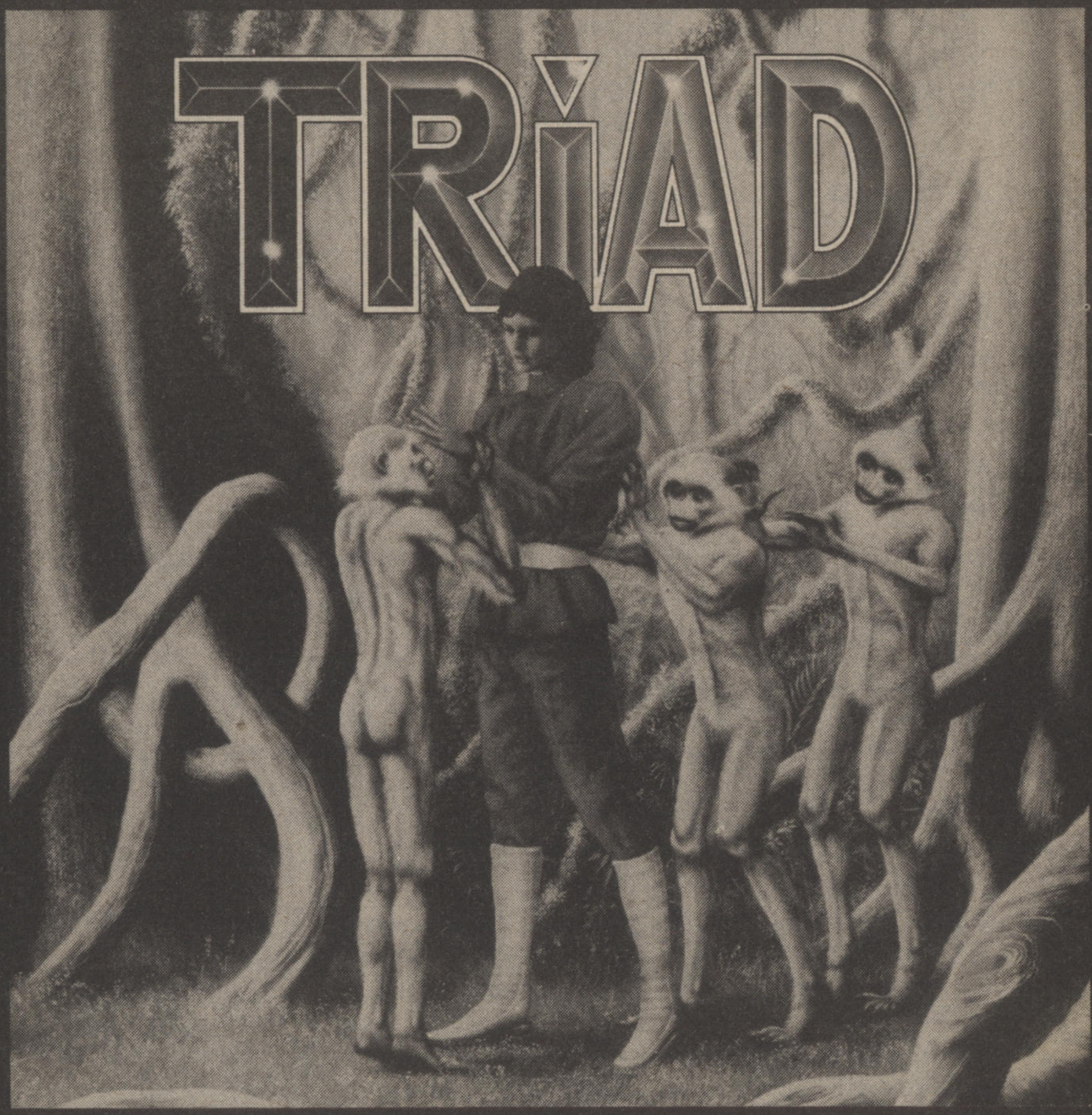

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choanalytic study of the fairy tale and it came out very "R" rated with sex all over the place.

There is the warning of the mother to "walk decently and keep on the path" or you might become a fallen girl or how about Red herself who knows she is pretty and will show off to anyone who is looking. So I agree that fairy tails are not as innocent as they first appear.

Sincerely yours,

Michael Hogshire

I read that very same article about Little Red Riding Hood and I was not impressed. It saw all sorts of sex in every line but I know all about ingenious brains and double entendres and I tell you that it is possible to see sex in every conceivable line written in the English language (or any other). When I look at fairy tales I will settle for the explicit violence and cruelty, and not look for the sub-subliminal.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Editor:

I've been an SF reader since the late 40s, a subscriber to this publication almost from its beginning, a subscriber to *Analog* since 1951 (and to *Galaxy* from 1951 until its end), the owner of a large collection of hardback SF books (including twenty plus of the good Doctor's), a fan of "Star Trek," "Night Gallery" and "Twilight Zone," etc. I've never been accused of a lack of imagination. I think my "credentials" are sufficient to voice an impression.

Avon Swofford's "Taking the Low Road" was a good, well-written (although somewhat predictable) story. Try as I might, I fail to see how it qualifies as science fiction. Tell me, what have I missed?

Sincerely yours,

George P. Highland, BLD
Atascadero, CA

Oh, well. John Campbell once defined science fiction thus: "Science fiction is what a science fiction editor buys." Having observed what the beauteous Shawna has bought, we can now look forward to what the Chestertonian Gardner is buying.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Editor,

Our lives and the products of our passage are made up of highs and lows. The October edition is just such.

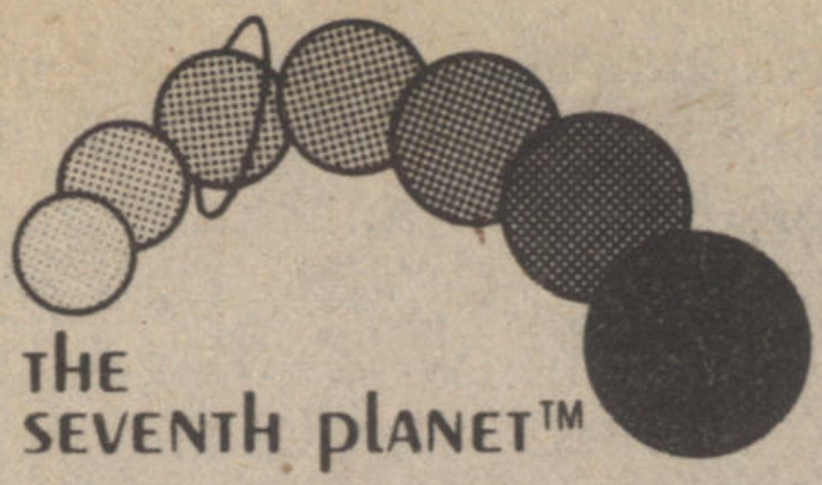
John Norment's cartoon, "I've been Prince Charming and . . . Mr. Toad and . . . both incarnations have been fraught with interest," and Mooney's Module, "Organ Swapmeet and Flea Market," are prime examples. Norment is on target.

But Mooney—Oh, but Mooney! Please, Dear Editor, give me BEM's, give me pulp action, purple prose, sensitive verse, thoughtful heresy—but above all, deliver it with style and taste. I can handle any kind of tale, but Mooney's October effort falls drastically short on both counts.

Norment—10: Mooney < 1. Not up to your usual standards. I think Mooney is standing in need of a "Taste Transplant."

Your ever-faithful reader,

Steve Thomas



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I guess that taste is in the mouth of the gustator. To me that Mooney's Module was merely a tongue-in-cheek comment on the new techniques of transplantation, carried out in an extreme "if this goes on" way. To me, the truly tasteless aspect of transplantation is the way in which television makes it a "media event."

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Editor,

While I have been mildly disappointed in the direction *IAsfm* has gone for the past few years —indeed, I have been disappointed in the direction of the genre—I have continued my subscription. Your magazine has great value in giving new writers an audience without having to risk the large investment required by book publication. The fact that many writers are involved in every issue increases the odds I will find something of interest and assures me that I'll find an occasional gem. I also subscribe to *Analog, The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*, and *Amazing*.

Fred Pohl's story, "The Things That Happen," (October 1985) reminded me of a story an old cowboy told my scout troop nearly twenty five years ago:

"There were Indians to the East and Indians to the West. Our backs were up against the cliff and the river was in front of us with more Indians on the other side. On top of that we were runnin' out of ammo. It sure looked bad. Then to make matters worse, they shot my horse. I couldn't figure out how the

heck we were gonna escape."

"Tell us, Cowboy Bill, how did you escape?"

The old cowboy just chuckled and said, "I didn't boys. The Indians killed all of us."

Naturally, we all groaned and knew we had been had by the old guy.

That's how I felt about Fred Pohl's story. Assuming that Mr. Smith and Miss Baker did dismember Hans Geissen as the story implies and assuming that this is science fiction and not supernatural mumbo-jumbo, we have a logical inconsistency. As the saying goes, dead men tell no tales.

Please ask Fred Pohl to quit cheating. He's *not* a new writer and knows better.

Otherwise, keep up the good work.

Andrew G. Williams
Collegeville, PA

Lester del Rey once wrote a story about a first-person narrator who dies. It is not necessary to suppose that the first-person narrator is sitting there telling you a story. It may simply be a story told from the view of a particular person who dies at the end. After all, how realistic is it to have a first-person narrative in which the narrator remembers every conversation word for word, every action move by move. Can you do that? Can I? If you can swallow the latter, swallow the former.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Dr. Asimov:

Usually the illustrator of science fiction stories has a fair amount of freedom when creating a visual illustration; however, when the story has a historical setting, care should be taken to avoid anachronisms. The illustration to "The Day We Really Lost The War" (Page 74, September, 1985 issue) had a large and rather humorous anachronism in it—at least for me it was quite humorous.

Reading science fiction is only one of my interests; my principal hobby is collecting and operating 00 scale British model trains. That is why I immediately recognized the train in the illustration as being British. The locomotive illustrated is a British Railways standard class 9F. According to *The Observer's Book of British Steam Locomotives*, the first member of this class was not built until 1954. The last new steam locomotive built by British Railways, the "Evening Star," was also a class 9F. As the "Evening Star" is fairly famous to railfans and model railroaders the world over, some of the other readers may have had to chuckle when they saw the illustration.

I'm not writing to complain, by the way; it's just that I had to share the humor of the anachronism with you.

Very cordially yours,

David D. Meashey
Roanoke, VA

Artists have a hard life. When I want to make use of a locomotive in a story, I say, "Slowly, the locomotive gained speed." You can't fault that. An artist who has to illustrate that sentence has to draw a locomotive in full detail. Poor fellow.

—Isaac Asimov

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MARTIN GARDNER

RAY PALMER'S ARCADE

Raymond Dero Palmer, as some readers may recall, is a gnomelike little man about four feet tall, with a cherub's face and watery blue eyes. He has a habit of moving from city to city, running shops that carry curious merchandise. I once bought a Klein bottle from him that contained a genii. It had been several years since I purchased some old SF magazines from one of his shops in Chicago (see Chapter 15 of my *Puzzles from Other Worlds*).

I recently had occasion to walk through the German district on Manhattan's upper east side when I passed an arcade of computer games. The sign above the door said "Ray Palmer's Fantasy and Science Fiction Galaxy."

The large room was almost totally dark, illuminated only by the fluorescent screens of the games. It was jammed with teenagers, mostly boys, and noisy with all the buzzes, whistles, and other weird sounds that came from the machines. All the games had SF or fantasy themes. Most were of the star wars type, but some involved capturing bug-eyed monsters, outwitting evil sorcerers, exploring strange planets, and so on.

Ray was there, wearing an apron, its large pockets filled with coins for making change. He had grown a long gray beard since I last saw him, making him look even more gnomelike.

I wandered around the room, watching games over the shoulders of players. In back of the arcade was an elevator. A sign on front said:

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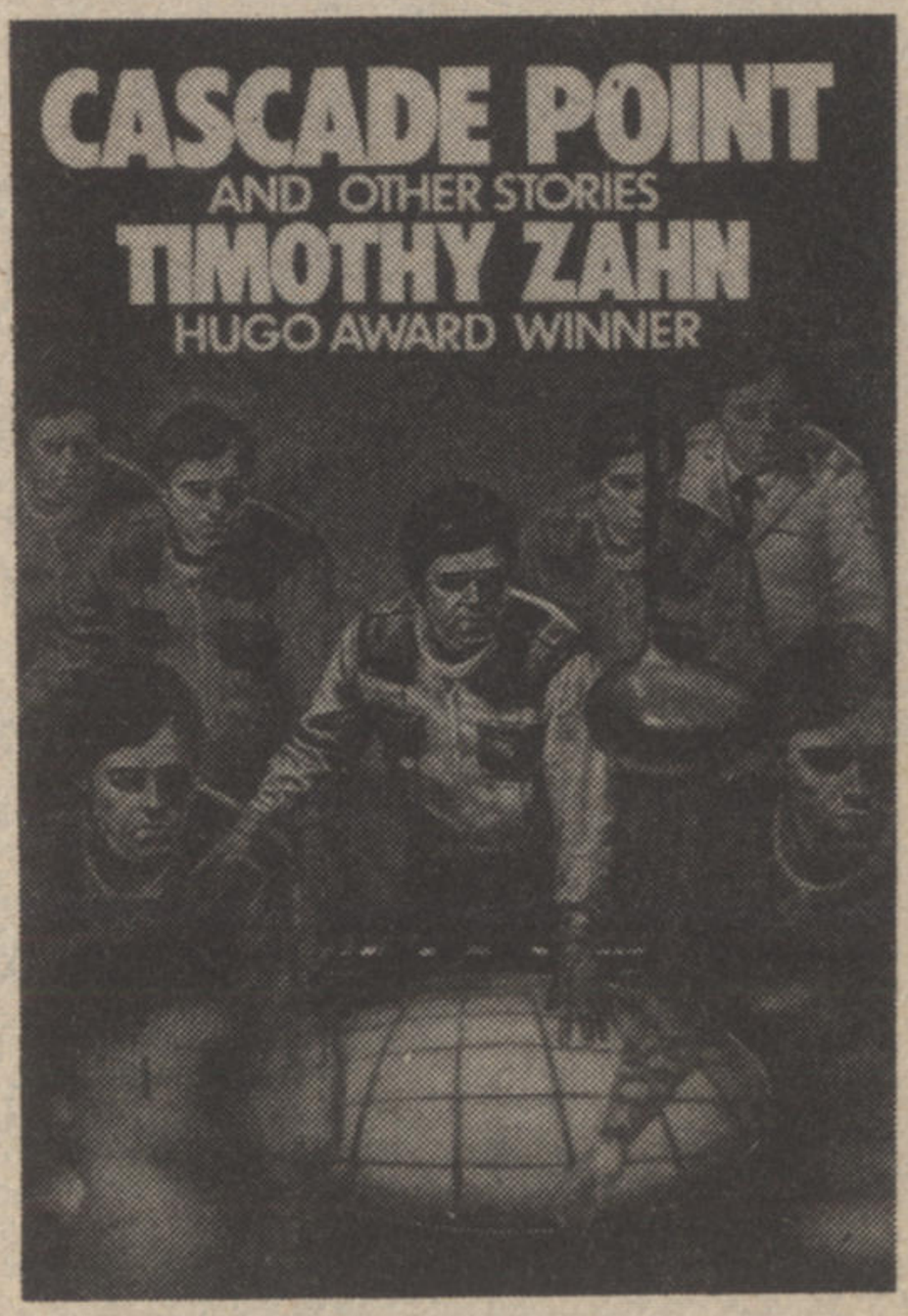

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KEEP OUT! PRIVATE USE ONLY. On the street I had noticed that the arcade was in a low flat building that had only one floor. Where could this elevator possibly go?

Always eager for adventure, I pulled open the door and stepped inside. There were just two large buttons, low on the front wall. One had *dn* printed on it. The other had exactly the same two letters inverted: *up*. I pressed the *dn* button. Through a small glass window I saw an angry Palmer rushing toward the elevator, but he was too late.

Watching through the window I could see that the elevator was rapidly gaining speed, and I could feel the acceleration by a lessening of my weight. The elevator soon settled down to a uniform rate. I couldn't believe it! For a full five minutes it sped downward.

My knees buckled as the elevator slowed to a stop, then something even more fantastic happened. The elevator began to move sideways! This continued for a full ten minutes before it resumed its vertical descent. My watch indicated a passage of almost 20 minutes before the elevator stopped and the door opened.

I stepped out into an enormous cavern. It was laced with gigantic stalagmites and stalactites, and lit by a strange purple glow that seemed part of the atmosphere. A midget humanoid, even smaller than Palmer, approached. He (I assumed it was male) was nude but totally covered with black hair. He had a nose something like an elephant's, and two elephant-like ears.

"Welcome," he said, making an uncouth hand gesture, "to the land of the deros."

Of course I knew about the deros. They were supposed to be wicked creatures who lived underground, as described in Richard Shaver's notorious SF tales of the late forties. I had always assumed that Shaver's stories were pure fiction, yet here I was, talking to a dero!

"You are Martin Gardner," said the dero, "and you contribute puzzles to a shabby little pulp magazine that bears the name of that arch-skeptic Isaac Asimov."

"How in hades did you know that?"

The dero smiled with his mouth, though not with his evil eyes. "We have extraordinary psi powers. My remote vision saw you enter Palmer's elevator. I checked the IDs in your wallet."

"My knees," I said, "are still wobbly from that wild elevator ride."

"Ah yes," said the dero. "Inertia. It's the same as gravity, you know. Einstein thought he discovered that equivalence, but we have known about it for fifty thousand years."

"I'm familiar with the principle of equivalence. After all, I wrote a popular book about relativity. Newton would have assumed that inertial forces inside an accelerating elevator prove that motion is absolute. You

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can't assume the elevator is fixed, and the universe moving, because then what would cause the inertial forces?"

"Right," said the dero. "As you know, Einstein used the elevator thought-experiment to explain why that isn't so. Assume your elevator is at rest, and the universe accelerating up or down. The accelerating universe generates gravity fields that produce the inertial effects."

"You do indeed know your relativity theory," I responded. "As I said in my book, it's not a question of which is *really* moving, the elevator or the universe. It's like asking whether ice-cream is on top of the pie, or the pie under the ice-cream. Only the relative motion is significant. If you take the universe as a fixed frame of reference—by far the simplest thing to do—the effects in the elevator are called inertial. If you take the elevator as fixed (which of course is much less convenient), the forces in the elevator are called gravitational. The tensor equations describing the field are identical in both cases. There is only *one* field, but you can talk about it in two different ways."

The dero smiled his mirthless smile again. "Before you go—and we can't let you stay any longer—here's a question for your moronic readers. Imagine yourself in an elevator with opaque walls. The gravity field is the same as on earth. The question arises: Are you at rest on a planet with a *g* field, or are you in an elevator accelerating upward at a rate that simulates the *g* field? Remember, the elevator is opaque. You can't observe anything outside. Assume the elevator is large enough to hold whatever sophisticated measuring devices you need. Is there an experiment you can perform that will distinguish between the two possibilities—an upward accelerating elevator, and one at rest on a planet?"

I knew the answer, but before I could reply, six other deros appeared on the scene. They forced me into the elevator, pushed the *up* button, and closed the door. The elevator suddenly filled with a purplish vapor. Two whiffs, and I passed out.

When I came to, the elevator was at rest and the door was slowly opening. On the wall I saw a conventional column of buttons for many floors. When I stepped out, I found myself on the top floor of Gimbel's department store.

What's the answer to the dero's question? As Einstein explained, you can't use light rays to detect the difference, because light, like material objects, is affected by gravity and inertia in identical ways. Nevertheless, there is a simple test you can make. It is explained on page 111.

GAMING

by Matthew J. Costello

THE NINTENDO ENTERTAINMENT SYSTEM

I'm sure there were lots of people who thought that video games were here to stay. Just as there were, I suppose, people who thought that hula-hoops were destined to become a permanent fixture on the American scene. Alas, the video parlors have all but disappeared, and the home video game, the "exciting" new cartridges, the video game magazines have all faded away.

So what in the world is Nintendo up to? Their Nintendo Entertainment System seems, at first glance, to be mighty late to catch even the tail end of the video game craze. Is anyone out there really shopping for a $150 video game system? Doesn't just about *everyone* have an Atari, or an Intellivision, or an Odyssey 2 cluttering an upstairs closet. I do, don't you?

But let's not be hasty. Things aren't always as they appear, and the home electronics industry is known for surprising developments.

The Nintendo Entertainment System (Nintendo of America Inc., P.O. Box 9572, Redmond, WA 98052; under $180) is, you'll note, called an "entertainment" system, and the contents of the box confirms that something different is going on here. The game console is small, with no cosmetic pretense to being a computer. The sleek, grey cartridges, not unlike an ultra-thin cigarette case, load in an unusual manner. Trying to load my first game forced me to follow the ancient dictum: If all else fails, read the directions. Fortunately, a little red light on the console flashes on and off if the cartridge is not in properly.

The controllers are also unconventional. There are no joysticks, merely two 2" × 5" controllers with thumb-sized pads to control direction, two action buttons, and two tiny buttons that select a game and then start it. The small controller proves to be highly responsive and more than adequate.

Then you unpack the "Zapper," a Saturday Night Special brand of light gun. The gun has a range of six feet and, at this point, most owners would probably load one of the two games provided with the N.E.S., *Duck Hunt*.

The graphics in *Duck Hunt* are cartoony and fun to watch. A dog goes bounding into the tall grass.

to scare up some wood ducks. You, zapper in hand, blast away. Hit a duck, and rover holds up your prize. Miss, and he stifles giggles at your ineptitude. There's nothing abstract about the graphics and, if a little mindless violence is in order, *Duck Hunt* is very entertaining.

But it's R.O.B., the "Robotic Operating Buddy," that's aroused the most interest. R.O.B. is a robot, with his own photosensor, microcomputer, and motors. You plop him in front of the TV, and his eyes remain focussed on the screen. With R.O.B. you at last have something that watches TV more avidly than you do. The Robot Game Pak included with the N.E.S. is *Gyromite* and it comes with a spinner and a platform, that attach to R.O.B., and two gyros.

Before playing the Gyromite game, a "direct mode" allows you to run R.O.B. through his paces. You can direct him to pick up a gyro, place it in the spinner, and then move it to a platform. This activity is likely to keep most people gleefully engaged for quite a while. In the first game, Game A, players must move a professor through his maze-like laboratory as he defuses dynamite. You also use R.O.B. to open and shut gates within the lab. R.O.B. does this by placing a gyro on either a red platform (for a red gate) or the blue platform (for a blue gate). If you need to open two gates, R.O.B. has to get one gyro spinning on a platform while he hustles after the other one.

Not easy. In fact, it's a bit awkward to play since you have to press the select button to switch from controlling the professor to controlling R.O.B. Game B is a much better "starter" game. Here, the professor is sleepwalking through his lab, and the player uses R.O.B. to operate the gates. The major pitfall here is closing a gate too early and crushing the somnambulant professor.

Of course, R.O.B. can be used as a toy, with or without gyros, though Nintendo warns of the danger of touching a spinning gyro. Nintendo's ads claim to bring the action off the screen, and they certainly have with R.O.B.

Other games in the series are all high quality, what one would expect from the creators of Popeye and Donkey Kong. One of them, *Clu Clu Land*, had me laughing out loud. A ballon-like creature named Bubbles bounces around the screen, grabbing at poles to swing around, while sea urchins chase after her. Bubbles' movements gradually reveal a pattern (a house, a person, etc.) which must be completed before Bubbles is destroyed. Getting the hang of the movement is very tricky, and there's a manic giddiness to the game that's very exciting.

Kung Fu, on the other hand, is a great martial arts game, complete with ninja assassins, knife-throwing thugs, and exploding confetti balls. (Don't ask me about the latter. Check with your nearest Bruce Lee fan.)

So, then, what do we have here? Well, for all the playful extras, the NES is still very much a video game machine. Most game cartridges (retailing from $25 to $35)

(continued on page 68)

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Sometimes life seems to go round in circles, events repeating themselves endlessly, yet we can't go back to the moment when our roads divided, and to when we, perhaps, set off down the wrong path.

by Connie Willis

CHANCE

art: Laura Lakey

On Wednesday Elizabeth's next-door neighbor came over. It was raining hard, but she had run across the yard without a raincoat or an umbrella, her hands jammed in her cardigan sweater pockets.

"Hi," she said breathlessly. "I live next door to you, and I just thought I'd pop in and say hi and see if you were getting settled in." She reached in one of the sweater pockets and pulled out a folded piece of paper. "I wrote down the name of our trash pickup. Your husband asked about it the other day."

She handed it to her. "Thank you," Elizabeth said. The young woman reminded her of Tib. Her hair was short and blonde and brushed back in wings. Tib had worn hers like that when they were freshmen.

"Isn't this weather awful?" the young woman said. "It usually doesn't rain like this in the fall."

It had rained all fall when Elizabeth was a freshman. "Where's your raincoat?" Tib had asked her when she unpacked her clothes and hung them up in the dorm room.

Tib was little and pretty, the kind of girl who probably had dozens of dates, the kind of girl who brought all the right clothes to college. Elizabeth hadn't known what kind of clothes to bring. The brochure the college had sent the freshmen had said to bring sweaters and skirts for class, a suit for rush, a formal. It hadn't said anything about a raincoat.

"Do I need one?" Elizabeth had said.

"Well, it's raining right now if that's any indication," Tib had said.

"I thought it was starting to let up," the neighbor said, "but it's not. And it's so cold."

She shivered. Elizabeth saw that her cardigan was damp.

"I can turn the heat up," Elizabeth said.

"No, I can't stay. I know you're trying to get unpacked. I'm sorry you had to move in in all this rain. We usually have beautiful weather here in the fall." She smiled at Elizabeth. "Why am I telling you that? Your husband told me you went to school here. At the university."

"It wasn't a university back then. It was a state college."

"Oh, right. Has the campus changed a lot?"

Elizabeth went over and looked at the thermostat. It showed the temperature as sixty-eight, but it felt colder. She turned it up to seventy-five. "No," she said. "It's just the same."

"Listen, I can't stay," the young woman said. "And you've probably got a million things to do. I just came over to say hello and see if you'd like to come over tonight. I'm having a Tupperware party."

A Tupperware party, Elizabeth thought sadly. No wonder she reminds me of Tib.

"You don't have to come. And if you come you don't have to buy anything. It's not going to be a big party. Just a few friends of mine. I thought

it would be a good way for you to meet some of the neighbors. I'm really only having the party because I have this friend who's trying to get started selling Tupperware and . . ." She stopped and looked anxiously at Elizabeth, holding her arms against her chest for warmth.

"I used to have a friend who sold Tupperware," Elizabeth said.

"Oh, then you probably have tons of it."

The furnace came on with a deafening blow. "No," Elizabeth said. "I don't have any."

"Please come," the young woman had continued to say even on the front porch. "Not to buy anything. Just to meet everybody."

The rain was coming down hard again. She ran back across the lawn to her house, her arms wrapped tightly around her and her head down.

Elizabeth went back in the house and called Paul at his office.

"Is this really important, Elizabeth?" he said. "I'm supposed to meet with Dr. Brubaker in Admissions for lunch at noon, and I have a ton of paperwork."

"The girl next door invited me to a Tupperware party," Elizabeth said. "I didn't want to say yes if you had anything planned for tonight."

"A Tupperware party?!" he said. "I can't believe you called me about something like that. You know how busy I am. Did you put your application in at Carter?"

"I'm going over there right now," she said. "I was going to go this morning, but the . . ."

"Dr. Brubaker's here," he said, and hung up the phone.

Elizabeth stood by the phone a minute, thinking about Tib, and then put on her raincoat and walked over to the old campus.

"It's exactly the same as it was when we were freshmen," Tib had said when Elizabeth told her about Paul's new job. "I was up there last summer to get some transcripts, and I couldn't believe it. It was raining, and I swear the sidewalks were covered with exactly the same worms as they always were. Do you remember that yellow slicker you bought when you were a freshman?"

Tib had called Elizabeth from Denver when they came out to look for a house. "I read in the alumni news that Paul was the new assistant dean," she had said as if nothing had ever happened. "The article didn't say anything about you, but I thought I'd call on the off-chance that you were still married. I'm not." Tib had insisted on taking her to lunch in Larimer Square. She had let her hair grow out, and she was too thin. She ordered a peach daiquiri and told Elizabeth all about her divorce. "I found out Jim was screwing some little slut at the office," she had said, twirling the sprig of mint that had come with her drink, "and I couldn't take it. He couldn't see what I was upset about. 'So I fooled around, so what?' he told me. 'Everybody does it. When are you going

to grow up?' I never should have married the creep, but you don't know you're ruining your life when you do it, do you?"

"No," Elizabeth said.

"I mean, look at you and Paul," she said. She talked faster than Elizabeth remembered, and when she called the waiter over to order another daiquiri, her voice shook a little. "Now that's a marriage I wouldn't have taken bets on, and you've been married, what? Fifteen years?"

"Seventeen," Elizabeth said.

"You know, I always thought you'd patch things up with Tupper," she said. "I wonder whatever became of him." The waiter brought the daiquiri and took the empty one away. She took the mint sprig out and laid it carefully on the tablecloth.

"Whatever became of Elizabeth and Tib, for that matter," she said..

The campus wasn't really just the same. They had added a wing onto Frasier and cut down most of the elms. It wasn't even really the campus anymore. The real campus was west and north of here, where there had been room for the new concrete classroom buildings and high-rise dorms. The music department was still in Frasier, and the PE department used the old gym in Gunter for women's sports, but most of the old classroom buildings and the small dorms at the south end of the campus were offices now. The library was now the administration building and Kepner belonged to the campus housing authority, but in the rain the campus looked the same.

The leaves were starting to fall, and the main walk was wet and covered with worms. Elizabeth picked her way among them, watching her feet and trying not to step on them. When she was a freshman she had refused to walk on the sidewalks at all. She had ruined two pairs of flats that fall by cutting through the grass to get to her classes.

"You're a nut, you know that?" Tib had shouted, sprinting to catch up to her. "There are worms in the grass, too."

"I know, but I can't see them."

When there was no grass, she had insisted on walking in the middle of the street. That was how they had met Tupper. He almost ran them down with his bike.

It had been a Friday night. Elizabeth remembered that because Tib was in her ROTC Angel Flight uniform and after Tupper had swerved wildly to miss them, sending up great sprays of water and knocking his bike over, the first thing he said was, "Cripes! She's a cop!"

They had helped him pick up the plastic bags strewn all over the street. "What are these?" Tib had said, stooping because she couldn't bend over in her straight blue skirt and high heels.

"Tupperware," he had said. "The latest thing. You girls wouldn't need a lettuce crisper, would you? They're great for keeping worms in."

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by Richard Bowes

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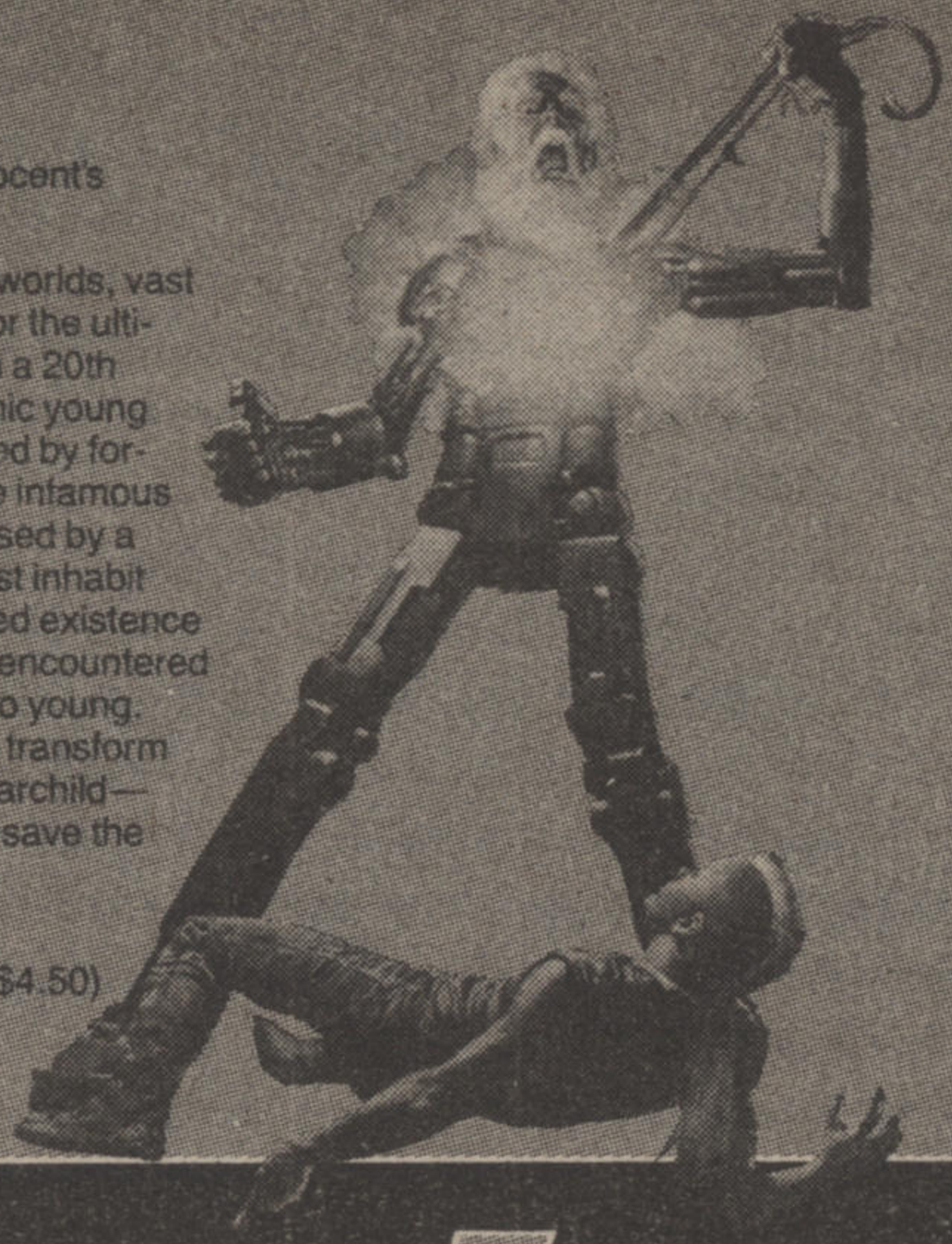

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Carter Hall looked just the same from the outside, ugly beige stone and glass brick. It had been the student union, but now it housed Financial Aid and Personnel. Inside it had been completely remodeled. Elizabeth couldn't even tell where the cafeteria had been.

"You can fill it out here if you want," the girl who gave her the application said, and gave her a pen. Elizabeth hung her coat over the back of a chair and sat down at a desk by a window. It felt chilly, though the window was steamy.

They had all gone to the student union for pizza. Elizabeth had hung her yellow slicker over the back of the booth. Tupper had pretended to wring out his jean jacket and draped it over the radiator. The window by the booth was so steamed up they couldn't see out. Tib had written, "I hate rain," on the window with her finger, and Tupper had told them how he was putting himself through college selling Tupperware.

"They're great for keeping cookies in," he said, hauling up a big pink box he called a cereal keeper. He put a piece of pizza inside and showed them how to put the lid on and burp it. "There. It'll keep for weeks. Years. Come on. You need one. I'll bet your mothers send you cookies all the time."

He was a junior. He was tall and skinny and when he put his damp jean jacket back on the sleeves were too short, and his wrists stuck out. He had sat next to Tib on one side of the booth and Elizabeth had sat on the other. He had talked to Tib most of the evening, and when he was paying the check he had bent toward Tib and whispered something to her. Elizabeth was sure he was asking her out on a date, but on the way home, Tib had said, "You know what he wanted, don't you? Your telephone number."

Elizabeth stood up and put her coat back on. She gave the girl in the sweater and skirt back her pen. "I think I'll fill this out at home and bring it back."

"Sure," the girl said.

When Elizabeth went back outside, the rain had stopped. The trees were still dripping, big drops that splattered onto the wet walk. She walked up the wide center walk toward her old dorm, looking at her feet so she wouldn't step on any worms. The dorm had been converted into the university's infirmary. She stopped and stood a minute under the center window, looking up at the room that had been hers and Tib's.

Tupper had stood under the window and thrown pebbles up at it. Tib had opened the window and yelled, "You'd better stop throwing rocks, you . . ." Something hit her in the chest. "Oh, hi, Tupper," she said, and picked it up off the floor and handed it to Elizabeth. "It's for you," she

said. It wasn't a pebble. It was a pink plastic gadget, one of the favors he passed out at his Tupperware parties.

"What's this supposed to be?" Elizabeth had said, leaning out the window and waving it at him. It was raining. Tupper had the collar of his jean jacket turned up, and he looked cold. The sidewalk around him was covered with pink plastic favors.

"A present," he said. "It's an egg separator."

"I don't have any eggs."

"Wear it around your neck then. We'll be officially scrambled."

"Or separated."

He grabbed at his chest with his free hand. "Never!" he said. "Want to come out in the worms with me? I've got some deliveries to make." He held up a clutch of plastic bags full of bowls and cereal keepers.

"I'll be right down," she had said, but she had stopped and found a ribbon to string the egg separator on before she went downstairs.

Elizabeth looked down at the sidewalk, but there were no plastic favors on the wet cement. There was a big puddle out by the curb, and a worm lay at the edge of it. It moved a little as she watched, in that horrid boneless way that she had always hated, and then lay still.

A girl brushed past her, walking fast. She stepped in the puddle, and Elizabeth took a half-step back to avoid being splashed. The water in the puddle rippled and moved out in a wave. The worm went over the edge of the sidewalk and into the gutter.

Elizabeth looked up. The girl was already halfway down the center walk, late for class or angry or both. She was wearing an Angel Flight uniform and high heels, and her short blonde hair was brushed back in wings along the sides of her garrison cap.

Elizabeth stepped off the curb into the street. The gutter was clogged with dead leaves and full of water. The worm lay at the bottom. She sat down on her heels, holding the application form in her right hand. The worm would drown, wouldn't it? That was what Tupper had told her. The reason they came out on the sidewalks when it rained was that their tunnels filled up with water, and they would drown if they didn't.

She stood up and looked down the central walk again, but the girl was gone, and there was nobody else on the campus. She stooped again and transferred the application to her other hand, and then reached in the icy water, and scooped up the worm in her cupped hand, thinking that as long as it didn't move she would be able to stand it, but as soon as her fingers touched the soft pink flesh, she dropped it and clenched her fist.

"I can't," Elizabeth said, rubbing her wet hand along the side of her raincoat, as if she could wipe off the memory of the worm's touch.

She took the application in both hands and dipped it into the water like a scoop. The paper went a little limp in the water, but she pushed

it into the dirty, wet leaves and scooped the worm up and put it back on the sidewalk. It didn't move.

"And thank God they do come out on the sidewalks!" Tupper had said, walking her home in the middle of the street from his Tupperware deliveries. "You think they're disgusting lying there! What if they didn't come out on the sidewalks? What if they all stayed in their holes and drowned? Have you ever had to do mouth-to-mouth resuscitation on a worm?"

Elizabeth straightened up. The job application was wet and dirty. There was a brown smear where the worm had lain, and a dirty line across the top. She should throw it away and go back to Carter to get another one. She unfolded it and carefully separated the wet pages so they wouldn't stick together as they dried.

"I had first aid last semester, and we had to do mouth-to-mouth resuscitation in there," Tupper had said, standing in the middle of the street in front of her dorm. "What a great class! I sold twenty-two square rounds for snake bite kits. Do you know how to do mouth-to-mouth resuscitation?"

"No."

"It's easy," Tupper had said, and put his hand on the back of her neck under her hair and kissed her, in the middle of the street in the rain.

The worm still hadn't moved. Elizabeth stood and watched it a little longer, feeling cold, and then went out in the middle of the street and walked home.

Paul didn't come home till after seven. Elizabeth had kept a casserole warm in the oven.

"I ate," he said. "I thought you'd be at your Tupperware party."

"I don't want to go," she said, reaching into the hot oven to get the casserole out. It was the first time she had felt warm all day.

"Brubaker's wife is going. I told him you'd be there, too. I want you to get to know her. Brubaker's got a lot of influence around here about who gets tenure."

She put the casserole on top of the stove and then stood there with the oven door half open. "I went over to apply for a job today," she said, "and I saw this worm. It had fallen in the gutter and it was drowning and I picked it up and put it back on the sidewalk."

"And did you apply for the job or do you think you can make any money picking up worms?"

She had turned up the furnace when she got home and put the application on the vent, but it had wrinkled as it dried, and there was a big smear down the middle where the worm had lain. "No," she said, "I was going to, but when I was over on the campus, there was this worm lying

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on the sidewalk. A girl walked by and stepped in a puddle, and that was all it took. The worm was right on the edge, and when she stepped in the puddle, it made a kind of wave that pushed it over the edge. She didn't even know she'd done it."

"Is there a point to this story, or have you decided to stand here and talk until you've completely ruined my chance at tenure?" He shut off the oven and went into the living room. She followed him.

"All it took was somebody walking past and stepping in a puddle, and the worm's whole life was changed. Do you think things happen like that? That one little action can change your whole life forever?"

"What I think," he said, "is that you didn't want to move here in the first place, and so you are determined to sabotage my chances. You know what this move is costing us, but you won't go apply for a job. You know how important my getting tenure is, but you won't do anything to help. You won't even go to a goddamn Tupperware party!" He turned the thermostat down. "It's like an oven in here. You've got the heat turned up to seventy-five. What's the matter with you?"

"I was cold," Elizabeth said.

She was late to the Tupperware party. They were in the middle of a game where they told their name and something they liked that began with the same letter.

"My name's Sandy," an overweight woman in brown polyester pants and a rust print blouse was saying, "and I like sundaes." She pointed at Elizabeth's neighbor. "And you're Meg, and you like marshmallows, and you're Janice," she said, glaring at a woman in a pink suit with her hair teased and sprayed the way girls had worn it when Elizabeth was in college. "You're Janice and you like Jesus," she said, and moved rapidly on to the next person. "And you're Barbara and you like bananas."

She went all the way around the circle until she came to Elizabeth. She looked puzzled for a moment, and then said, "And you're Elizabeth, and you went to college here, didn't you?"

"Yes," she said.

"That doesn't begin with an E," the woman in the center said. Everyone laughed. "I'm Terry, and I like Tupperware," she said, and there was more laughter. "You got here late. Stand up and tell us your name and something you like."

"I'm Elizabeth," she said, still trying to place the woman in the brown slacks. Sandy. "And I like . . ." She couldn't think of anything that began with an E.

"Eggs," Sandy whispered loudly.

"And I like eggs," Elizabeth said, and sat back down.

"Great," Terry said. "Everybody else got a favor, so you get one, too." She handed Elizabeth a pink plastic egg separator.

"Somebody gave me one of those," she said.

"No problem," Terry said. She held out a shallow plastic box full of plastic toothbrush holders and grapefruit slicers. "You can put it back and take something else if you've already got one."

"No. I'll keep this." She knew she should say something good-natured and funny, in the spirit of things, but all she could think of was what she had said to Tupper when he gave it to her. "I'll treasure this always," she had told him. A month later she had thrown it away.

"I'll treasure it always," Elizabeth said, and everyone laughed.

They played another game, unscrambling words like "autumn" and "schooldays" and "leaf," and then Terry passed out order forms and pencils and showed them the Tupperware.

It was cold in the house, even though Elizabeth's neighbor had a fire going in the fireplace, and after she had filled out her order form, Elizabeth went over and sat in front of the fire, looking at the plastic egg separator.

The woman in the brown pants came over, holding a coffee cup and a brownie on a napkin. "Hi, I'm Sandy Konkel. You don't remember me, do you?" she said. "I was an Alpha Phi. I pledged the year after you did."

Elizabeth looked earnestly at her, trying to remember her. She did not look like she had ever been an Alpha Phi. Her mustard-colored hair looked as if she had cut it herself. "I'm sorry, I . . ." Elizabeth said.

"That's okay," Sandy said. She sat down next to her. "I've changed a lot. I used to be skinny before I went to all these Tupperware parties and ate brownies. And I used to be a lot blonder. Well, actually, I never was any blonder, but I looked blonder, if you know what I mean. You look just the same. You were Elizabeth Wilson, right?"

Elizabeth nodded.

"I'm not really a whiz at remembering names," she said cheerfully, "but they stuck me with being alum rep this year. Could I come over tomorrow and get some info from you on what you're doing, who you're married to? Is your husband an alum, too?"

"No," Elizabeth said. She stretched her hands out over the fire, trying to warm them. "Do they still have Angel Flight at the college?"

"At the university, you mean," Sandy said, grinning. "It used to be a college. Gee, I don't know. They dropped the whole ROTC thing back in sixty-eight. I don't think they ever reinstated it. I can find out. Were you in Angel Flight?"

"No," Elizabeth said.

"You know, now that I think about it, I don't think they did. They

always had that big fall dance, and I don't remember them having it since . . . what was it called, the Autumn Something?"

"The Harvest Ball," Elizabeth said.

Thursday morning Elizabeth walked back over to the campus to get another job application. Paul had been late going to work. "Did you talk to Brubaker's wife?" he had said on his way out the door. Elizabeth had forgotten all about Mrs. Brubaker. She wondered which one she had been, Barbara who liked bananas or Meg who liked marshmallows.

"Yes," she said. "I told her how much you liked the university."

"Good. There's a faculty concert tomorrow night. Brubaker asked if we were going. I invited them over for coffee afterwards. Did you turn the heat up again?" he said. He looked at the thermostat and turned it down to sixty. "You had it turned up to eighty. I can hardly wait to see what our first gas bill is. The last thing I need is a two hundred dollar gas bill, Elizabeth. Do you realize what this move is costing us?"

"Yes," Elizabeth said. "I do."

She had turned the thermostat back up as soon as he left, but it didn't seem to do any good. She put on a sweater and her raincoat and walked over to the campus.

The rain had stopped sometime during the night, but the central walk was still wet. At the far end, a girl in a yellow slicker stepped up on the curb. She took a few steps on the sidewalk, her head bent, as if she were looking at something on the ground, and then cut across the wet grass toward Gunter.

Elizabeth went into Carter Hall. The girl who had helped her the day before was leaning over the counter, taking notes from a textbook. She was wearing a pleated skirt and sweater like Elizabeth had worn in college.

"The styles we wore have all come back," Tib had said when they had lunch together. "Those matching sweater and skirt sets and those horrible flats that we never could keep on our feet. And penny loafers." She was on her third peach daiquiri and her voice had gotten calmer with each one, so that she almost sounded like her old self. "And cocktail dresses! Do you remember that rust formal you had, with the scoop neck and the long skirt with the raised design? I always loved that dress. Do you remember that time you loaned it to me for the Angel Flight dance?"

"Yes," Elizabeth said, and picked up the bill.

Tib tried to stir her peach daiquiri with its mint sprig, but it slipped out of her fingers and sank to the bottom of the glass. "He really only took me to be nice."

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"I know," Elizabeth had said. "Now how much do I owe? Six-fifty for the crepes and two for the wine cooler. Do they add on the tip here?"

"I need another job application," Elizabeth said to the girl.

"Sure thing." When the girl walked over to the files to get it, Elizabeth could see that she was wearing flat-heeled shoes like she had worn in college. Elizabeth thanked her and put the application in her purse.

She walked up past her dorm. The worm was still lying there. The sidewalk around it was almost dry, and the worm was a darker red than it had been. "I should have put it in the grass," she said out loud. She knew it was dead, but she picked it up and put it in the grass anyway, so no one would step on it. It was cold to the touch.

Sandy Konkel came over in the afternoon wearing a gray polyester pantsuit. She had a wet high school letter jacket over her head. "John loaned me his jacket," she said. "I wasn't going to wear a coat this morning, but John told me I was going to get drenched. Which I was."

"You might want to put it on," Elizabeth said. "I'm sorry it's so cold in here. I think there's something wrong with the furnace."

"I'm fine," Sandy said. "You know, I wrote that article on your husband being the new assistant dean, and I asked him about you, but he didn't say anything about your having gone to college here."

She had a thick notebook with her. She opened it at tabbed sections. "We might as well get this alum stuff out of the way first, and then we can talk. This alum rep job is a real pain, but I must admit I get kind of a kick out of finding out what happened to everybody. Let's see," she said, thumbing through the sections. "Found, lost, hopelessly lost, deceased. I think you're one of the hopelessly lost. Right? Okay." She dug a pencil out of her purse: "You were Elizabeth Wilson."

"Yes," Elizabeth said. "I was." She had taken off her light sweater and put on a heavy wool one when she got home, but she was still cold. She rubbed her hands along her upper arms. "Would you like some coffee?"

"Sure," she said. She followed Elizabeth to the kitchen and asked her questions about Paul and his job and whether they had any children while Elizabeth made coffee and put out the cream and sugar and a plate of the cookies she had baked for after the concert.

"I'll read you some names off the hopelessly lost list, and if you know what happened to them, just stop me. Carolyn Waugh, Pam Callison, Linda Bohlender." She was several names past Cheryl Tibner before Elizabeth realized that was Tib.

"I saw Tib in Denver this summer," she said. "Her married name's Scates, but she's getting a divorce, and I don't know if she's going to go back to her maiden name or not."

"What's she doing?" Sandy said.

She's drinking too much, Elizabeth thought, and she let her hair grow out, and she's too thin. "She's working for a stockbroker," she said and went to get the address Tib had given her. Sandy wrote it down, and then flipped to the tabbed section marked "Found" and entered the name and address again.

"Would you like some more coffee, Mrs. Konkel?" Elizabeth said.

"You still don't remember me, do you?" Sandy said. She stood up and took off her jacket. She was wearing a short-sleeved gray knit shell underneath it. "I was Karen Zamora's roommate. Sondra Dickeson?"

Sondra Dickeson. She had had pale blonde hair that she wore in a pageboy, and a winter white cashmere sweater and a matching white skirt with a kick pleat. She had worn it with black heels and a string of real pearls.

Sandy laughed. "You should see the expression on your face. You remember me now, don't you?"

"I'm sorry. I just didn't . . . I should have . . ."

"Listen, it's okay," she said. She took a sip of coffee. "At least you didn't say, 'How could you let yourself go like that?' like Janice Brubaker did." She bit into a cookie. "Well, aren't you going to ask me whatever became of Sondra Dickeson? It's a great story."

"What happened to her?" Elizabeth said. She felt suddenly colder. She poured herself another cup of coffee and sat back down, wrapping her hands around the cup for warmth.

Sandy finished the cookie and took another one. "Well, if you remember, I was kind of a snot in those days. I was going to this Sigma Chi dinner dance with Chuck Pagano. Do you remember him? Well, anyway, we were going to this dance clear out in the country somewhere and he stopped the car and got all clutchy-grabby and I got mad because he was messing up my hair and my makeup so I got out of the car. And he drove off. So there I was, standing out in the middle of nowhere in a formal and high heels. I hadn't even grabbed my purse or anything, and it's getting dark, and Sondra Dickeson is such a snot that it never even occurs to her to walk back to town or try to find a phone or something. No, she just stands there like an idiot in her brocade formal and her orchid corsage and her dyed satin pumps and thinks, 'He can't do this to me. Who does he think he is?' "

She was talking about herself as if she had been another person, which Elizabeth supposed she had been, an ice-blonde with a pageboy and a formal like the one Elizabeth had loaned Tib for the Harvest Ball, a rust satin bodice and a bell skirt out of sculptured rust brocade. After the dance Elizabeth had given it to the Salvation Army.

"Did Chuck come back?" she said.

"Yes," Sandy said, frowning, and then grinned. "But not soon enough.

Anyway, it's almost dark and along comes this truck with no lights on, and this guy leans out and says, 'Hiya, gorgeous. Wanta ride?' " She smiled at her coffee cup as if she could still hear him saying it. "He was awful. His hair was down to his ears and his fingernails were black. He wiped his hand on his shirt and helped me up into the truck. He practically pulled my arm out of its socket, and then he said, 'I thought there for a minute I was going to have to go around behind and shove. You know, you're lucky I came along. I'm not usually out after dark on account of my lights being out, but I had a flat tire.' "

She's happy, Elizabeth thought, putting her hand over the top of her cup to try to warm herself with the steam.

"And he took me home and I thanked him and the next week he showed up at the Phi house and asked me out for a date, and I was so surprised that I went, and I married him, and we have four kids."

The furnace kicked on, and Elizabeth could feel the air coming out of the vent under the table, but it felt cold. "You went out with him?" she said.

"Hard to believe, isn't it? I mean, at that age all you can think about is your precious self. You're so worried about getting laughed at or getting hurt, you can't even see anybody else. When my sorority sister told me he was downstairs, all I could think of was how he must look, his hair all slicked back with water and cleaning those black fingernails with a penknife, and what everybody would say. I almost told her to tell him I wasn't there."

"What if you had done that?"

"I guess I'd still be Sondra Dickeson, the snot, a fate worse than death."

"A fate worse than death," Elizabeth said, almost to herself, but Sandy didn't hear her. She was plunging along, telling the story that she got to tell everytime somebody new moved to town, and no wonder she liked being alum rep.

"My sorority sister said, 'He's really got intestinal fortitude coming here like this, thinking you'd go out with him,' and I thought about him, sitting down there being laughed at, being hurt, and I told my roommate to go to hell and went downstairs and that was that." She looked at the kitchen clock. "Good lord, is it that late? I'm going to have to go pick up the kids pretty soon." She ran her finger down the hopelessly lost list. "How about Dallas Tindall, May Matsumoto, Ralph DeArvill?"

"No," Elizabeth said. "Is Tupper Hofwalt on that list?"

"Hofwalt." She flipped several pages over. "Was Tupper his real name?"

"No. Phillip. But everybody called him Tupper because he sold Tupperware."

She looked up. "I remember him. He had a Tupperware party in our

dorm when I was a freshman." She flipped back to the Found section and started paging through it.

He had talked Elizabeth and Tib into having a Tupperware party in the dorm. "As co-hostess you'll be eligible to earn points toward a popcorn popper," he had said. "You don't have to do anything except come up with some refreshments, and your mothers are always sending you cookies, right? And I'll owe you guys a favor."

They had had the party in the dorm lounge. Tupper pinned the names of famous people on their backs and they had to figure out who they were by asking questions about themselves.

Elizabeth was Twiggy. "Am I a girl?" she had asked Tib.

"Yes."

"Am I pretty?"

"Yes," Tupper had said before Tib could answer.

After she guessed it she went over and stooped down next to the coffee table where Tupper was setting up his display of plastic bowls. "Do you really think Twiggy's pretty?" she asked.

"Who said anything about Twiggy?" he said. "Listen, I wanted to tell you . . ."

"Am I alive?" Sharon Oberhausen demanded.

"I don't know," Elizabeth said. "Turn around so I can see who you are."

The sign on her back said Mick Jagger.

"It's hard to tell," Tupper said.

Tib was King Kong. It had taken her forever to figure it out. "Am I tall?" she asked.

"Compared to what?" Elizabeth said.

She stuck her hands on her hips. "I don't know. The Empire State Building."

"Yes," Tupper said.

He had had a hard time getting them to stop talking so he could show them his butter keeper and cake taker and popsicle makers. While they were filling out their order forms, Sharon Oberhausen said to Tib, "Do you have a date yet for the Harvest Ball?"

"Yes," Tib said.

"I wish I did," Sharon said. She leaned across Tib. "Elizabeth, do you realize everybody in ROTC has to have a date or they put you on weekend duty? Who are you going with, Tib?"

"Listen, you guys," Tib said, "the more you buy, the better our chances at that popcorn popper, which we are willing to share."

They had bought a cake and chocolate chip ice cream. Elizabeth cut the cake in the dorm's tiny kitchen while Tib dished it up.

"You didn't tell me you had a date to the Harvest Ball," Elizabeth said. "Who is it? That guy in your ed psych class?"

"No." She dug into the ice cream with a plastic spoon.

"Who?"

Tupper came into the kitchen with a catalog. "You're only twenty points away from a popcorn popper," he said. "You know what you girls need?" He folded back a page and pointed to a white plastic box. "An ice cream keeper. Holds a half-gallon of ice cream, and when you want some, all you do is slide this tab out," he pointed to a flat rectangle of plastic, "and cut off a slice. No more digging around in it and getting your hands all messy."

Tib licked ice cream off her knuckles. "That's the best part."

"Get out of here, Tupper," Elizabeth said. "Tib's trying to tell me who's taking her to the Harvest Ball."

Tupper closed the catalog. "I am."

"Oh," Elizabeth said. Sharon stuck her head around the corner. "Tupper, when do we have to pay for this stuff?" she said. "And when do we get something to eat?"

Tupper said, "You pay before you eat," and went back out to the lounge.

Elizabeth drew the plastic knife across the top of the cake, making perfectly straight lines in the frosting. When she had the cake divided into squares, she cut the corner piece and put it on the paper plate next to the melting ice cream. "Do you have anything to wear?" she said. "You can borrow my rust formal."

Sandy was looking at her, the thick notebook opened almost to the last page. "How well did you know Tupper?" she said.

Elizabeth's coffee was ice cold, but she put her hand over it, as if to try to catch the steam. "Not very well. He used to date Tib."

"He's on my deceased list, Elizabeth. He killed himself five years ago."

Paul didn't get home till after ten. Elizabeth was sitting on the couch wrapped in a blanket.

He went straight to the thermostat and turned it down. "How high do you have this thing turned up?" He squinted at it. "Eighty-five. Well, at least I don't have to worry about you freezing to death. Have you been sitting there like that all day?"

"The worm died," she said. "I didn't save it after all. I should have put it over on the grass."

"Ron Brubaker says there's an opening for a secretary in the dean's office. I told him you'd put in an application. You have, haven't you?"

"Yes," Elizabeth said. After Sandy left, she had taken the application out of her purse and sat down at the kitchen table to fill it out. She had had it nearly all filled out before she realized it was a retirement fund withholding form.

"Sandy Konkel was here today," she said. "She met her husband on

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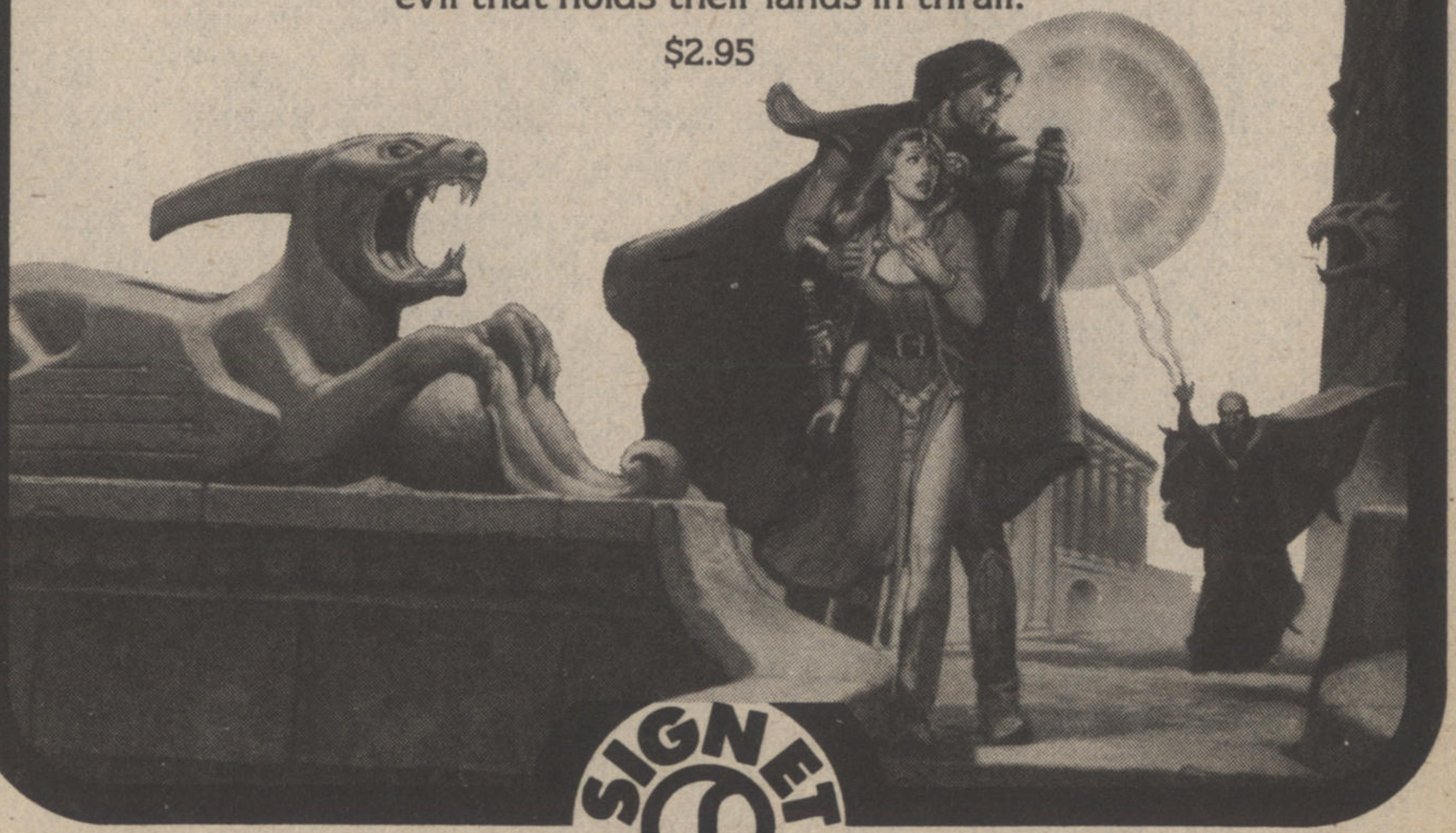


SIGNET FANTASY

a dirt road. They were both there by chance. By chance. It wasn't even his route. Like the worm. Tib just walked by, she didn't even know she did it, but the worm was too near the edge, and it went over into the water and it drowned." She started to cry. The tears felt cold running down her cheeks. "It drowned."

"What did you and Sandy Konkel do? Get out the cooking sherry and reminisce about old times?"

"Yes," she said. "Old times."

In the morning Elizabeth took back the retirement fund withholding form. It had rained off and on all night, and it had turned colder. There were patches of ice on the central walk.

"I had it almost all filled out before I realized what it was," she told the girl. A boy in a button-down shirt and khaki pants had been leaning on the counter when Elizabeth came in. The girl was turned away from the counter, filing papers.

"I don't know what you're so mad about," the boy had said and then stopped and looked at Elizabeth. "You've got a customer," he said, and stepped away from the counter.

"All these dumb forms look alike," the girl said, handing the application to Elizabeth. She picked up a stack of books. "I've got a class. Did you need anything else?"

Elizabeth shook her head and stepped back so the boy could finish talking to her, but the girl didn't even look at him. She shoved the books into a backpack, slung it over her shoulder, and went out the door.

"Hey, wait a minute," the boy said, and started after her. By the time Elizabeth got outside, they were halfway up the walk. Elizabeth heard the boy say, "So I took her out once or twice. Is that a crime?"

The girl jerked the backpack out of his grip and started off down the walk toward Elizabeth's old dorm. In front of the dorm a girl in a yellow slicker was talking to another girl with short upswept blonde hair. The girl in the slicker turned suddenly and started down the walk.

A boy went past Elizabeth on a bike, hitting her elbow and knocking the application out of her hand. She grabbed for it and got it before it landed on the walk.

"Sorry," he said without glancing back. He was wearing a jean jacket. Its sleeves were too short, and his bony wrists stuck out. He was steering the bike with one hand and holding a big plastic sack full of pink and green bowls in the other. That was what he had hit her with.

"Tupper," she said, and started to run after him.

She was down on the ice before she even knew she was going to fall, her hands splayed out against the sidewalk and one foot twisted under

her. "Are you all right, ma'am?" the boy in the button-down shirt said. He knelt down in front of her so she couldn't see up the walk.

Tupper would call me "ma'am," too, she thought. He wouldn't even recognize me.

"You shouldn't try to run on this sidewalk. It's slicker than shit."

"I thought I saw somebody I knew."

He turned, balancing himself on the flat of one hand, and looked down the long walk. There was nobody there now. "What did they look like? Maybe I can still catch them."

"No," Elizabeth said. "He's long gone."

The girl came over. "Should I go call 911 or something?" she said.

"I don't know," he said to her, and then turned back to Elizabeth. "Can you stand up?" he said, and put his hand under her arm to help her. She tried to bring her foot out from its twisted position, but it wouldn't come. He tried again, from behind, both hands under her arms and hoisting her up, then holding her there by brute force till he could come around to her bad side. She leaned shamelessly against him, shivering.

"If you can get my books and this lady's purse, I think I can get her up to the infirmary," he said. "Do you think you can walk that far?"

"Yes," Elizabeth said, and put her arm around his neck. The girl picked up Elizabeth's purse and her retirement fund application.

"I used to go to school here. The central walk was heated back then." She couldn't put any weight on her foot at all. "Everything looks the same. Even the college kids. The girls wear skirts and sweaters just like we wore and those little flat shoes that never will stay on your feet, and the boys wear button-down shirts and jean jackets and they look just like the boys I knew when I went here to school, and it isn't fair. I keep thinking I see people I used to know."

"I'll bet," the boy said politely. He shifted his weight, hefting her up so her arm was more firmly on his shoulder.

"I could maybe go get a wheelchair. I bet they'd loan me one," the girl said, sounding concerned.

"You know it can't be them, but it looks just like them, only you'll never see them again, never. You'll never even know what happened to them." She had thought she was getting hysterical, but instead her voice was getting softer and softer until her words seemed to fade away to nothing. She wondered if she had even said them aloud.

The boy got her up the stairs and into the infirmary.

"You shouldn't let them get away," she said.

"No," the boy said, and eased her onto the couch. "I guess you shouldn't."

"She slipped on the ice on the central walk," the girl told the recep-

tionist. "I think maybe her ankle's broken. She's in a lot of pain." She came over to Elizabeth.

"I can stay with her," the boy said. "I know you've got a class."

She looked at her watch. "Yeah. Ed psych. Are you sure you'll be all right?" she said to Elizabeth.

"I'm fine. Thank you for all your help, both of you."

"Do you have a way to get home?" the boy said.

"I'll call my husband to come and get me. There's really no reason for either of you to stay. I'm fine. Really."

"Okay," the boy said. He stood up. "Come on," he said to the girl. "I'll walk you to class and explain to old Harrigan that you were being an angel of mercy." He took the girl's arm, and she smiled up at him.

They left, and the receptionist brought Elizabeth a clipboard with some forms on it. "They were having a fight," Elizabeth said.

"Well, I'd say whatever it was about, it's over now."

"Yes," Elizabeth said. Because of me. Because I fell down on the ice.

"I used to live in this dorm," Elizabeth said. "This was the lounge."

"Oh," the receptionist said. "I bet it's changed a lot since then."

"No," Elizabeth said. "It's just the same."

Where the reception desk was there had been a table with a phone on it where they had checked in and out of the dorm, and along the far wall the couch that she and Tib had sat on at the Tupperware party. Tupper had been sitting on it in his tuxedo when she came down to go to the library.

The receptionist was looking at her. "I bet it hurts," she said.

"Yes," Elizabeth said.

She had planned to be at the library when Tupper came, but he was half an hour early. He stood up when he saw her on the stairs and said, "I tried to call you this afternoon. I wondered if you wanted to go study at the library tomorrow." He had brought Tib a corsage in a white box. He came over and stood at the foot of the stairs, holding the box in both hands.

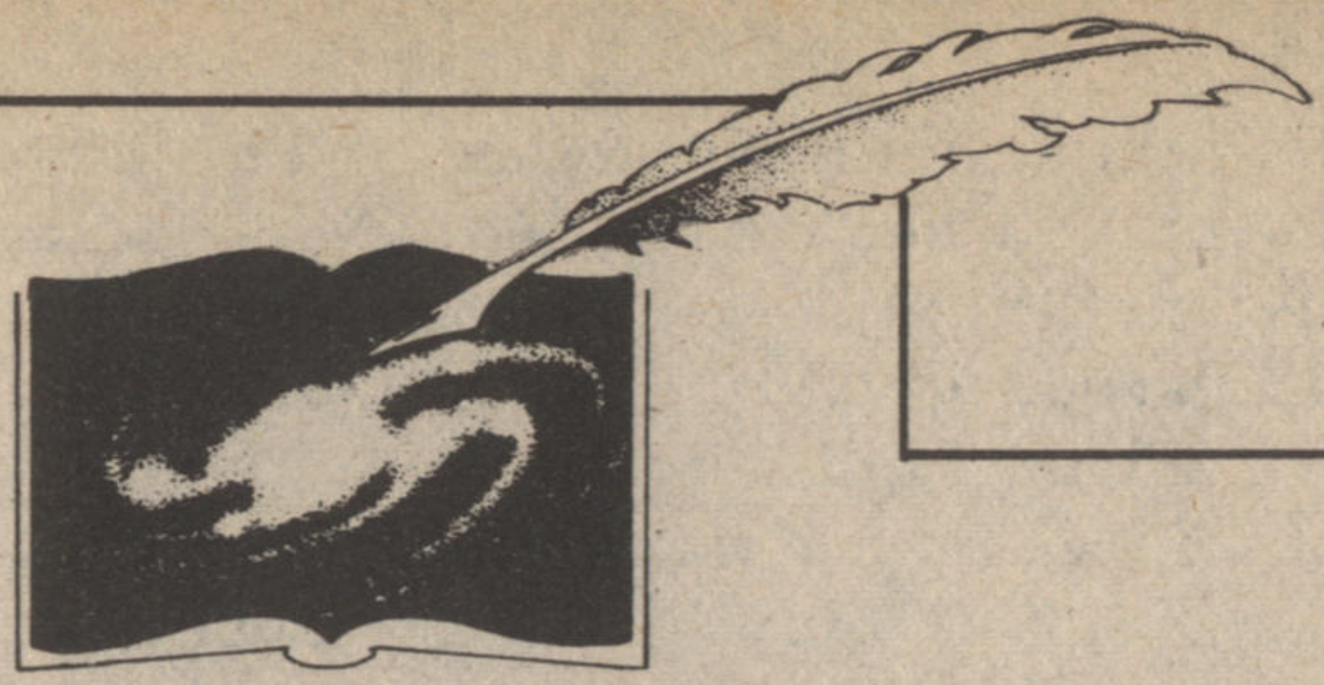
"I'm studying at the library tonight," Elizabeth said, and walked down the stairs past him, afraid he would put his hand out to stop her, but they were full of the corsage box. "I don't think Tib's ready yet."

"I know. I came early because I wanted to talk to you."

"You'd better call her so she'll know you're here," she said, and walked out the door. She hadn't even checked out, which could have gotten her in trouble with the dorm mother. She found out later that Tib had done it for her.

The receptionist stood up. "I'm going to go see if Dr. Larenson can't see you right now," she said. "You are obviously in a lot of pain."

Her ankle was sprained. The doctor wrapped it in an Ace bandage.



About L. RON HUBBARD's

Writers of the Future Contest

by Algis Budrys

The Writers of the Future contest substantially rewards at least twelve talented new speculative fiction writers each year. With no strings, every three months it confers prizes of $500, $750 and $1,000 for short stories or novelettes. In addition, there's an annual Master Prize of $4,000. All awards are symbolized by trophies or framed certificates, so there's something for the mantelpiece too.

There's also a Writers of the Future anthology, which I edit. (There was one last year, and there's another one just out as you read this.) It offers top rates for limited rights in the stories. These payments are in addition to any contest winnings. The anthology is distributed through top paperback book retailers everywhere, and is kept in print and on sale continually. All that's required to win or to be a finalist is a good new story, any kind of fantasy or science fiction, no more than 17,000 words long, by writers whose published fiction has been no more than three short stories or one novelette. Entry is free.

The contest deadlines in 1986 are March 31, June 30, and September 30, and there are First, Second and Third prizes for each three-month quarter. At the end of our year, a separate panel of judges awards a Master Prize to the best of the four quarterly winners. So one person will win a total of $5,000. Judging panels include or have included Gregory Benford, Stephen Goldin, Frank Herbert, Anne McCaffrey, C.L. Moore, Larry Niven, Frederik Pohl, Robert Silverberg, Theodore Sturgeon, Jack Williamson, Gene Wolfe and Roger Zelazny, as well as me. Matters are administered so that the judges are totally independent and have the final say.

It seems hardly necessary to embellish the above facts with any enthusiastic adjectives. This contest was created and sponsored by L. Ron Hubbard and the project will continue in 1986 and try to do some realistic good for people whose talent earns them this consideration. For complete entry rules, and answers to any questions you might have, write to the address given below:

Don't Delay! Send Your Entry To:

Writers of the Future Contest
2210 Wilshire Blvd., Suite 343
Santa Monica, CA 90403

Or, you can find the rules—and examples of winning stories, plus informative essays by some of the judges—in either of the Writers of the Future anthologies. They're original paperbacks and cost $3.95 each.

Good luck.

—Algis Budrys

Halfway through, the phone rang, and he left her sitting on the examining table with her foot propped up while he took the call.

The day after the dance Tupper had called her. "Tell him I'm not here," Elizabeth had told Tib.

"You tell him," Tib had said, and stuck the phone at her, and she had taken the receiver and said, "I don't want to talk to you, but Tib's here. I'm sure she does," and handed the phone back to Tib and walked out of the room. She was halfway across campus before Tib caught up with her.

It had turned colder in the night, and there was a sharp wind that blew the dead leaves across the grass. Tib had brought Elizabeth her coat.

"Thank you," Elizabeth said, and put it on.

"At least you're not totally stupid," Tib said. "Almost, though."

Elizabeth jammed her hands deep in the pockets. "What did Tupper have to say? Did he ask you out again? To one of his Tupperware parties?"

"He didn't ask me out. I asked him to the Harvest Ball because I needed a date. They put you on weekend duty if you didn't have a date, so I asked him. And then after I did it, I was afraid you wouldn't understand."

"Understand what?" Elizabeth said. "You can date whoever you want."

"I don't want to date Tupper, and you know it. If you don't stop acting this way, I'm going to get another roommate."

And she had said, without any idea how important little things like that could be, how hanging up a phone or having a flat tire or saying something could splash out in all directions and sweep you over the edge, she had said, "Maybe you'd better do just that."

They had lived in silence for two weeks. Sharon Oberhausen's roommate didn't come back after Thanksgiving, and Tib moved in with her until the end of the quarter. Then Elizabeth pledged Alpha Phi and moved into the sorority house.

The doctor came back and finished wrapping her ankle. "Do you have a ride home? I'm going to give you a pair of crutches. I don't want you walking on this any more than absolutely necessary."

"No, I'll call my husband." The doctor helped her off the table and onto the crutches. He walked her back out to the waiting room and punched buttons on the phone so she could make an outside call.

She dialed her own number and told the ringing to come pick her up. "He'll be over in a minute," she told the receptionist. "I'll wait outside for him."

The receptionist helped her through the door and down the steps. She went back inside, and Elizabeth went out and stood on the curb, looking up at the middle window.

After Tupper took Tib to the Angel Flight dance, he had come and

thrown things at her window. She would see them in the mornings when she went to class, plastic jar openers and grapefruit slicers and kitchen scrubber holders, scattered on the lawn and the sidewalk. She had never opened the window, and after a while he had stopped coming.

Elizabeth looked down at the grass. At first she couldn't find the worm. She parted the grass with the tip of her crutch, standing on her good foot. It was there, where she had put it, shrivelled now and darker red, almost black. It was covered with ice crystals.

Elizabeth looked in the front window at the receptionist. When she got up to go file Elizabeth's chart, Elizabeth crossed the street and walked home.

The walk home had made Elizabeth's ankle swell so badly she could hardly move by the time Paul came home.

"What's the matter with you?" he said angrily. "Why didn't you call me?" He looked at his watch. "Now it's too late to call Brubaker. He and his wife were going out to dinner. I suppose you don't feel like going to the concert."

"No," Elizabeth said. "I'll go."

He turned down the thermostat without looking at it. "What in the hell were you doing anyway?"

"I thought I saw a boy I used to know. I was trying to catch up to him."

"A boy you used to know?" Paul said disbelievingly. "In college? What's he doing here? Still waiting to graduate?"

"I don't know," Elizabeth said. She wondered if Sandy ever saw herself on the campus, dressed in the winter white sweater and pearls, standing in front of her sorority house talking to Chuck Pagano. She's not there, Elizabeth thought. Sandy had not said, "Tell him I'm not here." She had not said, "Maybe you'd better just do that," and because of that and a flat tire, Sondra Dickeson isn't trapped on the campus, waiting to be rescued. Like they are.

"You don't even realize what this little move of yours has cost, do you?" Paul said. "Brubaker told me this afternoon he'd gotten you the job in the dean's office."

He took off the Ace bandage and looked at her ankle. She had gotten the bandage wet walking home. He went to look for another one. He came back carrying the wrinkled job application. "I found this in the bureau drawer. You told me you turned your application in."

"It fell in the gutter," she said.

"Why didn't you throw it away?"

"I thought it might be important," she said, and hobbled over on her crutches and took it away from him.

* * *

They were late to the concert because of her ankle, so they didn't get to sit with the Brubakers, but afterward they came over. Dr. Brubaker introduced his wife.

"I'm so sorry about this," Janice Brubaker said. "Ron's been telling them for years they should get that central walk fixed. It used to be heated." She was the woman Sandy had pointed at at the Tupperware party and said was Janice who loved Jesus. She was wearing a dark red suit and had her hair teased into a bouffant, the way girls had worn their hair when Elizabeth was in college. "It was so nice of you to ask us over, but of course now with your ankle we understand."

"No," Elizabeth said. "We want you to come. I'm doing great, really. It's just a little sprain."

The Brubakers had to go talk to someone backstage. Paul told the Brubakers how to get to their house and took Elizabeth outside. Because they were late there hadn't been anyplace to park. Paul had had to park up by the infirmary. Elizabeth said she thought she could walk as far as the car, but it took them fifteen minutes to make it three-fourths of the way up the walk.

"This is ridiculous," Paul said angrily, and stode off up the walk to get the car.

She hobbled slowly on up to the end of the walk and sat down on one of the cement benches that had been vents for the heating system. Elizabeth had worn a wool dress and her warmest coat, but she was still cold. She laid her crutches against the bench and looked across at her old dorm.

Someone was standing in front of the dorm, looking up at the middle window. He looked cold. He had his hands jammed in his jean jacket pockets, and after a few minutes he pulled something out of one of the pockets and threw it at the window.

It's no good, Elizabeth thought, she won't come.

He had made one last attempt to talk to her. It was spring quarter. It had been raining again. The walk was covered with worms. Tib was wearing her Angel Flight uniform, and she looked cold.

Tib had stopped Elizabeth after she came out of the dorm and said, "I saw Tupper the other day. He asked about you, and I told him you were living in the Alpha Phi house."

"Oh," Elizabeth had said, and tried to walk past her, but Tib had kept her there, talking as if nothing had happened, as if they were still roommates. "I'm dating this guy in ROTC. Jim Scates. He's gorgeous!" she had said, as if they were still roommates.

"I'm going to be late for class," she said. Tib glanced nervously down the walk, and Elizabeth looked, too, and saw Tupper bearing down on them on his bike. "Thanks a lot," she said angrily.

WILLIAM SLEATOR

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PIG.**

SPECTRA

BANTAM

"He just wants to talk to you."

"About what? How he's taking you to the Alpha Sig dinner dance?" she had said, and turned and walked back into the dorm before he could catch up to her. He had called her on the dorm phone for nearly half an hour, but she hadn't answered, and after awhile he had given up.

But he hadn't given up. He was still there, under her windows, throwing grapefruit slicers and egg separators at her, and she still, after all these years, wouldn't come to the window. He would stand there forever, and she would never, never come.

She stood up. The rubber tip of one of her crutches skidded on the ice under the bench, and she almost fell. She steadied herself against the hard cement bench.

Paul honked and pulled over beside the curb, his turn-lights flashing. He got out of the car. "The Brubakers are already going to be there, for God's sake," he said. He took the crutches away from her and hurried her to the car, his hand jammed under her armpit. When they pulled away, the boy was still there, looking up at the window, waiting.

The Brubakers were there, waiting in the driveway. Paul left her in the car while he unlocked the door. Dr. Brubaker opened the car door for her and tried to help her with her crutches. Janice kept saying, "Oh, really, we would have understood." They both stood back, looking helpless, while Elizabeth hobbled into the house.

Janice offered to make the coffee, and Elizabeth let her, sitting at the kitchen table, her coat still on. Paul had set out the cups and saucers and the plate of cookies before they left.

"You were at the Tupperware party, weren't you?" Janice said, opening the cupboards to look for the coffee filters. "I never really got a chance to meet you. I saw Sandy Konkel had her hooks in you."

"At the party you said you liked Jesus," Elizabeth said. "Are you a Christian?"

Janice had been peeling off a paper filter. She stopped and looked hard at Elizabeth. "Yes," she said. "I am. You know, Sandy Konkel told me a Tupperware party was no place for religion, and I told her that any place was the place for a Christian witness. And I was right, because that witness spoke to you, didn't it, Elizabeth?"

"What if you did something, a long time ago, and you found out it had ruined everything?"

" 'For behold your sin will find you out,' " Janice said, holding the coffee pot under the faucet.

"I'm not talking about sin," Elizabeth said. "I'm talking about little things that you wouldn't think would matter so much, like stepping in a puddle or having a fight with somebody. What if you drove off and left

somebody standing in the road because you were mad, and it changed their whole life, it made them into a different person? Or what if you turned and walked away from somebody because your feelings were hurt or you wouldn't open your window, and because of that one little thing their whole lives were changed and now she's getting a divorce and she drinks too much, and he killed himself! He killed himself, and you didn't even know you did it."

Janice had opened her purse and started to get out a Bible. She stopped with the Bible only half out of the purse and stared at Elizabeth. "You made somebody kill himself?"

"No," Elizabeth said. "I didn't make him kill himself and I didn't make her get a divorce, but if I hadn't turned and walked away from them that day, everything would have been different."

"Divorce?" Janice said.

"Sandy was right. When you're young all you think about is yourself. All I could think about was how much prettier she was and how she was the kind of girl who had dozens of dates, and when he asked her out, I thought that he'd liked her all along, and I was so hurt. I threw away the egg separator, I was so hurt, and that's why I wouldn't talk to him that day, but I didn't know it was so important! I didn't know there was a puddle there and it was going to sweep me over into the gutter."

Janice laid the Bible on the table. "I don't know what you've done, Elizabeth, but whatever it is, Our Lord can forgive you. I want to read you something." She opened the Bible at a cross-shaped bookmark. " 'For God so loved the world that He gave his only begotten Son that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life.' Jesus, God's own son, died on a cross and rose again so we could be forgiven for our sins."

"What if he didn't?" Elizabeth said impatiently. "What if he just lay there in the tomb getting colder and colder, until ice crystals formed on him and he never knew if he'd saved them or not?"

"Is the coffee ready yet?" Paul said, coming into the kitchen with Dr. Brubaker. "Or did you womenfolk get to talking and forget all about it?"

"What if they were waiting there for him to save them, they'd been waiting for him all those years and he didn't know it? He'd have to try to save them, wouldn't he? He couldn't just leave them there, standing in the cold looking up at her window? And maybe he couldn't. Maybe they'd get a divorce or kill themselves anyway." Her teeth had started to chatter. "Even if he did save them, he wouldn't be able to save himself. Because it was too late. He was already dead."

Paul moved around the table to her. Janice was paging through the Bible, looking frantically for the right scripture. Paul took hold of Elizabeth's arm, but she shook it off impatiently. "In Matthew we see that

he was raised from the dead and is alive today. Right now," Janice said, sounding frightened. "And no matter what sin you have in your heart he will forgive you if you accept him as your personal Savior."

Elizabeth brought her fist down hard on the table so that the plate of cookies shook. "I'm not talking about sin. I'm talking about opening a window. She stepped in the puddle and the worm went over the edge and drowned. I shouldn't have left it on the sidewalk." She hit the table with her fist again. Dr. Brubaker picked up the stack of coffee cups and put them on the counter, as if he were afraid she might start throwing them at the wall. "I should have put it in the grass."

Paul left for work without even having breakfast. Elizabeth's ankle had swollen up so badly she could hardly get her slippers on, but she got up and made the coffee. The filters were still lying on the counter where Janice Brubaker had left them.

"Weren't you satisfied that you'd ruined your chances for a job, you had to ruin mine, too?"

"I'm sorry about last night," she said. "I'm going to fill out my job application today and take it over to the campus. When my ankle heals . . ."

"It's supposed to warm up today," Paul said. "I turned the furnace off."

After he was gone, she filled out the application. She tried to erase the dark smear that the worm had left, but it wouldn't come out, and there was one question that she couldn't read. Her fingers were stiff with cold, and she had to stop and blow on them several times, but she filled in as many questions as she could, and folded it up and took it over to the campus.

The girl in the yellow slicker was standing at the end of the walk, talking to a girl in an Angel Flight uniform. She hobbled toward them with her head down, trying to hurry, listening for the sound of Tupper's bike.

"He asked about you," Tib said, and Elizabeth looked up.

She didn't look at all the way Elizabeth remembered her. She was a little overweight and not very pretty, the kind of girl who wouldn't have been able to get a date for the dance. Her short hair made her round face look even plumper. She looked hopeful and a little worried.

Don't worry, Elizabeth thought. I'm here. She didn't look at herself. She concentrated on getting up even with them at the right time.

"I told him you were living in the Alpha Phi house," Tib said.

"Oh," she heard her own voice, and under it the hum of a bicycle.

"I'm dating this guy in ROTC. He's absolutely gorgeous!"

There was a pause, and then Elizabeth's voice said, "Thanks a lot,"

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and Elizabeth pushed the rubber end of her crutch against a patch of ice and went down.

For a minute she couldn't see anything for the pain. "I've broken it," she thought, and clenched her fists to keep from screaming.

"Are you all right?" Tib said, kneeling in front of her so she couldn't see anything. No, not you! Not you! For a minute she was afraid that it hadn't worked, that the girl had turned and walked away. But after all this was not a stranger but only herself, who was too kind to let a worm drown. She had only gone around to Elizabeth's other side, where she couldn't see her. "Did she break it?" she said. "Should I go call an ambulance or something?"

No. "No," Elizabeth said. "I'm fine. If you could just help me up."

The girl who had been Elizabeth Wilson put her books down on the cement bench and came and knelt down by Elizabeth. "I hope we don't collapse in a heap," she said, and smiled at Elizabeth. She was a pretty girl. I didn't know that either, Elizabeth thought, even when Tupper told me. She took hold of Elizabeth's arm and Tib took hold of the other.

"Tripping innocent passersby again, I see. How many times have I told you not to do that?" And here, finally, was Tupper. He laid his bike flat in the grass and put his bag of Tupperware beside it.

Tib and the girl that had been herself let go and stepped back, and he knelt beside her. "They're not bad girls, really. They just like to play practical jokes. But banana peels is going too far, girls," he said, so close she could feel his warm breath on her cheek. She turned to look at him, suddenly afraid that he would be different, too, but it was only Tupper, who she had loved all these years. He put his arm around her. "Now just put your arm around my neck, sweetheart. That's right. Elizabeth, come over here and atone for your sins by helping this pretty lady up."

She had already picked her books up and was holding them against her chest, looking angry and eager to get away. She looked at Tib, but Tib was picking up the crutches, stooping down in her high heels because she couldn't bend over in her Angel Flight skirt.

She put her books down again and came around to Elizabeth's other side to take hold of her arm, and Elizabeth grabbed for her hand instead and held it tightly so she couldn't get away. "I took her to the dance because she helped with the Tupperware party. I told her I owed her a favor," he said, and Elizabeth turned and looked at him.

He was not looking at her really. He was looking past her at that other Elizabeth, who would not answer the phone, who would not come to the window, but he seemed to be looking at her, and on his young remembered face there was a look of such naked, vulnerable love that it was like a blow.

"I told you so," Tib said. She laid the crutches against the bench.

"I'm sure this lady doesn't want to hear this," Elizabeth said.

"I was going to tell you at the party, but that idiot Sharon Oberhausen . . ."

Tib brought over the crutches. "After I asked him, I thought, 'What if she thinks I'm trying to steal her boyfriend?' and I got so worried I was afraid to tell you. I really only asked him to get out of weekend duty. I mean, I don't like him or anything."

Tupper grinned at Elizabeth. "I try to pay my debts, and this is the thanks I get. You wouldn't get mad at me if I took your roommate to a dance, would you?"

"I might," Elizabeth said. It was cold sitting on the cement. She was starting to shiver. "But I'd forgive you."

"You see that?" he said.

"I see," Elizabeth said disgustedly, but she was smiling at him now. "Don't you think we'd better get this innocent passerby up off the sidewalk before she freezes to death?"

"Upsy-daisy, sweetheart," Tupper said, and in one easy motion she was up and sitting on the stone bench.

"Thank you," she said. Her teeth were chattering with the cold.

Tupper knelt in front of her and examined her ankle. "It looks pretty swollen," he said. "Do you want us to call somebody?"

"No, my husband will be along any minute. I'll just sit here till he comes."

Tib fished Elizabeth's application out of the puddle. "I'm afraid it's ruined," she said.

"It doesn't matter."

Tupper picked up his bag of bowls. "Say," he said, "you wouldn't be interested in having a Tupperware party? As hostess, you could earn valuable points toward . . ."

"Tupper!" Tib said.

"Will you leave this poor lady alone?" Elizabeth said.

He held up the sack. "Only if you'll go with me to deliver my lettuce crispers to the Sigma Chi house."

"I'll go," Tib said. "There's this darling Sigma Chi I've been wanting to meet."

"And I'll go," Elizabeth said, putting her arm around Tib. "I don't trust the kind of boyfriend you find on your own. Jim Scates is a real creep. Didn't Sharon tell you what he did to Marilyn Reed?"

Tupper handed Elizabeth the sack of bowls while he stood his bike up. Elizabeth handed them to Tib.

"Are you sure you're all right?" Tupper said. "It's cold out here. You could wait for your husband in the student union."

She wished she could put her hand on his cheek just once. "I'll be fine," she said.

The three of them went down the walk toward Frasier, Tupper pushing the bike. When they got even with Carter Hall, they cut across the grass toward Frasier. She watched them until she couldn't see them anymore, and then sat there awhile longer on the cold bench. She had hoped that something might happen, some sign that she had rescued them, but nothing happened. Her ankle didn't hurt anymore. It had stopped the minute Tupper touched it.

She continued to sit there. It seemed to her to be getting colder, though she had stopped shivering, and after awhile she got up and walked home, leaving the crutches where they were.

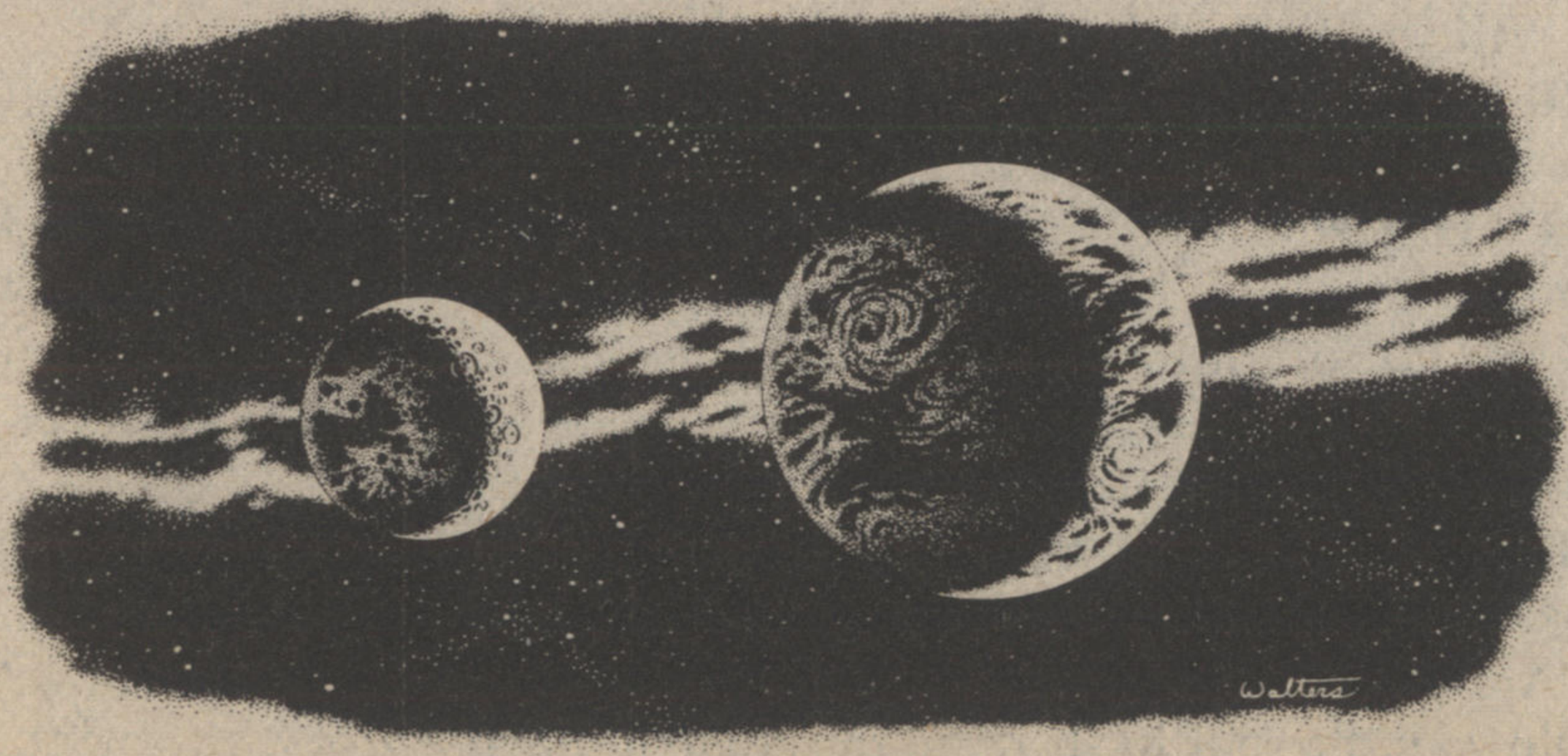
It was cold in the house. Elizabeth turned the thermostat up and sat down at the kitchen table, still in her coat, waiting for the heat to come on. When it didn't, she remembered that Paul had turned the furnace off, and she went and got a blanket and wrapped up in it on the couch. Her ankle did not hurt at all, though it felt cold. When the phone rang, she could hardly move it. It took her several rings to make it to the phone.

"I thought you weren't going to answer," Paul said. "I made an appointment with a Dr. Jamieson for you for this afternoon at three. He's a psychiatrist."

"Paul," she said. She was so cold it was hard to talk. "I'm sorry."

"It's a little too late for that, isn't it?" he said. "I told Dr. Brubaker you were on muscle relaxants for your ankle. I don't know whether he bought it or not." He hung up.

"Too late," Elizabeth said. She hung up the phone. The back of her hand was covered with ice crystals. "Paul," she tried to say, but her lips were stiff with cold, and no sound came out. ●



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"And there is no New Thing under the Sun."

Ecclesiastes

"An original idea can only be had during the first seven minutes after the beginning of a World. After that, somebody else will already have had the original idea.

"However, if Hawkins' Principle of ReEntrant Time is correct, we are *always* within seven minutes of the beginning of the world."

The Back Door of History, Arpad Arutinov,

"Oh, Oh, what *was* that jolt!" Anna Thursday-Dawn cried out. "There was a distinct jolt that shook me and shook the whole world." And she blinked three rows of her dazzling eyes. She had a piece of caul or soft egg-shell still draped about her head as new-born children sometimes have. And yet she looked at least twenty years old. If the jolt were of a particular sort, of course, she could have been a new-born twenty-year-old child.

"It must have been a *mental* jolt," Hiram Working-Day said. "There are no *physical* jolts on the Broken-Arrow-to-Tulsa-Light-Rail-Rapid-Transit-Lines, no jolt or unevenness on any of its cars ever. I believe that we have just experienced a beginning though, and one could hardly pass through that without a slight mental jolt. However, we can hardly be expected to interrupt an interesting conversation just because the world has begun. You were saying, John Rain-Tomorrow—?"

"I was speaking of the ReEntrant Principle," John Rain-Tomorrow said, "and of how, while it does not deny the validity of beginnings and endings, it does make them to be of relative unimportance. So even if the jolt betokened the beginning of the world; there is nothing unique about such a beginning. A question is whether the world is seven billion years old or seven seconds old. And the answer, for one who is committed to Hawkins' ReEntrant Principles, is that the world can never be more than seven seconds old, that the world is always in the process of beginning, and that the cutting edge of the beginning is always a little less than seven seconds thick. Whenever the world begins, everything that can happen has already happened at least once; every idea that can be entertained has been entertained at least once; and these things are clearly written into the records and residues of the world, whether they really happened or not."

"No, no, Oh, no, no, no!" Anna Thursday-Dawn cried out. "I *must* make inventions that have never been made before. I *must* have an idea that has never been considered before. Oh, I must. I'd trade my life for such."

There were eight of them sitting there on a pair of facing seats on the

Broken-Arrow-to-Tulsa-Light-Rail-Rapid-Transit-Line-Early-Prime-Run. They were John Rain-Tomorrow, Anna Thursday-Dawn, Hiram Working-Day, Catherine Tall-Tower, Clarence Bower-Bird, Mary Fat-Land, Andrew Kingdom-Come, and Elizabeth Burning-Brand. Each of the eight held fourteen cards in his hands. If it had been a little bit later in the history of the human race (Oh, say ten minutes later) it would be likely that the eight were getting ready to play cards. But that was not possible in the present case, for playing cards had not yet been invented. These were cards of another sort.

The eight persons held cards of eight different clans to which they belonged. Each of them held ten numbered Admonition Cards, and three Personage Cards, the King Father, the Queen Mother, and the Warrior Son, for each clan had been founded by such a triad. The eight persons were, as it happened, playing the game of n.n., but not with cards. In the game of n.n., one plays the cards only verbally on the table. Each of the eight also held a Clown Card, which four of them called the Joker Card.

"Hawkins has carried the ReEntrant Principle further than anybody else," said John Rain-Tomorrow. His rows of eyes twinkled with humor even when, as now, he was speaking seriously. "The first ReEntrant Concept, of course, was that of ReEntrant Space. Sometimes people tried to explain it by talking about the Curvature of Space, but there is no such thing. No! One travels in a straight line always, in one unvarying direction, for a very great distance, and then he meets himself. Oh, it happens, it happens! The thing would be more widely known except that most often there is no recognition on these meetings. And then there is ReEntrant Time. Time is the river whose end merges with its beginning so neatly that nobody notices the junction. And the end of the world always merges neatly with the beginning, but you must remember that the end always comes first."

"I like the Principle of Re-Entrant Numbers," said Hiram Working-Day who had now set thirteen of his cards face-down on the table and was assembling something with his hands. He was assembling something or making something. He had a very small lathe that he was running off a pen-light battery, and he was machining incredibly small parts. "One goes down all the regular numbers and through the Number One," he said. "One goes through all the numbers that are smaller than One, but he does not come to Zero. There is no Zero in the real world. One reaches the smallest possible number such as the smallest microscope could not discern. And then, going one notch smaller, one comes to the largest number possible, so big that a billion telescopes could not scan it. And there is no unevenness nor change of direction. The number that

is smaller than the smallest possible number really is the largest possible number, and the sequence from the one to the other is natural and even."

"What are you going to do with that laser-beam projector when you get it finished?" Elizabeth Burning-Brand asked Hiram.

"Oh, I'll put it in my buffalo gun," Hiram said.

The name of the game n.n. that they were playing was really "Nifty Notions." They took advantage of the creative early morning moments on the Broken-Arrow-to-Tulsa-Light-Rail-Transit-Line to attempt Prime Inventions, Original Ideas, Thoughts Never Thought Before, though the world insisted that such things were impossible.

"What I like is ReEntrant Size," said Mary Fat-Land. When Mary was entranced by an idea she closed all her many eyes except one pair. "The size goes down, smaller and smaller and smaller, in the magic descent, following down to the smallest sub-atomic particle, till it is itself particularized, and then down to the smallest and smallest particles of the particles. Still one step smaller then, and one comes to countless and unconceivable billions of mega-galaxies, but their totality is still smaller than that ultimate smallest particle. And there is no unevenness along the chain at all. The aggregation of mega-galaxies is such a little bit smaller than the smallest particle that you'd have to put calipers on them to be sure that there really was a difference in size."

"What I like is ReEntrant Ideas," said Catherine Tall-Tower, "and ReEntrant Perception, which is the same thing. An Idea will follow down the Idea Road, and its changes will have nothing to do with size or time or space or movement. And then there will be a ReEntrant Encounter. At the moment of the ReEntrant Encounter, the idea will become an Original Idea no matter how long it has already been kicking around. I'm on the verge of inventing playing cards now, a really Original Idea."

"And I'm on the verge of doing away with all eyes except one pair to a person," said Mary Fat-Land. "All of them except one pair are an illusion anyhow. Let me touch my mind to that Illusion of an Exuberance of Eyes as I might touch my cigar to a child's balloon, and it will burst and be no more. I'll do it. I've done it! And it's all legitimately within the ReEntrant Principle."

Why yes, Mary Fat-Land smoked cigars. Doesn't everybody? And children often do have balloons. So the metaphor was a sound one. And the Illusion of the Exuberance of Eyes was exploded forever. At least every person in that Light-Rail-Rapid-Transit Car was reduced to two eyes only. Some of the persons were displeased by the change. And the Light-Rail-Transit Train-of-Cars came to a stop. Two gentlemen from the Rectitude Militia entered the car. Those fellows work fast.

"What a cheap shabby trick that was!" one of them said. "Why would anybody want to destroy so beautiful an illusion as the Exuberance of

Eyes? Animals have two eyes only. Angels have an Exuberance of Many Eyes, and all of them are functional. Until now, Humans have also had (even though it was illusory) the Exuberance of Eyes, though only one pair of them was functional. Who would have done so crumby a thing?"

"I would have, if I'd known how," a passenger in the car said. "I never did like that dazzle about my head. I like it better this new way, with only two eyes. I get a better focus now."

"He's the one!" the second Rectitude Militia man said. So they dragged the better-focus man out of the car. Then two woodsmen with double-bitted axes reduced that man to a quivering mess that soon ceased to quiver. So they killed the man for causing a disturbance.

"You let them kill him for what *you* did, Mary Fat-Land," Elizabeth Burning-Brand accused.

"I won't tell anybody if you won't tell anybody," Mary Fat-Land said.

"I dislike that form of execution," Anna Thursday-Dawn protested. "I will invent a completely new way of execution, one which will allow persons to die with dignity."

"It is so easy to overlook so much in Hawkins' ReEntrant Principle," John Rain-Tomorrow said when the Light-Rail Train was rolling again. "His Principle of ReEntrant Time means that it doesn't matter whether that jolt a few seconds ago was the beginning of the world or the end of it. His Principle of ReEntrant Parallels gives us all the workable parallels we need in one sustaining skein. A single world alone would be too frail a thread even to sustain its own continuity. But there are uneasinesses about the parallel worlds. I believe this is because we do not always love our parallel persons as much as we should. Possibly this is because we do not like to admit that each of us alone is too frail a thread to sustain his own continuity. And we can never do or think anything absolutely original, for all our parallel persons will be doing and thinking shadowy parallels to it at the same time. We cannot be first in anything as long as we have parallel persons, and there is an utter frustration in not being first. 'Through whose veins did my blood flow before it flowed through mine?' I ask myself sometimes when I contemplate the parallel problem. 'Who dwelt in this tent of my skin before I dwelt in it? Who was conscious in my brain before I was conscious there?' For there is a circularity rather than a simultaneity in parallel persons. No one of them can ever be first before the others."

Catherine Tall-Tower *did* invent playing cards then.

"And it *is* an original invention," she insisted. "No parallel person of myself has invented playing cards, and none will do so before at least a full minute." They used their clan cards for playing cards, and they

began to play two parallel four-handed games. Well, the fact was that four of them were in one universe and four of them in a slightly different universe. How else could eight of them have sat comfortably in two facing seats that would hold only four? Four of them were in one Light Rail Transit Car, and four of them were in a very similar parallel car.

(Some of the parallel worlds do not even have Broken-Arrow-to-Tulsa-Light-Rail-Rapid-Transit-Lines, and the people drive from Broken Arrow to Tulsa in private vehicles that are called hokomobiles.)

"The Invention was easy," Catherine Tall-Tower said, "and it was in two stages. When first I realized that the cards were a Calendar as well as a Clan Almanac and Cautionary, then I realized that there was a game hidden in them also."

"How are they a Calendar, Kate?"

"Oh, the three top cards are number cards as well as personage cards; then everything works. So we find that each hand has thirteen cards for the thirteen moons of the year; that the total number of the playing cards is fifty-two for the fifty-two weeks of the year; that the total value of the cards in the deck is three-hundred-and-sixty-four, and counting the Clown Card as One we come to Three-Hundred-and-Sixty-Five for the Three-Hundred-and-Sixty-Five days in the year. Then we allocate four of the clan totems for four suits for the four seasons of the year. There is much more to it."

They played different sorts of poker. "We would all be better poker players if we still had our Exuberance of Eyes," John Rain-Tomorrow said. "It is hard to fake it at poker with only one pair of eyes."

"One aspect of the ReEntrant Principle that is often overlooked is the Principle of ReEntrant Matter," Hiram Working-Day cut in, for conversation always goes with card-playing. "By the Principle of ReEntrant Matter, the Creator has made an incomparably easy trick seem incomparably difficult. In the beginning, before the beginning, there would always be some little scrap of matter in the universe. A perfect vacuum is not possible. There would be, at least, a very small fragment, or a fragment of a fragment, of a mu-meson. Then, according to the Principle of ReEntrant Matter, when this fragment of a fragment became still a bit smaller, it would become billions of billions of galaxies and clusters of galaxies. The billionfold galaxies would need to be but slightly smaller in mass than the fragment of a fragment of a mu-meson. And yet the billionfold galaxies would fill all the space that would possibly be."

"Would not the fragment of a fragment of a mu-meson also fill all the space that could possibly be?" Andrew Kingdom-Come asked. "Would it not have filled all of the slightly larger space than the billionfold space that followed it?"

"Yes. That's right. It would have filled it," Hiram Working-Day said.

One of the four-handed games being played now was Worcester Whist, and Hiram Working-Day was Clown or Joker or Dummy, so he had laid his cards down.

"I have just made a truly Bright and New and Original Invention," he said, "and I will try it out now."

Disregarding the signs that are in all Light-Rail-Rapid-Transit cars, "Please Open Window Before Shooting Buffalo," Hiram shot his rifle through a window and killed a buffalo on a knoll two hundred meters from the speeding train-of-cars. He killed the buffalo, but he did not break the window.

Hiram was a good mechanic. Not everyone could have machined such an attachment for a rifle on the way to work in the morning.

"That is *not* a Bright and New and Original Invention," Mary Fat-Land protested. "Some of the militias have been using laser-beam pistols for a week."

"Laser-Beam Pistols are not Laser-Beam Buffalo Guns," Hiram Work-ing-Day explained. "When citizens ordinarily kill buffalo with their high-velocity carbines, the meat packagers have a messy time of it. They have to cut deep into the animal to get the bullet, and then to interpret the code cut on the nose of the bullet, all this before they cut up and process the animal and deliver it to the address of the one who shot it. But my laser-beam buffalo gun leaves the coded brand right at the point of the death burn. And it records the minute and second of the kill. No interloper or poacher could possibly record an earlier time. Yes, this is a Prime New Invention, something never known in the world before, and it glad-dens my heart."

"I have just invented Daylight Savings Time," Andrew Kingdom-Come announced.

"Yes, so you have," John Rain-Tomorrow agreed. "My watch sprang forward one hour and I wondered why. But it isn't really a first class invention. Oh, it'll give us an extra hour of daylight every day. But in a few months it'll be nullified again."

"No, it will not. Some smart lawyer will take the whole world to small claims court on the issue and get a writ against turning the clocks back ever."

"As to myself, I believe that I have just invented a way to defy the ReEntrant Circularity that tyrannizes all the universe," John Rain-To-morrow said. "I believe that the world was created this morning, or it will be created in a few moments while it is still morning. Whenever it is created, it is created in motion. It has its built-in stratified residues and memories, memories in rocks and memories in living brains, mem-ories of previous times that probably did not exist . . . I fear there is not any test by which we can be sure whether the world has begun or not,

whether we ourselves have lived or whether we are only stratified residues and memories. According to the Relentless Circularity, there is no real difference between having already died and not having been born yet. There is no mathematical way to battle the circularity. But there is another way to battle it, and its name is derision. When a perfect circle is drawn huge out in the vasty void, people are impressed and they say 'It is the image of God himself.' But if somebody draws a monkey's tail on that perfect circle, people will say 'Oh, it is only a monkey!' No matter how big it makes itself it is only a monkey. I intend to draw a monkey's tail on an impressive circle in the sky, and when people see it after dark tonight they will say 'Oh, it is only a monkey with a tail,' and they will laugh it clear out of its path."

"On what 'Circle in the Sky' do you intend to draw a monkey-tail tonight, John Rain-Tomorrow?" Clarence Bower-Bird asked.

"Oh, I have already drawn it. With me, to think is to do. But you will not be able to see it until tonight. I've drawn the tail on Casey's Comet which has been threatening the world. And now it will threaten the world no more. It will be intimidated by our laughter, and it will veer off its course. Can any of you imagine anything more comical than a comet with a tail?"

They couldn't, no. They laughed pleasantly about it. Then Anna Thursday-Dawn became pensive.

"It has given me the idea of my life," she said. "It has given me my Invention Bright and New. I said a while ago that I disliked the current modes of execution, whether axemen closing in on a victim with their double-bitted axes, or persons forming a ring around a victim and stoning him to death. I said that I would invent a method of execution to let a person die with dignity. Now I have done it. And it is the analog to John Rain-Tomorrow's putting a monkey-tail on a circle in the sky. I will have a loop of rope, and a tail to that loop."

The Light Rail Train-of-Cars was slowing for the Sixth-and-Main Tulsa Disgorgement. But before the train stopped there were two gentlemen of the Rectitude Militia in the car. Those fellows work fast.

"Nobody leaves the car for just a moment," they said. "Ah, yes, this is the lady who has just invented the noose. It is declared illegal, of course. We will use it on her, and then we will never use it again."

"Oh how nice!" Anna Thursday-Dawn cried out. "I'll be first to use it."

"Yes, the first and the last, the only one ever. This is an invention too original ever to be repeated."

"But why not for others? I want everybody to be able to die with dignity."

"If all criminals knew that they would be allowed to die with dignity, everybody would become a criminal," the gentleman explained, "and that

would throw all society into unbalance. Come along, sis, out of the car. There's a tall and ornate lamp post right at the beginning of the mall."

"Oh yes, that will be splendid," Anna Thursday-Dawn said. And everybody went out of the cars. The gentlemen of the Rectitude Militia threw one end of a rope, the "monkey's tail" end, over an arm of the lamp-post. And the other end was placed around the throat of Anna Thursday-Dawn in a beautiful hangman's knot.

"Why is this better? Why is it more dignified? Why is this happier than any other execution, Anna?" Elizabeth Burning-Brand asked.

"Don't you see? With the stonings and axings, the soul is driven out of the body and will have to wander homeless forever. But with my Hangman's Noose, the throat is constricted and the soul cannot fly out from any of the apertures of the head. So it will be saved. Everything is saved. Oh, I have this really original idea, this truly Bright and New invention. I'm delighted. And, as this gentleman says, it is an invention too original to repeat. The more I think of that the more I love it. Ready when you are, gentlemen!"

Oh, the happy and transcendent sense of being right! Some people have it even when they are wrong. Anna Thursday-Dawn died in the happiness that she had accomplished a bright and new invention, that she had a truly original idea that nobody would be able to steal from her.

And her happiness was infectious. All her friends, and the rest of the morning people around there also, went to work with happy dispositions. And that is appreciated in a world where many things are not happy. ●

GAMING

(continued from page 22)

use the controllers. Only a few use R.O.B. or the Zapper. Despite that, the NES would still be a winner compared to any other video game system. The graphics are great (no abstract symbols here), the jingles and sound effects have a nice arcade quality to them, and the games are loads of fun. Also included are all the wires and adaptors for every possible hook-up, even a direct audio/visual cable that produces a really high-res picture. The Zapper and R.O.B. are fun to play with, even if there does seem to be limited use for them so far. And Nintendo has an ambitious release schedule. There'll be dozens of games for owners to add to their library.

They must know what they're doing. Some stores near me reported selling out the NES and they were hoping that their re-orders would arrive soon. Perhaps some people have gone full circle from video game to computer to bigger computer, and now they like the single-minded arcade nature of this game machine. And if anyone does go shopping for a game machine, they'll find the NES all alone, an evolutionary survivor after the big, primitive machines have died off.

As for me, I'm going back to Clu Clu Land. Bubbles is waiting. ●

FOR THE THOUSANDS KILLED IN THE MUTINY OF MINING BUREAU CAMP 66/CETUS IV

We knew
from our classes on the American
frontiers: the West, the Ocean, the Amazon
and the Moon, that this
would be difficult.

The fine food,
climate controlled domes.
Holodiscs from the hemispheric
libraries at Brasilia and Beijing.
The swimming pools and
exercise equipment on which
we burned out some of our boredom,
would only emphasize
how far we were from home.

From each other

—Roger Dutcher

by Richard Paul Russo

art: Gary Freeman

FOR A PLACE IN THE SKY

The author is a graduate of the Clarion Science Fiction Writing Workshop (1983). In addition to his science fiction, he has had a number of short stories published in literary magazines. Mr. Russo has also won three literary awards for his non-SF work, two for short stories, and one for a play.

1.

The heat and the humidity oppressed him. In the darkness, Ricollo swung his legs over the edge of the cot and sat up. He listened to the quiet, uneven snores of the woman lying next to him. Ricollo had been here too long, and the woman no longer helped the waiting.

Wearing only shorts, he rose to his feet, then padded out of the hut and into the trees, making his way from memory. Outside the hut, animal sounds and the dripping of water from the trees became more pronounced. He recognized the harsh cry of a jungle hen in the distance, and scolding replies of monkeys nearby.

Ricollo walked along the narrow path that led to a clearing, easing leaves and branches aside he barely saw in the darkness. When he came to the small clearing he moved out to the center and looked up through the opening in the high tree-tops. The moon, almost full, was just rising over the edge of the trees. Anger and frustration blossomed within him, tempered with a slight fear.

That was what the Americans had promised him, that cool white light. A place in Clavius or Plato on the moon, or one of the Lagrange colonies. An escape from the chaos that was coming, that had already begun. All he had to do, they had assured him, was carry out this one assignment. Well, he had done what they had asked, and they had tried to kill him. Now he hid in the jungle, waiting for time to pass; for the pursuit to ease or cease; to be given up for dead. He had waited long enough.

It was time to get out on his own. The bastards. He would force them to pay up, and now the price would be higher.

He remained in the clearing, gazing up at the sky, and wondered if any of the orbiting colonies could be seen from here. But he did not remember, if he had ever known. He saw no signs, no glints of light in the night sky. The moon, though, he could see, and that was enough. When it completed the short trip across the opening in the trees above, Ricollo left the clearing and returned to the woman in the hut.

2.

The morning he left, Ricollo laid out all his clothing and equipment from the three field packs and spent an hour consolidating the most important items into a single pack. He listened to the woman, Naainu, cooking as he worked, humming to herself. She did not know he was leaving.

Ricollo sat on the edge of the cot, smoking. She had been good to him these last six weeks. She was nothing like Renata, but still . . . He

watched her move about the hut, her dark hair sweeping across the back of her rough, brown cloth dress. Bands of feathers on her upper arms fluttered with each of her movements. Ricollo crushed out his cigarette on the cot leg and lay back with his eyes shut, waiting for her to finish.

After he ate, Ricollo dressed in long pants, boots, and cotton T-shirt. The day was already hot, his shirt soaked with sweat. He thought about burying everything he didn't take with him, but decided to leave it with Naainu. She could probably sell it, or gain a few favors for herself. Most of the equipment would be in high demand with the villagers.

Ricollo shouldered the field pack, adjusted the straps and belt, checked for the balance. The pack weighed probably seventy, seventy-five pounds, but he'd humped that much through jungle in El Salvador and Honduras, fighting for the Americans. At least it was almost winter; the rains would be lighter and less frequent.

It would get tougher now, though. There was no way to know how extensive the search was, or how persistent. He scratched at his thick, dark beard. He had stopped shaving three months before, and had not cut his hair since starting this project nearly half a year ago. The hair might help him remain unrecognized. And right now he would take any help he could get.

He left the hut without a word. A hundred yards away was the small monkey he'd named Mico, leashed to a stake in the ground. Mico's mother had provided the village with meat a few days before, and Mico was being kept until he was big enough to do the same. Ricollo squatted and patted the young monkey on the head. He turned and looked back at the hut.

Naainu stood in the doorway, silent, looking hurt and confused. For a moment Ricollo felt a sliver of guilt twist through him; but there was nothing he could do, nothing he could say. He got to his feet, returned to the path, and plunged into the wet jungle.

3.

What Ricollo had done, over a period of several months, was distribute five boatloads of tall, narrow cylinders—two loads along the Amazon, one along the Tocantins, one on the Tapajós, and the last along the Madeira. They looked like thin oxygen tanks, four and a half feet tall, a foot in diameter, with two rounded projections on top. One of the projections was a mystery to him; the other was a beacon he activated just before the burial of each cylinder at the water's edge.

"We've filled them with special medicines," the Agency man had told him. "With everything going to hell here on Earth—economically, so-

cially, politically—we're afraid there will be outbreaks of exotic diseases, waves of fatal illnesses, and there won't be the means to get the right kinds of medicines into remote areas quickly enough. So we're planting antibiotics, antitoxins . . ."

The voice droned on, but Ricollo had stopped listening. They're telling me it's drugs, he thought. Pharmaceuticals, sure, but not "medicine." What kinds of drugs, though? Pretty damn special. Not cocaine, you sure don't need to send that *into* the Basin. Heroin, maybe, or something new and experimental. He wondered what they'd be using it for. Currency? Better than money these days.

Then again, maybe they just wanted him to *believe* it was drugs, when it was really something else. These Americans, the games they played. They knew he had run drugs before, did some gold smuggling along the Amazon, so they let him think . . .

If not drugs, though, then what? Something much worse, probably. Weapons, maybe set for new wars. Chemical or biological . . . no, he really didn't want to think about it.

It bothered him at first, though, not knowing exactly what was in the cylinders. But someone else would do it if he didn't. He told himself that over and over, because he did believe one thing the Agency man had said: Life on Earth was disintegrating, and the only safe places would be on the moon or the orbiting Lagrange colonies. Moral considerations were beside the point if you were dead. So Ricollo agreed to the mission, in return for the promise of a place in the sky.

4.

It was dusk when Ricollo approached the outskirts of Novo Aripuaña. The trail widened into a rough, single lane stretch of cleared earth that passed for a road, and crude buildings began to appear, mostly single huts made of wood with thatched roofs.

He slowed his pace, and kept to the edges of the road, in the shadows. He passed few people, most of them Indians. No words were spoken, no glances exchanged.

Ricollo kept his right hand near the hidden Browning as he walked, and fought down the urge to light a cigarette. As he went further into town, there were more people, and lights inside the buildings. His breathing quickened, and he thought he could feel the added force of his heartbeat against the interior of his chest, even as he forced himself to walk slowly, casually.

At a familiar intersection, he turned onto a twisting road that seemed to head back into the jungle. After five minutes he came to a low, stucco

building set among dense trees. Dim orange light emerged from the windows and open doorway, and Ricollo hesitated. Finally, knowing he had little choice, he breathed in, and entered.

Inside were half a dozen tables and a short counter on the wall opposite the door. Flickering candles on the tables and counter provided the only light, and the darkness outside was falling quickly. Three Indians sat at a corner table under a window, silent and unmoving, a single large bottle of beer in front of them. Two white men, deeply tanned, spoke quietly over another table, hands around empty glasses. No one seemed interested in Ricollo.

He stepped to the end of the counter. The owner, a large, dark-haired half-breed named Benito, approached and asked him, in Portuguese, what he wanted. When Ricollo didn't answer, Benito looked closer at him.

"Ricollo?" he whispered. *"Este você, estrangeiro?* That you, stranger?"

"Sim, it's me. Just a little beard, extra hair. And if you speak my name, do it quietly."

"Compreend. Something to drink?"

Ricollo shook his head. "I am looking for the Jack-Man."

"Not today," Benito said. "Flying in . . . two or three days. I will see him at the dock when he comes."

"Tell him I am looking for him? And tell no one else?"

"Sure."

Ricollo breathed in deeply. He had to trust Benito. "You have somewhere I can stay until then?" he asked.

Benito didn't say anything at first, then nodded. He looked at the two occupied tables, shrugged. *"Aqui."* He led Ricollo through a draped doorway, along a narrow corridor, then out through the rear of the building and into the trees. In the darkness and the sticky heat, Ricollo could hardly see where they were going. After a few minutes they came to a small wooden shack built against two trees. Benito unlocked the door, went inside, and lit an oil lamp. Ricollo entered behind him.

On the floor was a thick, lumpy mat of foam and leaves covered by worn cloth. Stacked against one wall were cases of bottled beer, and against the adjacent wall, cases of empties. Two small windows had been cut into the walls.

"I will bring you food every day," Benito said.

Ricollo put his hand on the big man's shoulder. *"Obrigado,* Benito."

Benito smiled, shrugged, then left. Ricollo dropped his field pack to the floor, then sat on the mat, his back against the wall. The darkness seemed solid, an oppressive weight surrounding the shack; the flickering of the oil lamp tossed dim shadows about the room. Ricollo reached over and put out the lamp. He had been waiting a long time now; another two or

three days would be easy. He closed his eyes and, still sitting up, tried to sleep, his hand on the cool metal of the 9mm. Browning.

5.

As he had expected, the waiting in Benito's shack was not easy. In Naainu's village, where he did not expect to be found, waiting had been easy for him. But here, where he expected someone to break down the door and burst into the shack at any time, it became nerve wracking.

Every sound startled him. The sweat poured out in a constant stream, and he started chain smoking. At night he hardly slept, continually awakened by animal sounds, distant voices, the movement of trees. Each trip outside to relieve himself was hurried and tense, and when Benito came with food, Ricollo crouched in the corner of the shack, the Browning in hand, prepared for betrayal.

But strangely through it all, he was no longer afraid. Whatever would happen, would happen. It was the waiting that was bad. Ricollo just wanted an end to it, either way.

On the third afternoon, Ricollo heard approaching footsteps, and the distinct sound of two voices. Sweat pouring down his sides, and dripping into his eyes, Ricollo waited against the wall, the Browning trained on the doorway.

The footsteps stopped in front of the door, then a voice came through.

"Nicolás, it's me. Jack."

Ricollo relaxed slightly. "Come on in," he said.

The door opened and Jack Tramlin walked in carrying two bottles of beer. Benito stuck his head inside, smiled, then closed the door and left. Ricollo felt cold relief wash through him. For the moment, he could relax.

Tramlin was short and wiry, brown hair bleached blond by the sun, skin worn and dark. He handed a bottle to Ricollo. "Someone's looking for you," he said. He sat on the floor across from Ricollo. "Up and down the river. Not really searching. More like waiting to see you show up."

"Who?"

"Spooks, probably. You know, don't you?"

Ricollo nodded. He sipped at the warm beer. "I did a job. They don't want to pay."

"And you want a ride out of here."

"You've got it."

"It'll cost. Fuel's getting to be a bitch to find these days." He pointed the beer bottle at him. "And I think I'd better do only one hop with you. I have a feeling carting you around could be dangerous. Where you want to go?"

"I'm going to the States, eventually, to make them pay. But for now, I just need to get to São Paulo."

"Jesus, not a chance." Tramlin shook his head. "Listen, how 'bout I fly you to Leticia? It's just across the border, you can get to Bogotá pretty easy, and from there it's a breeze to the States."

"São Paulo," Ricollo said.

Tramlin gave a dramatic sigh. "Let me think a minute." He closed his eyes, leaned his head back against the wall, and slowly finished his beer. Ricollo watched, patient. Tramlin opened his eyes. "Okay. I'm supposed to make a run to Cuiabá next week. I can do it earlier, and I'll take you with me."

"Cuiabá? Christ, cow country."

Tramlin grinned. "Yeah, cow country. Now, there's a damn good pilot, her name is Tracy Blackthorne, who does sort of regular runs between Cuiabá and Bauru. That's about two hundred miles from São Paulo, but you couldn't get much closer by air anyway." He rolled the empty bottle across the floor. "Hell, I wouldn't want to."

"That bad now?"

Tramlin nodded. "Worse all the time. The airport at Campinas is closed except to the military, and a few restricted commercial flights. Same with the local airport. And the city's a goddamn zoo. At night, all hell breaks loose. In the day the *Nacionales* pick up the pieces, manage to keep things something like until control under dark comes again. You sure you want to go there?"

"I've got . . . friends in São Paulo."

Tramlin shrugged and shook his head. "You're paying." He stood, picked up his bottle, and set it on one of the wooden cases. "I'll be back tonight, let you know just when I'm leaving, and we'll make arrangements then." He walked out, and Ricollo went back to the waiting.

Two days later, in the dim light of early morning, Ricollo waited in a canoe at the edge of the river. Light steam rose from the water like smoke. Ricollo sat with his gaze unfocused and listened for the sound of the Cessna.

When he heard the plane's engine, he turned and watched for the plane. Digging easily into the water, hidden by the limbs of trees on the river's edge, he paddled just enough to maintain his position. Ricollo kept a constant watch on the riverbanks, and the curve of the downstream bend in the river, still half expecting pursuit. The Cessna came into view. It *was* Tramlin's plane, and it was alone.

The Cessna descended, skipped once on the surface of the water, then settled out towards the middle, throttled just enough to counter the current.

Ricollo let the canoe turn and drift, then paddled slowly out towards midstream. He neared the plane, cleared the spinning prop, and pulled hard on the paddle to come in just behind and through the wake of the pontoon. He grabbed onto the pontoon and pulled to where he could tie up to one of the struts. He continued to watch the river, the jungle, and the air, but no one appeared.

The cabin door opened, and Tramlin stepped down. Ricollo grabbed the pack and passed it up to Tramlin, who swung it carefully into the plane. After cutting loose the canoe, Ricollo followed Tramlin into the cabin.

Inside, Ricollo watched the canoe drift downstream as Tramlin throttled back. The canoe, floating sideways, went around the bend and out of sight as the plane rose from the surface of the water. For the first time in nearly two months, Ricollo felt completely, if temporarily, secure.

6.

Ricollo had a week-long wait in Cuiabá, which was hot, and just as dry, it seemed, as the jungle was wet. At the end of the week, he flew with Tracy Blackthorne to Bauru, an all day flight that ended with a rough, twilight landing just ahead of a rainstorm. After two more days of waiting, he caught a ride on a night train of ore cars filled with iron and manganese that had been mined deep in the Matto Grosso. Finally, a little before dawn the following morning, Ricollo arrived at the outskirts of São Paulo. He dropped from the train as it slowed coming round a sharp curve, and headed towards the heart of the city.

For half an hour he hiked through gullies and fields in the growing light. He moved among clusters of huts and shacks built from aluminum siding and plywood, metal containers and piles of rock. Rarely, he saw the ruins of dwellings that had been built of stone or wood or cement.

Ricollo saw few lights, and often heard the cracks of gunfire, usually distant, but occasionally nearby. His pace was slow and quiet. At first the only roads were paths of dirt and gravel. It was hard to believe he was entering a city of nearly thirty million people. Soon, however, paved streets appeared, along with small houses and a few other buildings.

Though the sun was not quite visible, the morning sky was fairly light. People began to emerge onto the streets, almost never alone. He could see he was watched, and avoided. He wondered if the field pack was too conspicuous, but saw people carrying all kinds of bags, carts, even packs like his own; individuals and families were on the move. Still, Ricollo continued with caution, usually walking on cracked sidewalks, alert, searching for a city directory. The Browning, though hidden, was in easy reach.

He continued to hear isolated bursts of gunfire, but they waned as the sun rose and the heat grew. Ricollo kept to the main roads, guessing they would be safer, and he'd be more likely to find a directory. He was somewhat surprised at the frequency of military vehicles traveling in all directions, at the large numbers of armed soldiers being transported from one part of the city to another.

He found two directories within a few blocks of each other, marked by the overhead signs, but at both cubicles the terminals had been torn out of the walls. As he went on, the streets became more crowded with pedestrians; groups of office workers walked together, some with what appeared to be armed escorts. Cars drove past, but there was not the traffic he expected in São Paulo. Public transit busses were running, though without much regularity that he could see. The busses were all crammed full with riders.

A half hour after he'd found the first two directories, he came to another. It still had its terminal, but the screen was smashed. The next, a few blocks further on, was like the first two, the terminal ripped out of the cubicle. It was not surprising. Although it was clear that houses and apartment buildings all around him were occupied, and that businesses were open, most of the buildings were damaged and defaced, with windows smashed, doors pulled off, and entire walls caved in from explosions or wrecking balls. Piles of rubble littered the sidewalks. Fire had done a lot of damage as well, leaving cinders and charred wood and sprays of soot on stone and cement walls. Occasionally he passed buildings that had become only structural shells clawing at the air with twisted metal rods and splintered wood.

Finally, close to ten, he found a working directory in front of a well-maintained, heavily guarded office complex. He entered Renata's name, and a phone/address listing came onto the screen. A map appeared at his request, showing where she lived; he was no more than a two hour march away.

But when he tried calling, a message flashed on the screen, notifying him that telephone service in that part of the city had been temporarily suspended for repairs. He logged off and continued through the crowded streets of the city.

7.

The apartment building was almost completely intact. Graffiti, in black and red and gold spray paint, in charcoal and bright acrylics, even a phrase or two in chalk and crayon, decorated its cement face. The graffiti was dense on the lower two floors, then tapered off, almost disappearing

by the sixth, and then reappearing on the tenth, the top floor. Most windows were broken, boarded up from inside, but the cement itself was hardly marred, only a few small chunks missing here and there.

Ricollo walked up the concrete steps to the front doors. The glass in the left door was unbroken, clean, and through it he could see people stationed inside, like guards. He slowly pushed open the door, stepped inside.

A man with a rifle and a woman with a pistol both aimed their weapons at him. A second man, dressed like his companions in anonymous military fatigues, approached and searched him with rapid, but thorough movements. He took the Browning, handed it to the woman.

"What is your business?" he asked.

"I am looking for Renata Velasquez. My name is Ricollo."

The man went to the desk, pressed something on an intercom system. After a moment he spoke quietly into the intercom, listened, spoke again, listened. He straightened, looked at Ricollo.

"Apartment 614. Use the stairs. The elevators are not working today." He pointed to the back corner of the foyer. They did not offer to return the Browning, and Ricollo did not ask for it.

The stairway was surprisingly clean and free of the foul odors he had expected. There seemed to be more organization in this building than in much of what he had already seen in São Paulo.

Ricollo knocked sharply on the apartment door. A few moments passed, then the door swung open and he found another weapon aimed at him, this time a shotgun. The dark-haired woman kept the gun trained on him for a minute, then slowly lowered it.

"So, it *is* you," Renata said.

She was not quite five-and-a-half feet tall, trim but strong, and wore black pants and boots and a loose brown shirt, her hair just touching the collar. She stood without moving, watching him.

Ricollo did not know whether to kiss her, hug her, or shake her hand. It was always like that at first. Finally she leaned the gun against the wall and threw her arms around him. Ricollo pulled her tightly to him, a choking sensation rising in his chest. He had forgotten what it was like to be with her.

After two or three silent minutes, she let him go, backed away to let him inside, then closed the door.

The front room was fairly bright. Though the windows were boarded, they were large, and the narrow planks criss-crossed to allow checkerboards of light to enter. There were a couple of chairs, a couch, and on one wall a long table with two computer terminals, several disk drives, and a printer. A young woman sat in front of one of the monitors, and after watching Ricollo for a minute, returned her attention to the graph-

ics frozen on the screen. Her fingers moved nimbly over the keyboad and the graphics began to shift.

Renata placed the shotgun in a wall rack and motioned to Ricollo. He followed her out of the front room, along a short hall, and into the kitchen, which was small, but a little brighter than the front room.

"You still drink coffee? Strong and black?"

Ricollo nodded and sat at the small wooden table. Renata went to the stove, turned on a gas burner. A large, dull silver tank, for propane or butane, rested on the floor; metal tubing from it snaked into the side wall of the stove.

"What are you doing here, Nicolás?"

He didn't say anything at first, and wondered how much he should tell her. But hell, he would have to give her all of it. He'd never been able to keep secrets from her, and she'd know if he held anything back. She deserved to know anyway, if she was coming with him.

While she fixed coffee, he told her the full story, from the original proposal, the job itself, the attempt to kill him in Manicoré, the hiding in the jungle, and his trip here. He told her he intended to be paid for what he had done, even if he had to force them.

"And how are you going to do that?" Renata asked.

"I'll work it out, I've got time yet. They tried to kill me to shut me up. That's my bargaining power. What I know. I'll cover myself, don't worry about that."

The coffee was ready, and Renata poured Kahlua into both mugs, then brought them over to the table. "You don't know what's been happening, do you?" she said.

"What do you mean?"

She left the room and came back with the front page of a newspaper. "AMERICAN SOLDIERS KILL 47 AMERICAN CITIZENS," she began. "That's the headline."

"What the hell?"

She continued reading to him. "At Cape Canaveral yesterday morning, American soldiers fired on several large groups of American citizens, killing 47 and wounding nearly 200 others. So far, at the three American shuttle launching sites, 378 U.S. citizens have been killed in the rioting, and over 2,000 wounded. 423 have been killed at the French and German launch sites, and an estimated 700 at the two Soviet sites.

"The rioting protests the preferential status given wealthy businessmen and politicians for places on the Lunar colonies at Tycho, Plato, Clavius, and Alphonsus, and the seven multi-national Lagrange communities.

"Up to now, several shuttle flights have been delayed, but none have yet been canceled. Accelerated construction of living sites at the La-

grange colonies and on the moon continues, with freight shuttles flying as often as possible."

Renata dropped the paper onto the table and sat across from him. Ricollo pulled the paper towards him. He glanced at the article she'd read to him, but noticed another headline lower on the page: PEOPLE, FISH, DYING IN AMAZON BASIN. His stomach and chest felt odd as he started reading the story. People were dying of unidentified diseases in towns and villages along the Amazon and its tributaries, and entire schools of dead fish were found floating down the rivers. The deaths, mostly in children, seemed to be increasing, and authorities were trying to determine if there was a connection between the dying people and the fish. Christ, he thought, the cylinders . . . ?

"That's what you want to be involved with," she said.

"What?" He pushed the paper away.

"The shuttles. The killing at the launch sites."

"That has nothing to do with me. All I'm asking is to be paid for what I did. All I'm asking for is survival, and it sure as hell isn't down here."

Renata closed her eyes, put her head in her hands. She shook her head slowly, then looked up at him. "All right, I'm not going to get into that with you, no arguing. But why did you come here? There must have been easier ways to get to the States than coming through São Paulo."

"I want you to come with me."

Renata didn't respond. She leaned back in the chair and drank her coffee. Again she slowly shook her head, not looking at him. Ricollo reached for the Kahlua and poured more into his coffee. For the first time he noticed the gray in her hair, the faint lines around her eyes.

He heard footsteps in the hall, quiet and hesitant, and turned around. The young woman from the front room came in. She stared at Ricollo as if she was terrified of him, then hurried across the room and handed a sheaf of printout to Renata. Without a word, she left the kitchen.

"Who's she, and what's her problem?"

Renata smiled gently. "Her name is Camilla, and she lives here. Her problem is, she's infatuated with me. She knows who you are, and what you mean to me." She glanced at the printout, leafed through a few sheets. "I'll be back in a few minutes."

She tore off a sheet, dropped the others onto the table. "I've got to take care of something." She left.

Ricollo finished the coffee and Kahlua. She was going to tell him no, he thought. His heart was beating heavily, and his breath was ragged. Relax, he told himself. You can still go alone. He put his head in his hands, and closed his eyes, and waited for her to return.

8.

They lay together in the single bed, bare skin touching, the sounds of the night loud in the darkness. Ricollo could hear screams in the distance, the scattered cracks of gunfire. There was a lull, then an explosion, closer, followed by shouts, then relative quiet. Even during the quiet times there was never silence; he heard the same sounds, only from further away, several miles perhaps, even the other side of the city. Occasionally he would hear the growl of a car or several in a caravan. Tramlin was right, the city was madness at night.

"I have to get up at six," Renata said. "I've got escort detail tomorrow."

"I want you to go with me," he said. "To the States. I'll find a way to get us off this planet, a place on the moon or one of the Lagranges."

She sighed heavily. Dim moonlight leaked in through the boarded windows, left pale shapes on her face and breasts. She turned to look at him.

"You don't understand that I can't leave, do you?" When he didn't answer, she went on, her voice strong and confident. "There's a community here in this building, and we're all trying to keep our lives together. There are other buildings like ours, groups of apartments, blocks of houses. We keep in touch with each other, provide whatever cooperation we can. We've even got a kind of underground computer network going to help out. It's how we know what's going on. We've got a hell of a lot better idea of what's happening in this city than the military does, and they're supposed to be running it. Yes, we can see things falling apart here, everywhere else, but we're doing what we can to keep at least a part of it intact." She stopped, watched him for a moment, then resumed.

"You ask me to leave with you. Well, I'm asking you to stay here with me. We can use you. You're a survivor, Nicolás, you could help us all so much if you stayed."

"It's hopeless, Renata, it'll never happen. You'll never be able to keep it together here when everything comes apart. It'll take you with it."

"We can't just give up, damn it. What are we supposed to do, lay down and die? Kill ourselves?"

"You're going to save the goddamn world instead, right? What crap. The only way out is up, that's all I'm saying."

She shook her head violently. "And just leave everyone else behind? Give up on them? Not a chance."

"With or without you, they'll be the same. One person won't make a difference."

"If everyone took that attitude, no. That's exactly why the world's such a goddamn mess in the first place, that kind of thinking. Which is why I can't. I have to stay here, do what I can. I *am* a part of this community.

And I wish you would stay." She sighed heavily and turned away from him to stare at the ceiling. When she spoke again, her voice was much softer. "Besides, if nothing works and everything does collapse, someone has to stay around to pick up all the pieces."

He didn't respond. They remained side by side, silent a long time.

"When will you be going?" she asked.

"Soon. A day or two." Much longer, he thought, and he might not be able to leave her. He rolled over to face her, put his arm around her shoulder and back. She moved into him, pulled him tightly to her breast.

Their mouths pressed together, frantic and searching. His hands were in her hair, down her skin to her thighs and hips, and the damp heat blossomed between them.

Ricollo knew then, as they pressed and moved against each other, more desperate with each movement, that she would not go with him. This, then, was all they would have, and they would have to squeeze everything they could from the night.

9.

At dawn the next morning, they were awakened by a frantic pounding at the bedroom door, and Camilla calling loudly to them.

"Hurry, hurry! The television! Hurry!"

Renata called back to her, then scrambled out of bed.

"Come on, damn it, something important is happening." She threw on jeans and T-shirt and pulled at his arm. "Come on!"

Ricollo swung his legs over the bed, pulled on his pants and grabbed a shirt, and they hurried out of the room barefoot. Renata led the way down the hall and into another apartment three doors away.

Nearly twenty-five people were in a half circle in front of a large television set. Renata and Ricollo stood behind them and looked at the screen. The people in the room were silent, listening.

The picture was sharp and clear, the volume high. The announcer spoke rapidly, giving background of the unscheduled shuttle launch, but Ricollo didn't pay much attention to it. Instead, he focused on the pictures moving across the screen.

There was a long shot at first, the camera steady, gradually zooming in on the launch site at Cape Canaveral. To the left, in the distance, were two shuttles ready for launch. It appeared the ignition sequence had begun on one of them, and clouds of white rolled from beneath it. Vehicles surrounded the two shuttles, the vehicles and moving platforms in turn were encircled by high cyclone fencing manned every few feet

by an armed soldier. Far away from the shuttles, on the right of the screen was the rioting.

The camera shifted to the crowds at the outer perimeters of fence. Ricollo estimated there were several thousand people shouting and waving their arms, some carrying signs, others with clubs and other objects. They shoved against the first of the two lines of fencing, pushing back and forth, back and forth. Military personnel waited inside the second fence, rifles aimed at the crowds. They wore gas masks and stood in a long line along the fences, probably no more than three feet apart from each other. Behind the soldiers, were half a dozen tanks.

A group of soldiers stepped forward, dropped to their knees. They fired gas canisters over the fences and into the mob. Salvo after salvo was fired, and the air quickly filled with sick-colored smoke that swirled in the changing, light breezes.

People began to cough, cover their eyes, cry out, but they did not disperse. The crowd moved in waves against the fence. Arms and sticks and clubs swung through the air. Rocks flew over the fence at the soldiers, followed by more rocks, bottles, then several molotov cocktails, shooting flame as they broke.

The picture switched to a jerky, hand-held camera right at the edge of the crowds, and faces of the rioters could be distinguished. Some were in pain, others showed madness and rage. The gas swirled about them all, and another salvo of canisters was fired.

Ricollo felt dazed. He kept thinking he must be watching a movie; this couldn't be happening, not really. But he knew.

Several of the protesters were working on the cyclone fence with bolt cutters, and the first row of fencing collapsed. The crowd surged over it, trampling people as it did, and struck the next line of fence. Those with bolt cutters set back to work.

Two more rounds of gas were fired. The soldiers, armed with automatic rifles, machine guns really, stepped back.

Christ, Ricollo thought, it *is* going to happen. He almost turned away, but couldn't.

The cameraman was jostled, and the picture jerked up and down and from side to side. The narrator's voice was almost completely drowned by the shouts of the protesters, the cries of those in pain from the gas, the thrumps of the canisters launched over the fence.

"Jesus Christ," Ricollo whispered. He felt Renata's hand grip his, squeeze tightly.

The second, and final fence went down.

The soldiers who had been firing the gas dropped to their bellies. Those with rifles raised them . . . and fired.

At the loud staccato bursts from the automatic rifles, Ricollo slapped

his hands over his ears. He could not cut off the sound, and his arms began to tremble. Renata grabbed at his arm and her fingernails dug convulsively into his skin.

The camera swiveled, and suddenly they saw bodies crumpling, men and women climbing over each other, then being struck by bullets and screaming as they fell, hands out and clawing at the air.

The guns would not stop firing, and the people did not stop coming. The soldiers stepped slowly back as they fired, and the bodies continued to fall. Soon the soldiers were back to the line of tanks, and stationed themselves there.

Christ no, Ricollo thought, they can't use the tanks!

The soldiers continued to fire. The camera swung back to the crowds, and Ricollo saw they had finally stopped coming. The picture jumped up and down. Bodies littered the pavement, then flashes of arms and faces and legs appeared, the survivors now scrambling frantically in retreat.

Suddenly the camera dipped, the picture swung round, down at the earth, then up at the sky, then down once more and went black.

Almost instantly the picture switched to the camera back away from the field. The shuttle entered the picture for a moment, then shifted offscreen as the camera turned towards the fleeing protesters and the soldiers, zooming in.

An explosion rocked the air, followed by two more even louder, and the camera swung back.

One of the shuttles was in flames, smoke and pieces of metal flying through the air. Two ground vehicles nearby were in flames as well. People scurried madly around the burning shuttle, running for cover.

The picture went dead.

This time, the screen remained blank.

After a few moments, a picture reappeared on the screen, a dark-haired man sitting behind a newsdesk. He was trying to speak, but could hardly get the words out. He held his head in his hands, then, after another minute, he began to speak more clearly.

Ricollo eased his arm from Renata's grasp and quietly backed out of the apartment. He walked slowly down the empty hall and listened to the relative silence. A steady hiss filled his ears, punctuated by the dull thumping of his heart.

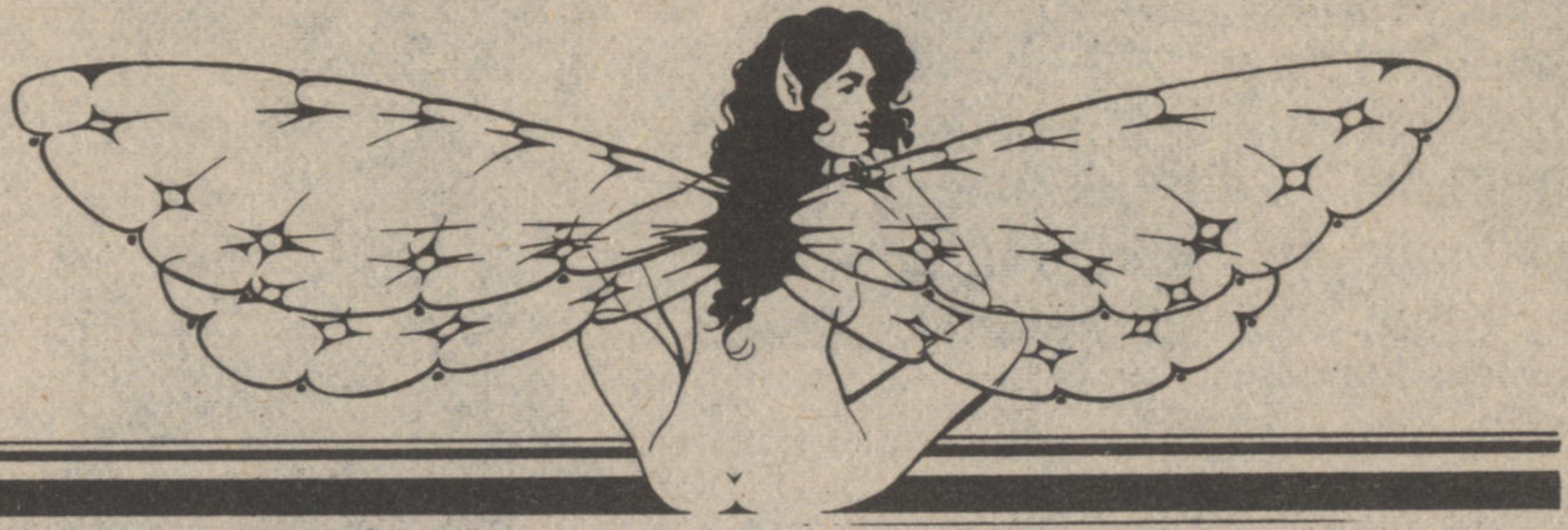
At the end of the hall was a large window, boarded over, with a wide sill about three feet above the floor, Ricollo sat on the ledge in the shafts of light slanting between the boards. He heard the faint crack of gunfire in the distance, then nothing. No, not nothing. Voices rose from below, people on the streets, a few vehicles moving past.

There was no going to the States now, he thought. Even the Americans

had gone mad. Killing each other, blowing up the shuttle . . . and what had they done with the cylinders? What had *he* done? Christ.

A door opened down the hall. He turned and saw Renata walking towards him. She was right, he thought. Someone had to stay around to pick up the pieces.

She sat on the floor a foot or two away, her back against the wall, looking at him. Angled rays of sunlight crossed her body and face. Ricollo turned back to the boarded window, and they remained silent a long time, warmed by the jagged sun. ●

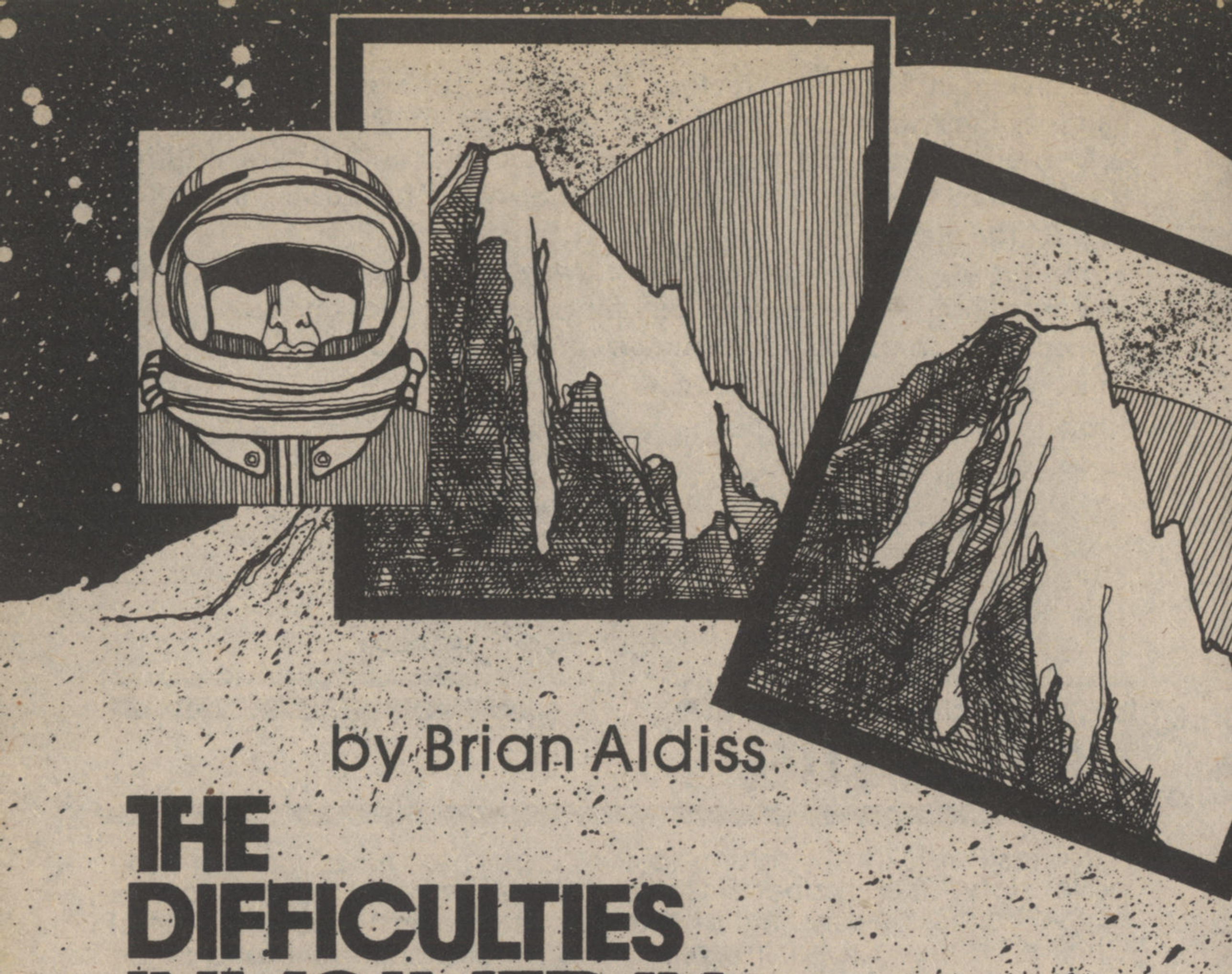


NEXT ISSUE:

James Patrick Kelly returns to our pages next issue with our June cover story, "The Prisoner of Chillon." Kelly is rapidly becoming one of the hottest new writers in science fiction, and "The Prisoner of Chillon," a fast-paced, inventive, and pyrotechnic novelette of the future, may well be his best story to date. It is also a partial sequel to one of 1985's most acclaimed stories, Kelly's own "Solstice," which appeared in our June issue *last* year. Our June Viewpoint, "Robotics and Common Sense," by Philip E. Agre, perfectly compliments Kelly's fiction with fact.

Another hot new writer, Bruce Sterling, who gained considerable acclaim for his stories in *IAsfm* in 1985, makes his first 1986 appearance here in June with "The Beautiful and the Sublime," a quirky and fascinating story which the author describes as "a Wodehousian romantic comedy about the death of the scientific method." Also in June: a story with one of the strangest casts of characters you are ever likely to encounter (including a sentient radio), Jim Aikin's "A Place to Stay for a Little While"; a look at some enigmatic "Alien Graffiti," by Nebula-winner Michael Bishop; a razor-edged shocker about a very strange use for the art of "Prosthesis," by Melanie Tem and Steve Rasnic Tem; and a wry and sardonic little piece called "Body Man," which marks Avram Davidson's return to *IAsfm* for the first time in too long a while. Plus our usual columns and features. Look for the June issue on your newsstands on May 6, 1986, or subscribe today.

Coming up: new novellas by Robert Silverberg, George R.R. Martin, and Lucius Shepard, plus stories by Orson Scott Card, R.A. Lafferty, Ian Watson, Harry Turtledove, Jack McDevitt, Molly Gloss, Walter Jon Williams, Avram Davidson, and many others.



by Brian Aldiss

THE DIFFICULTIES INVOLVED IN PHOTOGRAPHING NIX OLYMPICA

According to *The Illustrated Book of SF Lists*,.
Mr. Aldiss is one of the "Twelve Most Prolific
Short Story Writers of SF and Fantasy."
He is also one of our favorite short story writers,.
and we are pleased to present this haunting
portrait of a man's obsession with Nix Olympica.

art: George Thompson

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THOMPSON/85

It was unprecedented for anyone stationed on Mars to refuse home leave. Ozzy Brooks refused. He secretly wanted to photograph Olympus Mons.

For his whole two-year tour of duty, Sgt. Brooks had saved money and hoarded material. Had made friends with the transport section. Had ingratiated himself with the officer in charge of rations. Had gone out of his way to be nice to practically everyone in Atmosphere Control. Had wooed the guys in the geological section. Had made himself indispensible in Engineering.

Almost everyone in Fort Arcadia knew and, within their lights, liked little Sgt. Brooks.

Brooks was small, dark-skinned, lightly built, neat-boned—ideal fodder for Mars. He had nondescript sandy hair which grew like lichen over his skull, with eyes to match. He had what are often referred to as ageless looks, and the rather blank stare that goes with those looks.

Behind that blank and inoffensive gaze lay ambition. Brooks was an intellectual. Brooks never got drunk. He rarely watched TV screenings from Earth. Instead, he could be seen reading old books. He went to bed early. He never complained or scratched his armpits. And he seemed to know everything. It was amazing that the other troops stationed in Fort Arcadia liked him nevertheless: but Brooks had another qualification.

Ozzy Brooks was Fort Arcadia's Martian *t'ai chi* master. He taught two classes of *mar t'ai chi*, as he himself called it: an elementary class from eight to ten in the morning and an advanced class from eight to eleven in the evening. Even men for whom *mar t'ai chi* was not compulsory joined Brooks's classes, for they agreed that Brooks was a brilliant teacher; all "felt better" when each session was finished. Brooks's teaching was an antidote to the monotony of Mars.

After dismissing one of his morning classes, Brooks slipped out of his costume, put on denims, and strolled across the dome to Engineering, to work on the larger format camera he was building.

"What do you need a camera for on Mars?" Sgt. Al Shapiro asked.

"I want to photograph Olympus Mons from the ground," Brooks said.

Shapiro laughed, with contempt in the sound.

Brooks's secret in life was that he did not hate anything. He hated no man. He did not hate the Army, he did not hate Mars. All the rest of the men, his friends, spent long hours trying to decide whether they hated the Army or Mars most. Sometimes Mars won, sometimes the Army.

"It's the boredom. The monotony," they said. Referring to both or either.

Brooks was never bored. In consequence, he did not find life monotonous. He did not dislike Army discipline, since he had always strictly disciplined himself. Certainly he missed women; but he consoled himself

by saying that instead he had this unique opportunity to know the Red Planet.

He loved Mars. Mars was the ideal place on which to do *t'ai chi*. Despite his ordinary name, Brooks was an exotic. While his grandmother, a refugee from Vietnam, had had the fortune to marry a seventh-generation American, his great-grandparents were Chinese from Szechwan Province. A *t'ai chi* tradition had been passed down in the family from generation to generation. Ozzy Brooks hugged this knowledge to himself: Mars, with its lighter gravity, was the perfect planet on which to develop his art. Some wise Chinese ancestor, many generations ago, had invented the postures of the White Crane *with Mars in mind*.

Under Brooks's American-ness ran a strong delight in his oriental heritage. He believed that it was a Chinese who had discovered the perfect way to live on another planet, in harmony with its elements, using those elements to become more perfect in oneself. Mars—he had realized this almost as soon as he had disembarked from the military spaceship—was the most Chinese of planets, even down to the *sang-de-boeuf* tint of its soil, the color of ancient Chinese gateways and porcelains.

In Brooks's mind, Mars became an extension of China, the China of long ago, crammed with warriors, maidens as fair as white willows, and tombs loaded high with carvings and treasure. Beyond the dome of Arcadia, he thought he saw Cathay.

It was some while before he realised he had a friend in Sgt. Al Shapiro.

He was working in the engineering laboratories, inserting the shutter mechanism in the 8×10 camera now rapidly nearing completion, when Shapiro strolled up. Shapiro was small, light on his feet, and darker in complexion than Brooks. He smiled at Brooks through a hank of black hair which hung across his face.

"What are you really going to use that camera for, Ozzy?"

"Pictures—like I told you. What else?"

"You're not going to be able to take it back to Earth in your kit. It's too heavy."

"What a nuisance," said Brooks, blandly.

Shapiro hesitated, then said, "You should photograph Mars with it, same as you said. Maybe I could help."

The remark took Brooks aback. He regarded Al Shapiro as a wooden man, cut off from his fellows, often to be seen reading the Army manuals other guys shunned. Al didn't even do *t'ai chi*. Could there be a vein of imagination under that stolid surface?

Mistaking his surprise, Shapiro lowered his voice and said, "Most guys see nothing in Mars, nothing at all. Except the officers. Do you notice when we're out doing maneuvres, Colonel Wolfe always says, 'Mars is fine fighting country'? That's how a professional soldier sees it, I guess.

What do the men say about it? 'The dustbowl'—that's what they call Mars, the squaddies. They can't see it except as a torn-off chunk of America's Badlands. They've got no imagination. Me—I've had a think about it . . ."

"How do you see Mars, Al?" Brooks asked, very calm and in control again.

Shapiro gave his flitting smile.

"How do I see it? Why, when I take a look out there, I see it as a fantastic piece of natural engineering. Uncluttered by trees and all the vegetation that hides Earth. Mars is honest, a great series of cantilevers and buttresses and platforms. God's naked handiwork. I'm the only guy I know who'd like to get out there among it all."

"Some of the men like to go out for the pigeon shoots," Brooks said.

There were Mars jeeps which toured nearby gulleys firing off clay pigeons in all directions. These shoots formed one of the few outdoor recreations available. But no one ever ventured more than a mile from the fort.

Shapiro shrugged. "Kid stuff . . . I'd just like to figure on doing something memorable with my time on Mars. I've only got a month before they ship me back to Chicago."

Brooks put out his hand.

"That's the way I think too. I wish to do something memorable."

And so they came to draw up plans to photograph Olympus Mons from the ground.

Al Shapiro was as resourceful as Ozzy Brooks in getting what he wanted. He actually enjoyed the Army, and knew how to exploit all the weaknesses of that organisation. They indented for a week's base leave, they set about bribing Captain Jeschke in Transport to secure the unauthorised loan of a Mars jeep, they bartered services in return for supplies.

"I should be a general—I could run Mars single-handed!" Shapiro said, laughing.

And all the while, he went ahead with his work in Engineering, and Brooks taught *mar t'ai chi*, instructing his squads how to love Mars as the ally of all their muscular exertions—thus, in his quiet way, subverting the army's purpose, which was to make the men hate the planet and anything on it which moved and was not capitalist.

Occasionally, maneuvers were undertaken in conjunction with the EEC dome in Eridania. The men had to fire missiles on the arctic ranges, or crawl around, cursing, in the red dust. Brooks saw then that his subversion had not had much effect. Everyone wanted to go back to Earth. They had no vision. He longed to give them one.

"Before we leave here, we must make a model of Nix Olympica, and

study it from all angles, so that we decide the ideal position to which to drive." Brooks nodded sagely as he spoke and looked sideways at Shapiro.

"Cartography," said Shapiro. "Lou Wright owes me a favor. Let's try Cartography."

They obtained more than maps and photographs. As the most prominent physical feature on Mars, the extinct volcano had warranted a plastic model, constructed by a bygone officer in the Army Geological survey. Brooks inspected it with interest before rejecting it.

"It's too small. We can make a much better one between us," he said.

What he felt was that this army model of Olympus was contaminated by its source; it had no poetry. Whoever had ordered it had probably been concerned with how the sides of the crater could be scaled, or how the cordera itself might provide a base for ground-to-space missiles.

Brooks molded his model of the gigantic volcano in plastic, coloring it with acrylics. Shapiro occasionally came over to admire his work.

"You see, the formation is about the size of the state of Missouri. It rises to all of fifteen miles high," Brooks said. "The best idea is to approach it from the east. The lighting will be best from the east."

"What's your lens?"

"I'm taking a selection. The point about an 8×10 camera is that it will give terrific definition—though it feeds on sheet film, and I'll need a tripod to keep it steady."

"I can make you a tripod."

They surveyed the model of Olympus critically when it was finished. Brooks shook his head.

"It's a good model," Shapiro said. "Photograph it here against a black background and we can save ourselves a trip."

Although Brooks rarely laughed, he laughed now. Laughed and said nothing.

He was serenely happy drawing up his own map, entering the sparse names of features in fine calligraphic style, precision-drawing contour lines. The most dangerous aspect of the trip was its distance. They were contemplating a drive of almost seven hundred and ninety miles, with no filling stations on the way, and then the journey back. They would be unlikely to see anyone the whole trip, except possibly a patrol moving between the Arcadia base and the hemisphere of the planet held by the enemy.

No possible danger could deter Brooks. His mind was filled with his delight in having found a friend and in the prospects ahead. Ever since Mariner 9 had executed its fly-over back in 1971, Olympus Mons, the largest volcano in the solar system, had frequently been photographed, by both satellites and rockets. But never from the ground. Never as *he* would photograph it, with all the skill of an Ansel Adams.

He could visualize the prints now. They would be majestic, expressing both the violence and the deadness of the Martian landscape; he would create a serenity out of the conflicting tensions. He would create such an image that it would remain definitive: through the elusive art of photography, he would create a monument not only to the sublimity of the universe, but also to the greatness and the insignificance of mankind in the scheme of things.

With such exalted thoughts in his mind, Brooks had no room for fear.

The two men left Arcadia early one morning. Clad in suits, they slipped through one of the personnel locks in the main dome and made their way over to the transport hangar. There a stretched Mars jeep was waiting, loaded with fuel and supplies. As it rolled into the dim dawn light, the half-tracked vehicle resembled a cumbrous beetle.

There was little room to move in the cab. When they slept, their hammocks would be strung overhead. The ironically named Fort Arcadia was situated close to fifty degrees North, in the veined recesses of the Arcadia Planita. It was summer in the northern hemisphere of Mars, and they had a straightforward drive southwards to the giant volcano, according to the maps.

They reckoned on traveling for fourteen hours a day, and averaging something close to twenty-seven miles per hour, the best they could hope for over trackless terrain. They nodded with pleasure as the shabby collection of prefabricated buildings disappeared behind them, and they were alone with Mars. Shapiro was driving.

A chill, shrunken sun had pierced through the mists of the eastern horizon, where layers of salmon pink dissolved into the sky. The shadow of their vehicle spread across a terrain which resembled Earth's Gobi Desert. Dust lay in sculptured terraces, punctuated here and there by rocks of pumice. In the far distance to their right, a series of flat-topped escarpments suggested a kind of order completely lacking nearer at hand; they made their way through a geological rubbish dump.

This formless landscape was familiar to them from their military exercises. They had crawled through it, dressed in camouflaging sand-robes. Nothing moved but dusts and rusts; the rest—unlike Earth's restless territories—had endured without change for billions of years. It had no more life to offer than the Geological Survey map of the route pinned to the dash.

There was no cratering here, as in the southern hemisphere, to lend interest. Their one concern was to steer south, avoiding rocks and dust drifts. After the first hour of travel, with Al Shapiro at the wheel, Brooks began to want to talk.

Shapiro, however, had gone silent. As the sun climbed in the pinkish sky, he became more silent. He offered the information that his family

came from the Cicero area of Chicago, and then gave up entirely. Brooks, tired of trying to make conversation, resorted to whistling.

The sun arched overhead. The two sergeants took the wheel by turns, driving till the sun sloped to the west, to sink behind a low dust cloud. They had covered three hundred and seventy miles, and were pleased with their good progress. With nightfall, Shapiro found his voice again and was more cheerful; they ate a companionable supper from their rations before climbing into their hammocks and sleeping.

Once in the night, Brooks woke and peered out of the window. The stars and the Milky Way were there in glory, remote yet curiously intimate, as if they shone only for him, like a hope at the back of his mind. He was caught between the tensions of awe and enjoyment, like a troglodyte before its god, unable to tear his gaze away from the glitter until an hour had passed. He climbed back into his hammock, smiling into the fuggy darkness, and slept.

Next dawn revealed no sign of the dust storm glimpsed at sunset—to Brooks's secret relief. Joy came to him. He sang. Shapiro looked doleful.

"Are you okay?" Brooks asked.

"I'm fine, sure."

"Anything worrying you? You wanted to get out among it all, and here we are."

"I'm fine."

"The Tharsis Bulge should be in view in an hour or two. Tomorrow we'll be within sight of Nix Olympica."

"Its name's Olympus," Shapiro said, sourly.

"I like to call it by the old name, Al. Nix Olympica . . . That was the name bestowed on it before anyone had ever set foot on the planet, or even left Earth. Nix Olympica is the old name, the name of mystery, of remoteness. I like it best. I'm going to photograph Nix Olympica and give a new image to Earth, before they come and build a missile site in the crater. Let's hope the atmosphere stays clear of dust."

Shapiro shrugged and brushed his hair from his eyes. He said nothing.

They were rolling by six-thirty. By eight, the terrain was changing. Petrified lavas created a series of steps over the ancient sand-rocks. Their gravimeter began to show fluctuations in the gravity field.

Brooks pointed ahead.

"There's the Tharsis Bulge," he said. "From here it stretches to south of the equator."

"I can see it," Shapiro said, without answering Brooks's excitement.

They began to steer south-east until the low wizened lips of Alba Patera lay distantly to their left. The view ahead became increasingly formidable.

The Tharsis Bulge distorted half a hemisphere. Earth held no feature as majestic. At its northwestern bastion stood the grim sentinel shape of Olympus, its cone rising a sheer fifteen and a half miles above the surrounding plain. As yet, they were too distant to see more than a pimpled shoulder of the Bulge looming above the ancient lands like a great bruise. Black clouds of dust rolled above the bruise. From the clouds, lightning showered, flickered like burning magnesium wire, died, flickered elsewhere. High above both Bulge and dust clouds, wispy white clouds formed a halo in the dark sky.

They climbed. The engine throbbed. The hours passed, the landscape took on power. It was as though the ancient rock breathed upwards. Despite the jeep, Brooks could feel the strength of the great igneous upthrust through the soles of his feet—the "Bubbling Well," as *t'ai chi* had it.

He breathed air deep into his *hora* center. But Shapiro sank back in his seat.

"You are suffering agoraphobia, Al," Brooks said. "Don't worry. Now we have something marvelous to distract your mind."

Brooks's intention was to drive some way up into the Bulge until Nix Olympica lay to the west; from there, he estimated he could photograph the formation at its most dramatic, with falling ground behind it.

The terrain which had been merely rutted now became much more difficult to drive. Long parallel fractures, remarkably uniform in spacing and orientation, ran downhill in their path. There was no way of avoiding the fracturing; as the map indicated, the faults extended for at least a hundred miles on either side of their course. Each fracture had straight, almost vertical, cliffs and reasonably flat bottoms. They found a point where a landslide had destroyed a cliff. By working their tracks on alternate sides, they contrived to slip down a small landslide to the bottom of the fracture, after which it was simple to drive along it. It was the width of an eight-lane highway.

Cliffs boxed them in on either side. The sky above was leaden, relieved by a strip of white cloud low ahead. It was just a matter of proceeding straight. No canyon on Earth was ever like this one.

Brooks pointed into the shadowed side of the fracture at the foot of the cliff. A trace of white lay across small boulders.

"It's a mixture of frost and snow, by the look of it," he said.

The sight delighted him. At least there was one natural process still functioning on the dead surface of the planet.

"How're we going to get out of this fault?" Shapiro asked.

"We're in a crack at least two and a half billion years old," Brooks said, more or less to himself. Even Cathay was not that ancient.

"And the satellites can't pick us up while we're down here," Shapiro said.

But Brooks would have nothing of misgivings. They would emerge somehow. He had never enjoyed himself so much.

"Just imagine it—once a great torrent rushed along here, Al. We're on an old river bed."

"No, this wasn't formed by water," Shapiro said expertly. "It's the result of stresses in the Martian lithosphere. You'll be looking out for fish-bones next."

Although Brooks was silenced by this rejoinder, he spent the next hour alert for signs of departed life. What a triumph to see a fossil in the fracture walls! Once he cried out and stopped the jeep, to peer more closely at the cliff; there was nothing to be seen but a pattern of splintering in the rock.

"Nothing living has ever lived here—not ever," Shapiro said, and began to shiver.

It was impossible to say anything sympathetic, but Brooks understood how Shapiro felt. These unknown spaces chilled Shapiro as much as they excited Brooks; it was what came of being born in a crowded Chicago slum. Besides, he understood intellectually how absurd it was to be experiencing such intense pleasure in such a forbidding place. The mountains of Western Szechwan Province, from which his Chinese ancestors had come, might be almost as unwelcoming as this.

It turned out that Brooks's light-heartedness was not misplaced. The fracture cut into another at an oblique angle. Vast ramps, as smooth as if designed by mortal architect, led up to the general level of the Bulge. The jeep climbed with ease, and they emerged onto the rainless elevations of the Tharsis Bulge. They were 1.3 miles above the datum, Mars's equivalent of sea level. The read-out also showed a free-air gravity anomaly of 229 mgals. The wall of yellowish black dust had disappeared. Visibility was good in the thin atmosphere. The sun shone as if encased in lucite. There was a glazed aspect, too, to the great smooth features of the inclined plain about them, where strange bumps and undulations suggested bones under the basaltic skin.

"Wonderful!" Brooks said. He began to tease himself. "All we need now is for a devil to emerge and dance before us. A devil with a red and white face."

"For god's sake . . ." Shapiro protested. "Take your photographs and let's get home."

But Brooks wanted to climb out and dance. He was sick of being cooped in the cab of the vehicle, sick of the perpetual noise of the engine and air-purifier. It would be a time for the *t'ai chi* solo dance, even with the space suit on. He would celebrate Mars as no one else had done.

He controlled himself. A few more hours driving and they would see Nix Olympica itself. The sun was already descending. They had to make as much distance as they could before dark.

With nightfall, an electrical storm swept down from the heights. They stopped the jeep beside a corroded boulder. Flicking light surrounded them. Shapiro spent an hour checking through all the equipment, climbing restlessly about, and muttering to himself.

"One failure and we're dead," he said, catching Brooks's eye. "No one could get to us in time if anything went wrong. We embarked on this caper far too thoughtlessly. We should have planned it like a military operation."

"We shall see Nix Olympica tomorrow. Don't worry. Besides, imagine—wouldn't this spot really make a dramatic tomb?"

Shapiro was apologetic next morning. He did not realize that the desolate spaces of Mars would have such a bad effect on him. He knew he was acting foolishly. It was his determination to take a grip on himself. He was looking forward to seeing Olympus, and would be fine, he felt sure, on the way home. There was just—well, the realization that their lives balanced on a knife-edge.

Clapping him affectionately on the shoulder, Brooks said, "Life is always lived on a knife-edge. Don't worry."

By ten that morning, when the sun was shining through its blue glaze, they caught sight of a dark crust beyond the curve of the horizon. It was the volcano.

Both men cheered.

The volcano grew throughout the day, arising from behind the humps of the Bulge. Hour by hour, they gained a clearer impression of its size. It was a vast tomb of igneous rock which would have dominated any continent on Earth. It would have stretched from Shapiro's Chicago to Buffalo, obliterating Lake Erie. It would have stretched from Switzerland to London, obliterating Paris and most of Belgium. It would have stretched from Lhasa in Tibet to Calcutta, obliterating Mount Everest like a molehill on its way.

Above its shoulders, where the sky was indigo, little demons of lightning danced, corkscrewing their way down into its scarred crust.

It could not be imagined or described. Only photographed.

Brooks brought his films from the refrigerator. He had three SLR cameras besides his homemade "tank." He went to work with cameras, lenses, and filters when they were still over four hundred miles from the giant caldera of Olympus. In the thin air, it appeared deceptively close.

Talking excitedly as he worked, Brooks tried to explain what he felt to Shapiro, who drove with his gaze on the ridged ground ahead.

"Back in the eighteenth century, painters discriminated between the

beautiful, the picturesque, and the sublime. You'd need to dream up another category for most of Mars, particularly the dull bits round Arcadia. You wouldn't find much that would square with definitions of 'beautiful' or 'picturesque,' but here we have the sublime and then some . . . This monster has all the elements of awfulness and grandeur which the sublime requires. I wonder what the great painters would have made of Nix Olympica. . . ."

The sun climbed to zenith, and then began to slope away down the western sky.

"Turn direct south, Al. Speed it up, if you can. I want to catch the sunset behind Nix. It should be wonderful."

Shapiro managed a laugh. "I'm doing my best, Ozzy. Don't want to shake the buggy to pieces."

Brooks began loading low-grain fast film into his cameras.

They were traveling over ground composed of flow after flow of lava, one wave upon another, slags, powders, and ejecta cast upon the previous outpourings in grotesque patterns, as if the almost indestructible material had been bent on destroying itself, to the depth of hundreds of fathoms.

Whatever ferment had taken place over eons of time, those eons were themselves now eons past; since then, only silence covered the forbidding highlands—silence without motion, without so much as a wisp of steam from a solitary fumarole.

"Stop here!" Brooks exclaimed suddenly. "Where's that tripod? Oh, god . . . I must get on top of the jeep and film from there."

Grunting, Shapiro did as he was told. Brooks screwed his helmet on, draped his cameras and telescopic lenses over one shoulder, and climbed to the ground. He stood for a while, staring at the ground sloping towards the distant formation, and the sky, in which thin cloud curled like feather some five miles overhead. He took several shots at various shutter speeds almost without thought.

Looking back on his modest life, without distinction of any kind, he could hardly believe his luck. Night was descending on Mars, and he was here to photograph it. Even if Earth soon blew itself up, still he was here, and could record the moment.

His luck was crowned as he started to photograph from the top of the vehicle, using the 8×10 tank, steadying it with the tripod.

Phobos, the innermost moon, appeared to rise from the west—its orbital period being less than Mars's rotation period.

It glittered above the barricades of Nix Olympica. An ice cloud trailed like a pennant above the great volcano. The setting sun emerged from under a band of mist, spilling its light like broken egg along the horizon.

The volcano was black in silhouette against the sky. The tank's shutter clicked, as moment by moment the light enriched itself.

Totally engrossed, Brooks slotted a polarizing filter over the lens. Click. Wonderful. Click. Click.

The universe closed down like an oyster on the strip of brightness. The sun seemed to flare and was gone, leaving Nix Olympica to prop up its sky. Brooks opened up his aperture and kept shooting. He knew he would never witness anything like this again. Tomorrow night, they would be on their way home, racing the sinking gauge on the oxygen cylinders. Then it would be up to him to try and recreate this moment in his darkroom, where the hard work would be done.

Next morning, both sergeants were stirring before dawn.

"I've got to capture the first ray of light to touch those crater walls," Brooks said. "Let's try to get fifty miles nearer."

"How about something to eat first, Ozzy?"

"We can eat for the rest of our lives. You drive, okay?"

Shapiro drove while Brooks fussed over his equipment. He threw the vehicle recklessly forward, caught by Brooks's excitement.

He laughed.

"This'll be something to tell people about."

"No mistake there," Brooks said. "Maybe I'll publish an album of the best shots. Hey, Al, maybe we should climb the crater while we're here!"

"Forget it. Fifteen miles up in a space suit, with no climbing gear! I'm not mad even if you are."

They were racing across the bulbous incline. A worn stump of rock loomed ahead.

"Stop and I'll climb that," Brooks said.

When they got to it, the rock proved to be a small cone, a hundred yards across and several feet high. Unmoved by Shapiro's protests, Brooks unclamped the portable ladder from the jeep and climbed to the top. The crater was plugged with ancient magma and covered with dust. He got the tripod and the cameras in place just as the sun rose from behind a shoulder of Tharsis.

Click. This time, the fortress of Olympus was bright against a dark sky. For a moment, the outline of Tharsis was printed in shadow on its eastern flank. Click. Then like an iceberg of untold mass, it was floating on a sea of shadow. Click. The shadow withdrew across the plain towards the men. Mists rose. Click. For no more than five minutes, the great mesa was softened by evaporating carbon dioxide fumes. Click.

"Wonderful, wonderful!" said Brooks. He found that Shapiro had followed him up the ladder. Rapture was on both their faces. They hugged each other and laughed. They took shots of each other standing by the volcanic cone.

They forgot to eat and, throughout the morning, drove as fast as they could towards the volcano. It was a magnet, bathed in light.

At midday, they stopped to drink ham and green pea soup.

They were still over one hundred and fifty miles from Olympus. It spread grandly before them: its great shield, its summit caldera—not a vent as in Earth's familiar stratovolcanoes but a relapse of the summit region—its flanking escarpments, its pattern of frozen lava runs, which from this distance resembled tresses of hair. From above, as Brooks knew, Nix Olympica resembled the nipple of a Martian Juno.

They gazed out at this brilliant formation as they slurped down their soup. It occupied one hundred and twelve degrees of their vision, although it was still so distant.

Shapiro turned from the sight and checked their instruments.

"We're doing okay, but getting near the safety margin on both fuel and oxygen. Are you almost ready to turn homewards, Ozzy?"

Brooks hesitated, then spoke in a nonchalant manner. "I'm almost ready. There's just one thing left to do. We've got some fine photographs in the bag, and by the time I bring the negatives up, there just could be a masterpiece or two among them. The only problem is the question of scale. Since there's no means of comparison in any of the pictures, you can't get an idea of the magnitude of Nix."

They looked at each other. Shapiro said, "You want me to leave you here and then drive the jeep nearer, so that you can have it in the foreground?"

"I don't want the truck in. Besides, I need to be mobile myself. I want you in it, Al—the human figure. I want to put you forward in the landscape. Then I move around taking shots."

Shapiro became rigid.

"I won't do that, Ozzy."

"Why not?"

"I won't do it."

"Tell me why."

"Because I just won't."

"Look, Al, we'll never be out of sight of each other. We'll be in radio contact. You'll be able to see the jeep all the while. All you have to do is stand where I put you. It'll take an hour, no more."

"No, I said. I'm not standing out in that landscape alone. That's flat, okay?"

They glowered at each other.

"You go out there. I'll take the damned pictures."

"I'm not afraid to go out there. Come on, Al, we've come all this way. There's nothing to be scared of, for Christ's sake. One hour, that's all I ask."

Shapiro dropped his gaze, clenching his fists together.

"You can't make me do it."

"I'm not making you. What's so difficult? You just do it."

"Suppose something happens?"

"Nothing has happened here for century after century. Not a thing."

Shapiro expelled a sigh. His face showed the tension inside him. His skin gleamed in the flat light.

"Okay. I'll do it, I guess."

"Okay." Brooks hesitated then said, "I appreciate it, Al. The medics haven't yet got round to naming a fear of wide open alien spaces, but they will. I know it must take some fighting."

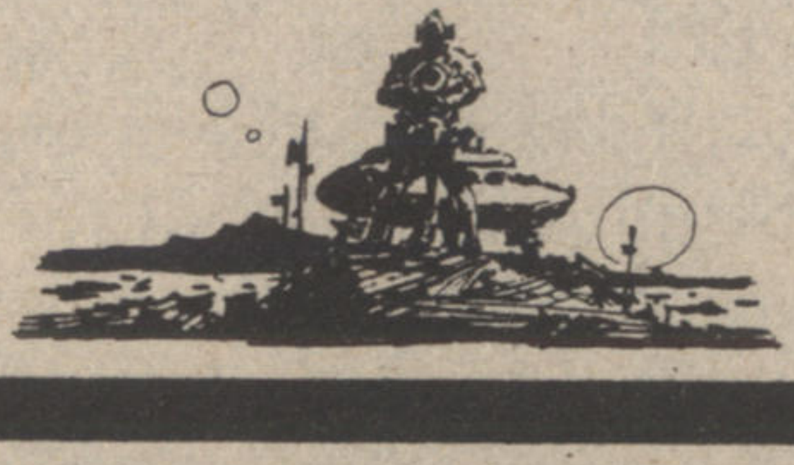
"I'll conquer it. Just don't talk about it," said Al, his teeth chattering, as Brooks helped him secure the helmet of his suit.

"Sometimes there's need for talk. Remember, same demons and spirits haunt wide open spaces of Mars as those of Earth. No difference really, since all apparitions are in the mind. If we import demons, then we can conquer them, because they must obey our laws."

"I'll try and bear that in mind," said Shapiro, forcing his teeth to stop chattering. "Now let me out before I think better of it."

All the while Brooks drove back and forth about that portion of the Bulge, taking his historic shots of Nix Olympica, he was aware of what the distant white figure was undergoing as it stood alone in the grotesque landscape. He proceeded without haste, but he worked as fast as possible, concentrating now on his wide-angle lenses.

The end result of the men's endeavor was the series of photographs which became historic records of mankind's expansion through the solar system. They rank as works of art. As for Brooks, despite a period of fame, he eventually died in penury. General Shapiro ended up as Officer Commanding Mars Base; his memoirs, in four volumes, contain an account of his first reconnaissance of Olympus—which differs considerably from the facts as set down here. ●



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THE SHADOW ON THE DOORSTEP

by James P. Blaylock

Is there something really hiding just at the edge of your peripheral vision or camouflaged behind a chair in that dimly lit corner over there? If you're reading this story at night, it may remind you of all the peculiar suspicions that dark tales and darker evenings have given rise to. Please don't think too hard about these suspicions, they just might materialize on your doorstep.

art: Arthur George

It was several months after I had dismantled my aquaria that I heard a rustling in the darkness, a scraping of what sounded like footsteps on the front porch of my house. It startled me out of a literary lethargy built partly of three hours of Jules Verne, partly of a nodding acquaintance with a bottle of single malt scotch. In the yellow glow of the porch lamp, through the tiny, distorting panes of the mullioned upper half of the oaken door, I saw only a shadow, a face perhaps, half turned away. The dark outline of it was lost in the shaded confusion of an unpruned hibiscus.

The porch itself was a rectangular island of hooded light, cut with drooping shadows of potted plants and the rectilinear darkness of a pair of weather-stained mission chairs. Encircling it was a tumult of shrubbery. Beyond lay the street and the feeble glow of globed lamps, all of it washed in pale moonlight that served only to darken that wall of shrubbery, so that the porch with its yellow buglight and foliage seemed a self-contained world of dwindling enchantment.

I couldn't say with any confidence as I sat staring in sudden, unexplained horror at the start this late visitor had given me, that the leafy appendages thrusting away on either side of him weren't arms or some strange melange of limbs and fins. With the weak light at his back he was a fishy shadow suffused in the amber aura of porchlight, something which had crawled dripping out of a late Devonian sea.

In the interests of objectivity, I'll say again that I had been reading Jules Verne. And it's altogether reasonable that a mixture of the book, the shadows, the embers aglow in the fireplace, the late hour, and a morbid suspicion that nothing but trouble travels in the suburbs after dark combined to enchant into existence this troublesome shade that was nothing, in fact, but the scraping of a branch of hibiscus against the windowpane. But you can understand that I wasn't anxious to open the door.

I set the book down silently, the afterimage of the interior of the Nautilus slanting across my consciousness and then submerging, and I remember wondering at the appropriateness of the scene in the novel: the crystal panels bound in copper beyond which floated transparent sheets of water illuminated by sunlight; the lazy undulations of eels and fishes, of lampreys and Japanese salamanders and blue and silver clouds of schooling mackerel. Slipping into the shadows beyond the couch, I pressed myself against the wall and crept into the darkened study where a window would afford me a view of most of the porch.

My aquaria, as I've said, were dismantled some months earlier, six, I believe—the water siphoned out a window and into a flower bed, the waterweeds collapsed in a soggy heap, the fish astonished to find themselves imprisoned in a three gallon bucket. These last I gave to a nearby

tropical fish store; the empty aquaria with its gravel and lumps of petrified stone I stored beneath a bench in the shed under my avocado tree. It was a sad undertaking, all in all, like bundling up pieces of my boyhood and packing them away in a crate. I sometimes have the notion that opening the crate would restore them wholesale, that the re-creation of years gone by could be effected by dragging in a hose and filling the tanks with clear water, by banking the gravel around rocks heaped to form dark caverns, the entrances of which are shadowed by the reaching tendrils of waterweeds through which glow watery rays of reflected light. But the visitor on the porch that night dissuaded me.

Three aquarium shops sit neatly in my memory by day and are confused and shuffled by night, giddily trading fishes and façades, all of them alive with the hum and bubble of pumps and filters and the damp, musty smell of fishtanks drip dripping tropical water onto concrete floors. One I discovered by bicycle when I was thirteen. It was a clapboard house on a frontage road along a freeway, the exhaust of countless roaring trucks and automobiles having dusted the peeling white paint with black grime. Inside sat dozens of ten-gallon tanks, poorly lit, the water within them half evaporated. There wasn't much to recommend it, even to a thirteen year old, aside from a door in the back—what used to be a kitchen door, I suppose—that led along a gravel path to what had been a garage. These thirty years later I can recall the very day I discovered it, the gravel path that is, easily a year after my first bicycle journey to the shop. I'd wandered around inside, shaking my head at the condition of the aquaria, despising the guppies and goldfish and tetras that swam sluggishly past their scattered dead companions. My father waited in a Studebaker at the curb outside, drumming his fingers along the top of the passenger seat. A sign in pencil scrawl attracted my eye, advertising another room of fish "outside." And so out I stepped along that gravel path, shoving into the darkened back half of the garage, which was unlit save for the incandescent bulbs in aquarium reflectors. I shut the door behind me for no other reason than to keep out sunlight. Banks of aquaria lined three walls, all of them a deep greenish-black, the water within lit against a backdrop of elodea and Amazon swordplant and the waving, lacey branches of ambulia and sagitarius. There was the faint bursting of fine bubbles that danced toward the surface from aerators trapped beneath mossy stones. On the sandy floor of one aquarium lay a half dozen mottled freshwater rays from the Amazon, their poisonous tails almost indistinguishable from the gravel they rested on. A half score of buffalo-head cichlids hovered in the shelter of an arched heap of waterfall rock, under which was coiled the long, finny, serpent's tail of a reedfish.

The aquarium seemed to me to be prodigiously deep, a trick, perhaps, of reflection and light and the clever arrangement of rocks and water-

plants. But it suggested, just for a moment, that the shadowed water within was somehow as vast as the sea bottom or was a sort of antechamber to the driftwood and pebble floor of a tropical river. Other aquaria flanked it. Gobies peered up at me from out of burrows in the sand. An enormous compressiceps, flat as a plate, blinked out from behind a tangle of cryptocoryne grasses. Leaf fish floated amid the lacey brown of decaying vegetation, and a hovering pair of golfball-sized puffers, red eyes blinking, tiny pectoral fins whirring like submarine propellors, peered suspiciously from beneath a ledge of dark stone. There was something utterly alien about that room full of fishes, existing in manufactured amber light, a thousand miles removed from the dusty gravel of the yard outside, from the roaring freeway traffic not sixty feet distant. I stood staring, oblivious to the time, until the door swung open in a flood of sunlight and my father peeked in. In the sudden illumination the odd atmosphere of the room seemed to decay, to disperse, and it reminds me now of what must happen to a forest glade when the sun rises and dispels the damp enchanted pall summoned each night by moonlight from the roots and mulch and earth of the forest floor.

One dimmed tank was lit briefly by the sunlight, and in it, crouched behind a tumble of dark stone, was an almost hidden creature with an enormous head and eyes, the eyes of a squid or a spaniel, eyes that were lidded, that blinked slowly and sadly past the curious scattered decorations of its tank: a half dozen agate marbles, a platoon of painted lead soldiers, a brass sheriff's star, and a little tin shovel angling from a bucket half full of tilted sand and painted in tints of azure and yellow, a scene of children playing along a sunset beach.

I was old enough and imaginative enough to be struck by the incongruity of the contents of that aquarium. I wasn't, though, well enough schooled in ichthyology to remark on the lidded eyes of the creature in the tank—which is just as well. I was given over to nightmares as it was. A year passed before I had occasion to visit the shop beside the freeway again, and I can recall bicycling along wet streets through intermittent showers, hunched over in a yellow, hooded slicker, my pantlegs soaked from the knees down, rewarded finally with the sight of no shop at all, but of a vacant lot, already up in weeds, the concrete foundation of the clapboard house and garage brown with rainwater and mud.

Here it was nearly midnight, thirty years later, and something was stirring on my front porch. Wind out of the west shuffled the foliage, and I could hear the sighing of fronds in the queen palms along the curb. I stood in shadow, wafered against a tilted bookcase, peering past the edge of the casement at nothing. There was a rustling of bushes and swaying shadow. Something—what was it?—was skulking out there. I was certain. Hairs prickled along the back of my neck. A low, mournful boom

of distant thunder followed a windy clatter of raindrops. The wet, ozone smell of rain on concrete washed through the room, and I realized with a start that a window had blown open behind me. I turned and pushed it shut, crouching below the sill so as not to be seen, thinking without meaning to of wandering in the rain across the ruins of the tropical fish shop, searching in the weeds for nothing I could name and finding only shards of broken glass and a ceramic fishbowl castle the color of an Easter egg. I slipped tight the bolt on the window and crept across to my bookcase, peering once again out into the seemingly empty night where the branches of hibiscus with their drooping pink flowers danced in the wind and rain.

In San Francisco, in Chinatown, in an alley off Washington, lies the second of the three aquarium shops. I was a student at the time. I'd eaten a remarkable dinner at a restaurant called Sam Wo and was wandering along the foggy evening street, looking for a set of those compressed origami flowers that bloom when dropped into water, when I saw a sign depicting Chinese ideographs and a lacey looking tri-colored koi. I slouched down a narrow alley between canted buildings, the misty air smelling of garlic and fog, barbecued duck and spilled garbage. Through a slender doorway veiled with the smell of musty sand sounded the familiar hum of aquaria.

The shop itself was vast and dark beneath low ceilings. Dim rooms, lost in shadow, stretched away beneath the street, scattered aquarium lights glowing like misty distant stars. Flat breeding tanks were stacked five deep on rusted steel stands below a row of darkened transom windows that fronted the alley. Exotic goldfish labored to stay afloat, staring through bubble eyes, their caudal fins so enormously overgrown that they seemed to drag the creatures backward. One of the fish, I remember, was the size and shape of a grapefuit, a stupendous freak bred for the sake of nothing more than curiosity. Illogically, perhaps because of my having stumbled years earlier upon that shed full of odd fish along the freeway, it occurred to me that the more distant rooms would contain even more curious fish, so I hesitantly wandered deeper, under Washington, I suppose, only to discover that yet farther rooms existed, that rooms seemed to open onto others through arched doors, the ancient plaster of which was so discolored and mossy from the constant humidity that it appeared as if the openings were chipped out of stone. Vast aquaria full of trailing waterweeds sat bank upon bank, and in them swam creatures that had, weeks earlier, lurked in driftwood grottoes in the Amazon and Orinoco.

There was something about the place that brought to mind the shovel and bucket, the promise of pending mystery, perhaps horror. Each aquarium with its shadowy corners and heaped stone and lacey plants seemed

a tiny enclosed world, as did the shop itself, utterly adrift from the noisy Chinatown alleyways and streets above, which crisscrossed in a foggy tapestry of a world alien to the hilly sprawl of San Francisco, each successive layer full of wonder and threat. There was something in my reaction to it akin to the attraction Professor Aronnax felt to the interior of the Nautilus with its library of black-violet ebony and brass, its twelve thousand books, its luminous ceilings and pipe organ and jars of molluscs and sea stars and black pearls larger than pigeons' eggs and its glass walls through which, as if from within an aquarium, one had a night and day view of the depths of the sea.

I was confronted on the edge of the second chamber by a tiny Oriental man, his face lost in shadow. I hadn't heard him approach. He held in his hand a dripping net, large enough to snare a sea bass, and he wore rubber boots as if he were in the habit of clambering into aquaria to pursue fish. His sudden appearance startled me out of a peculiar frame of mind that accounted for, I'm certain, the curious idea that in the faint, pearl-like luminosity of aquarium light, the arm and hand that held the net were scaled. I found my way to the street. He hadn't said anything, but the slow shaking of his head had seemed to indicate that I wasn't entirely welcome there, that it was a hatchery, perhaps, a wholesale house in which casual strollers would find nothing that would interest them.

And it was nothing, years later, that I found on the front porch. The wind blew rain under the eaves and against the panes of the window. Water ran along them in rivulets, distorting even further the waving foliage on the porch, making it impossible to determine whether the dark places were mere shadow or were more than that. I returned to my couch and book and fireplace, piling split cedar logs atop burned down fragments, and blowing on the embers until the wood popped and crackled and firelight danced on the walls of the living room. It must have been two o'clock in the morning by then, a morbid hour, it seems to me, but somehow I was disinclined toward bed, and so I sat browsing in my book, idly sipping at my glass, and half listening to the shuffle and scrape of things in the night and the occasional rumble of far away thunder.

I couldn't, somehow, keep my eyes off the door, although I pretended to continue to read. The result was that I focused on nothing at all, but must have fallen asleep, for I lurched awake at the sound of a clay flower pot crashing to bits on the porch outside, the victim, possibly, of a rainy gust of wind. I sat up, tumbling Jules Verne to the rug, a half-formed dream of tilted pier pilings and dark, stone pools of placid water dissolving into mist in my mind. A shadow loomed beyond the door. I snatched at the little pull-chain of the wall sconce overhead and pitched

the room into darkness, thinking to hide my own movements as well as to illuminate those of the thing on the porch.

But almost as soon as the light evaporated, leaving only the orange glow of the settled fire, I switched the light back on. It was futile to think of hiding myself, and as for whatever it was that lurked on the threshold, I hadn't any monumental desire to confront it. So I sat trembling. The shadow remained, as if it watched and listened, satisfied to know that I knew it was there.

There had been another tropical fish store in San Pedro in a dockside street of thrift stores and bars and boarded-up windows. The harbor side of the street was built largely upon pilings, and below the slumping wooden buildings were shadowy broken remnants of abandoned wharfs and the shifting, gray Pacific tide. The windows of the shop were obscured by heavy dust that had lain on the cracked panes for years, and there were only dim, scattered lights shining beyond to indicate that the building wasn't deserted. A painted sign on the door read "Tropical Rarities—Fish and Amphibia" and below it, taped to the inside of the door and barely visible through the dust, was a yellowed price list, advertising, I recall, Colombian horned frogs and tiger salamanders, at prices twenty years out of date.

The door was locked. But from within, I was certain of it, came the humming of aquaria and the swish-splash of aerated water against a background of murmuring voices. Had I been ten years younger, I would have rapped on the glass, perhaps shouted. But my interest in aquaria had waned, and I had come to the neighborhood, actually, to purchase tickets for a boat ride to Catalina Island. So I turned to leave, only vaguely curious, noting for the first time a wooden stairway angling steeply away toward the docks, its stile gate left carelessly ajar. I hesitated before it, peering down along the warped bannister, and saw hanging from the wooden siding of the building a simple, wordless sign depicting ideographs and a tri-colored koi. It was the shock of curious recognition as much as anything that impelled me down those stairs, grinning foolishly, rehearsing what it was I'd say to whomever I'd meet at the bottom.

But I met no one—only the lapping of dark water against the stones and a scattering of red crabs that scuttled away into the shadows of mossy rock. Overhanging buildings formed a sort of open air cellar, dark and cool and smelling of mussels and barnacles and mud flats. At first the darkness within was impenetrable, but as I shaded my eyes and stepped into the shadows I made out a half dozen dim rings of mottled stone—amphibian pools I imagined, their sides draped with trailing water plants.

"Hello," I called, timorously, I suppose, and was met with silence except

for a brief splashing in one of the pools. I stepped forward hesitantly. I had no business being there, but I was struck with the idea that I *must* see what it was that dwelt within those circular pools.

The first appeared to be empty of life aside from great tendrils of tangled elodea and a floating carpet of broad-leaf duckweed. I knelt on the wet stone and swept the duckweed aside with my hands, squinting into the depths. Some few bits of clouded daylight filtered in from above, but the feeble illumination was hardly enough to lighten the pool. Something, though, glistened for a moment below, as if beckoning, signifying, and I found myself glancing around me guiltily even as I rolled up my shirtsleeve. In for a penny . . . I thought to myself, plunging my arm in up to the shoulder.

There was a movement then beneath the water, as if the pool were deeper than I'd thought and I'd disturbed the solitude of some submerged creature. I groped among plants and gravel, nearly dipping my ear into the water. There it was, lying on its side. My fingers closed over the half hoop of its handle just as a slow scuffling sounded from the far end of the twilit room.

I stood up, prepared for heaven knew what, holding in my hand, impossibly, a familiar tin pail, its side dented in now, its blue ocean bent over and half submerging the children still at play, these many years later, along its sandy beach. Before me crouched a small Oriental man, staring oddly, as if he half recognized my face and amazed to find me, it seemed, in the act of purloining that bent, toy pail. I dropped it into the pool, began to speak, then turned and hurried away. The man who had confronted me wore no rubber boots, and he carried no enormous fishnet in his hand. In the dim halflight of that strange ocean side grotto his skin, at a hasty glance, was nothing more than skin. I could insist for the sake of cheap adventure that he was scaled, gilled, perhaps, with webbed hands and an ear-to-ear mouth. And he easily might have been. I left without a backward glance, focusing on the alligatored blue paint of the ramshackle stairway, on the shingled roof that rose into view on the opposite side of the street as I climbed, step by creaking step. I drove home, I recall, punching randomly on the buttons of my car radio, turning it on and off, aware of the incongruity, the superfluousness of the music and the newscasts and the foolish and alien radio chatter.

The incident rather took the wind out of the sails of my tropical fish collecting—sails that were half furled anyway. And certain odd, otherwise innocent, pictures began to haunt my dreams—random images of pale, angular faces, of painted lead soldiers scattered in a weedy lot, of the furtive movement of fish in weed-shadowed aquaria, of a wooden signboard swinging and swinging in wind-driven rain.

Beyond the locked front door lies nothing more than the shadow of

evening foliage, stirring in the rainy wind. Common sense would have it so, would say, in a smug and tiresome voice, that I've been confused by a dangerous combination of coincidence and happenstance. It would be an invitation to madness not to heed such a voice.

But it's not a night for heeding voices. The wind and rain lash at the dark shrubbery, the shadows waver and dance. Through the window glass nothing at all can be seen beyond the pallid light of the porch lamp. Two hours from now the sun will rise, and with it will come a manufactured disregard for the suggestion of connections, of odd patterns behind the seemingly random. The front porch—rainwater drying in patches, the mission chairs sitting solid and substantial, the oranges and pinks of hibiscus bloom grinning at the day—will be inhabited only by a hurrying, square-jawed milkman in a white cap and by the solid clink of bottles in a galvanized wire basket. ●

MARTIN GARDNER (from page 20)

SOLUTION TO RAY PALMER'S ARCADE

The experiment is to let two steel balls, held far apart, drop simultaneously. A careful measurement of their paths will show them to be parallel if the elevator is accelerating upward. If it is at rest on a planet, the paths will move closer together as each ball falls toward the planet's center.

Does this violate Einstein's famous principle of equivalence? No, but it *does* prove that the gravitational field surrounding a planet or star has a spherical structure that can't be duplicated by an elevator accelerating upward.

The answer to last month's anagram problem is that the letters of ROAST MULES can be rearranged to spell SOMERSAULT.

by James Tiptree, Jr.

COLLISION

art: Bob Walters

James Tiptree, Jr. last appeared in *IAsfm* in our Mid-December 1985 issue with "All This and Heaven Too." The author has a novel, *The Starry Rift*, upcoming from Tor Books, and a collection of short stories, *Byte Beautiful*, was recently published by Doubleday.

The space-worn message pipe, looking like a tiny spaceship, noses its way up the incoming chute. Finally its sensor cap touches the communications antenna that has called it across the light-years to Human FedBase Nine Hundred.

When it makes contact a beep sounds, far down below in the Communications Office, where the extensive facilities of the base are housed inside a great crystalline asteroid. Nine Hundred is an old frontier base and accordingly is fitted out with every convenience and luxury that can keep life functioning happily in the immense isolation of space.

At the beep, Pauna, the Commo Officer, sighs resignedly. It's been a busy day. She waits for the Commo aide in the surface bubble above to detach the sensor cap and send the incomer down the chute to her.

While she waits she finishes sorting the routine PM intake: five for Navigation and Charts; two non-urgent for Medical; two for Terraforming; three long ones for Colony Services; and a personal commendation to Maintenance from a touring Commander. Plus a late info-special to Exec, from FedBase Three Hundred, way out on the far northeast end of the Rift.

She glances over it. Some suspected Black Worlds activity there. The Black Worlds are a largely Human group of planets who refused to come in the Federation after the Last War. They give refuge to a lot of bad actors and their cultures are pretty unsavory. They're outside Fed boundary, and no regular space routes run there, but they manage a small traffic in gemstones from their native mines. This message is of no concern to Nine Hundred, but Exec will post it as a news item.

When the new message pipe thumps down, Pauna's eyes are drawn to its heavy space patina, and the freckling of dents and scratches. This thing has been a long time en route. Is it from deep in the Rift? Or has it only spent time bumping its blind way around some enormous planet?

No telling. In Commo you get used to receiving strange things—even junk pipes built by kids back in Central to surprise a FarBase, and bearing weird notes: "The storm is coming!" or "Hass and Dahlia send love."

But this is no prank. It's an old, old realie, maybe from some mission that set out before her tour of duty. She pulls out its cassette—it's stuck in crooked, probably in haste—and threads it on her voder to sample for distribution and urgency.

A man's voice announces, "Message One, R-R-One to Base at Beacon Alpha, Navigator Torrane recording." Which means nothing to Pauna.

He goes on to give the Standard date—why, that's over twenty years ago!—and rattles off their space coordinates. Pauna doesn't need her ephemeris to know that those specs are deep in the Rift. Whoever can

this be from? It isn't a Charts mission, the pipe didn't carry Charts' bright black-and-yellow belly stripe. Maybe a lost ship?

"We have just established Beacon Alpha," Torrane goes on. "It's in orbit around the tenth planet of a big blue sun, mass approximately four point five Sol, luminosity two-fifty. We are about to make a thirteen-degree course change to the Galactic northeast because our computer shows a concentration of electromagnetic transmissions in that direction. It should be a center of activity for whatever life-form systems lie across the Rift."

Across the Rift!

Aha, now Pauna gets it—R-R-One stands for Rift-Runner, the first cross-Rift exploration! It had started out while she was a child. And this must go straight to Exec, right now. She'll take it up herself, that way she just might get to hear some of it.

Even in her excitement, Pauna's lips quirk at the folly of Human hurry at the end of the pipe's slow years of travel. But the pipes are the only means of commo from the Rift—the changing density-gradients out there garble any EM transmission to unintelligibility after a very short distance.

She calls a messenger to deliver the routines—not without a little twinge of regret; like any good Commo officer she has a keen ear for gossip, and she enjoys her daily after-work round—and gives a hasty briefing to her night relief, who has just arrived. Then she's hastening up the spiral exercise-ramp she uses as a short-cut to the Main View Corridor, where Exec's office is.

When she gets to the big main viewport she stops for an instant to look out. Oh, how beautiful! Over the bleak surface of the asteroid the starfield is splendid, dramatically cut by the long black river of the Rift. It's almost all above the horizon and parallel to it, about twenty degrees wide and half the sky long. A very few bright stars stand out in it against the faint haze of starlight from the far side.

The Rift is not a rent or tear, of course, but only a relatively starless region, of the same nature as the starless regions between the Galactic arms. Many such abrupt local density fall-offs can be seen with scopes, but this rift is special because it serves as the northern border of the slowly-expanding sphere of Federation space. The Rift has made Fed. space quite lop-sided to the north, so that Nine Hundred, which isn't really very far from Central, is also a genuine frontier.

Several explorations have ventured far enough into the Rift to know that the normal starfields of the Arm begin again on the far side. And their sensors have picked up definitely artificial transmissions. But all the near stars have proved planetless; it became clear that a complete

crossing would have to be made to find sentient life. A generation ago the time was judged ripe, and Riftrunner One set out.

It's nothing unusual as missions go—two women and three men, all multiply-skilled, and including a keen Sensitive. And a redundancy of supplies and First Contact gear. The ship is a regular reconn model, retrofitted with extra fuel tanks and super-long-range sensors, plus broad-spectrum radiation detectors. They also carry a few beacons to position at course changes, so that others can follow them. The ship is of course taking the regulation time-lapse aft-pointed holography which can serve as computer guidance on their own trip home.

The only really unusual feature of the cross-Rift trip is the very long times spent in cold-sleep. But even that is not a record; longer sleeps have been done, some inadvertently, and no ill effects observed. There is only the incongruous youthfulness of the sleepers on emergence, because you don't age—or do anything else—in cold-sleep.

And now comes their first message. Pauna's pace quickens as she catches sight of the Exec's Deputy at their office door. Like many dedicated specialists, Pauna is quite unaware of the expressions her face is radiating, or that she's leaving behind her a trail of smiles and curious looks. Fred, the Deputy, catches sight of her face and sighs in his turn. He too has had a long day, escorting a pod of Sfermini all over the great base.

He holds the door open for Pauna.

"Oh, Fred, thank you. Is Exec in?"

"And waiting for you. I caught the message as you came."

"Oh?" Flustered, she puzzles over this, gives it up. "Fred, the first signal from the cross-Rift mission just came in! I knew you'd want it now."

"Cross-Rift. . . . Oh! Yes, indeedy."

They go in, to be greeted by the Exec, a solidly built grey-haired woman with sharp eyes and a fine smile.

"You have an info-alert about Black Worlders from FedBase Three Hundred coming up by messenger, but I thought you'd want this before closing time."

Fred has opened their voder and is holding out his hand for the cassette.

"May I thread it, please?" Pauna asks. "It wasn't put in straight. It's not hurt as far as I can tell, but they're delicate."

"By all means."

Exec's sharp eyes have picked up Pauna's radiant excitement, and she takes pity on the girl. "Would you like to stay and hear it?"

"Oh, yes!" The blinding smile makes Exec ashamed of herself for teasing. Funny, she thinks, how much more appealing curiosity is in the young and pretty than in the old and worn.

The recorded voice of Navigator Torrane is starting. As he proceeds through the part she has heard the Deputy starts to frown. After Torrane gives the blue sun's specs there's a pause.

"Sounds nervous," Fred observes.

Exec nods.

Pauna reproaches herself sharply. She'd missed that. Now she heard it too, the breathing, the tone. And Torrane had started improperly, with an abbreviation—and the jammed-in cassette. Curse her over-excitedness. But—is there trouble? Has anything gone wrong? Oh, please, no!

Torrane gives the course change, and then goes on. "By the way, there seems to be a lot more transmission activity than we expected. There may be something pretty big over there."

Exec's eyebrows go up, then meet in a frown. She's listening intently, but her gaze seems to be fixed on some vistas beyond the voder.

"I wonder how much briefing those kids got," she says quietly to Fred as Torrane pauses. He looks at her thoughtfully and nods.

But the next words drive all this from Pauna's mind. Torrane takes another audible breath, and then blurts out, "Something weird is happening to us, I think—but I don't know how to say it!"

At that same moment—insofar as simultaneity can be affirmed over such vast distances—far away on the other side of the Rift, which is here called the River Darkness, another but non-Human message is being heard. This message too has come automatically to its destination, the planet Zieltan, headquarters of the Harmony. But it has not come so long a way or over so much time. It identifies its origin as a group of colonies at the far south-east end of the River Darkness. These colonies are not of the dominant Ziello race, but of another, the Comenor, who are also in the Harmony.

It is being listened to by an assembly of the Advisors of Zieltan, who are clustered round a great table in the brilliant afternoon sunlight, their large single eyes intent upon the strange-looking mechanism, which shows the scars of its perilous journey.

"Help!" cries the recorded Comeno voice. "Help in the name of the Oversoul!"

It is the ultimate appeal; the Advisors raise their distinguished heads, tensely attending to the alien accents.

"Help us or we die—and others, many others, after us. We have been attacked by an unknown alien race, who descend upon our colonies and capture, murder and enslave us by torturing our children. Every world they touch on is captured or extinguished. It has taken us years and lives to contrive to send this message. When you receive it we may be gone too. The attackers are infiltrating around the east end of the River, from

the south. They are repugnant in aspect, and call themselves the Zhumans or Zhumanor.

"In the name of the Harmony, send help to wipe out these monsters, even if we die with them. Death is better than life under their rule. They will not stop with us."

As the message runs out, the Chief Advisor comes painfully to his aged feet.

"We must convene a full Council at once, and our young Administrator must attend." He brushes the grey exudate of grief from his eye. "This is terrible. Terrible . . . never did I think I would say such a thing, but I thank the Oversoul that we did not destroy all the dread weapons of the Last War."

Around the table, indrawn breaths of realization are heard as the full import of his words strikes home.

Back in the Executive office at Human FedBase Nine Hundred, the three Humans look with sudden sharpness at the cassette from which Torrane had just uttered his strange words.

"Weird," he repeats. "I've got to tell you. Maybe if I just say it like it happened . . . The others are all back in cold-sleep now, there's no hurry. But I wish I knew who's listening to this. If the Exec is still Myr Rabeson, I know how he feels about Sensitives and hallucinations. Believe me, I'd give anything not to send this. But I have to."

Exec smiles very faintly. Her name is Myr Jonne.

Torrane takes another loud breath.

"Well, I was awakened according to plan when the computer decided we should change course, and I proceeded to put out a beacon and take scope holos. But first I checked everything, according to regs. All instruments were green, go. But when I checked the crew, well, that's when the first strange thing happened, when I looked at Kathy, uh, Lieutenant Ekaterina Ku. Her vital signs were fine.

"But I, well, it was like somebody was thinking for me, I said to myself, like whispering, 'Her spots are too pale.'

"*Spots*. I was looking at her through the front vision plate, and of course she doesn't have spots any more than I have. She has a lot of freckles, sure. But I was looking for big blotches, like dark brownish, about three-four centimeters' diameter. Especially she should have one on the bridge of her nose. Then I thought, I'm crazy, I'm still asleep—what gives me the idea Kathy should have spots? And yet it meant something, too.

"So I went on checking out the others—and they all looked a little queer to me. Their colors were wrong—mostly too pale. And when I saw Captain Asch's neck it looked completely wrong to me. Please, I'm not

crazy. Or if I am, it's not only me, you'll see in a minim. Anyway, when I saw his neck—Oh, I can't say it.

Comes the sound of Torrane swallowing.

"Funny, water tastes bad. . . . Damn. I have to. All right—*I thought he should have like extra little arms.* Little arms where his neck joins his shoulders, on the collar-bone. And he was too short there.

"Wait, please—I can tell what you must be thinking. Only please wait.

"Well, I choked those thoughts down—there were others, about Dinger and Shara, see. Different things wrong. About faces and eyes, yes, eyes most. But all of them were green on their vital signs. I was pretty scared about myself, I wondered should I wake Captain Asch and tell him I was unfit for duty.

"Because thinking these things wasn't all. I was clumsy. I mean, out of cold-sleep you expect a little slow reflex, but this was—is—different. I keep reaching for things with hands that aren't there, and finding I'm too short or small to fit where I expect—and the worst is, this is hard to say . . . I keep trying to brace myself . . . like with a tail. A tail, I mean, like an animal's. A picture came in my mind sort of, I saw it once, an animal called a Roo, or a Kangroo, with a big thick tail like a third leg. That's what I felt I should look like. *Be* like.

"Meanwhile I was doing my work in spite of the clumsiness. I put out the beacon and examined the area the computer had headed us for, and found a high-density region of GO suns. A lot of signal activity was coming from there. Too garbled to get anything of course, but I did catch voice sounds not too different from Human.

"I was feeling a little more normal then, except sometimes when I went to use the stylus I tried to pick it up with a hand that wasn't there. I mean a little hand and arm like I'd imagined on Asch. And just when I was coming to where I had to decide about myself, a shower of small rocks hit us, plus one large one that holed the cargo bay. And the alarm went off and everybody was waking up."

He pauses again; the listeners hear him gag. Realune, Exec's aide, has come in quietly with a sheaf of papers; Exec nods for her to stay.

" 'Scuse me. Well, we did the routine and it was nothing, just a teeny hole by the aft scope. I want to make a note here, somebody please record. There ought to be reinforcement there. If a rock bounces off the rear scope housing just right, it can hit a single weld. That's what happened to us. But we had the sealant right there and made permanent repairs in seven minim. And I reset course, because the jet of the leak had moved us a hair off.

"But what I want to say, why it took us seven minim, was because everybody else was clumsy too. During sleep we all wear as much as we can tolerate, in case we wake up in vac alarm, so there was only like

pulling up and closing in to do. But people had trouble. Captain Asch and Shara were cursing their suits, and Dinger said, 'Some joker had one too many bright ideas, where do I stow my tail?' But he like broke off as he said it. And Kathy said, 'You, too?" while we were all rushing and scrambling to check the leak. And I saw a couple people *hopping*, if we hadn't been zero gee we'd have broken our necks. Kathy seemed to be the worst off, I saw her standing with her hands at her sides, wiggling her shoulders, as if her helmet ought to be coming down by itself saying, 'Oh, oh, oh.' But what with the alarm and the leak and the confusion I was about in a panic myself. I figured I might be hearing and seeing things as well as feeling them.

"Then after we fixed the leak and everyone was checking their assigned areas as per regs, I got Asch aside and told him I'd been feeling and seeing funny things and maybe the cold-sleep was affecting my mind. He didn't say anything for the longest while, just kept looking at me like I was, well, slipping in and out of focus. Then he suddenly turned to the whole crew and asked, 'Have any of you noticed any unusual subjective phenomena?'

"There was kind of a gasp, like people had been holding their breaths, and Dinger said 'Oh, man! Have I. Yes!' And then it came out all at once, they'd all been feeling just like I had, that they had missing hands, and a tail, and everybody looked and felt wrong. And Kathy said, 'I am the spotted one! I shall do the ritual if we make it!' And she was crying and laughing together. I tell you, it's weird—like something had got at our minds. Shara even said, 'Shall we turn back? Abort?' "

Torrane is breathing hard with the effort of telling the strange tale. They hear him drink again.

"Even water tastes terrible," he complains. "Usually after cold-sleep you can't get enough . . . Well.

"So then Asch, who hasn't been saying much, speaks up in his official voice, slowly. 'All right. So we're all experiencing the same type of illusory sensations, as if we had different bodies. I have heard of one other such phenomenon, though I can't at the moment recall any more than that, I do recall that it wore off after the region had been passed through. It may be that this is normal for this particular region of space as well. And although it slows us down a little, it doesn't prevent us from carrying out our duties. That's the crucial point. And somebody's got to explore this area sooner or later. We're here. I propose going on. But I realize some of you may be more affected than I, so we can take a vote. Lieutenant Dingañar?'

"Well, Dinger voted Yes, and so did the others, but when it came to me I told him I had reservations. 'I don't know exactly, but it's like there

was some danger to Kathy—Lieutenant Ku.' I should say here, Kathy is our Sensitive. My specs show I'm part-Sensitive but it's not reliable.

"Captain Asch thought this over and then asked me if I felt strongly enough to force an abort. You know a vote like that has to be unanimous. That was the toughest decision I ever had to make. And Kathy kept saying, 'Oh, *no*, Torry, not for me,' and grinning so I lost my feeling of fear. So I just said 'Abstain,' which wouldn't abort, and it was decided. They all got back in their chests.

"I didn't want to strain matters by asking Asch if I should send all this, but he knows I have to report the course change and the leak. Maybe he guesses I'll put the rest in.

"I guess that's all. Except just now I took a look in Kathy's sleep-chest and for a minute I could have sworn she has this big spot, over her nose. And like this voice whispering in my ear, 'She's the one who'll have to do the pool ritual if we land green.' And I felt terribly afraid—and yet at the same time *happy*, like it was great for her. But it can't be. I wish, I wish we'd turned back . . . Oh Lords, let me not be crazy . . . I don't *feel* crazy but they say the worst ones never know it. But Asch did say . . ."

He chokes off, then comes back stolidly.

"I'll send this now, after I take a roll of holos of the whole starfield from Beacon Alpha for Charts. Another will follow when we're halfway to target. Lieutenant Torrane of Riftrunner One signing off."

In the Executive office there is silence for a minim; then Exec clears her throat and turns to Pauna and Realune.

"You two can probably guess what I'm going to say. We simply have no evidence on which to judge the seriousness of Lieutenant Torrane's report. And it'll be years before we do. I want you to remain entirely silent on the so-called subjective phenomena he or they experienced—spots, tails, rituals, little arms, clumsiness and all. During the years before Riftrunner's return, a loose word could get magnified into the rumor that you grow tails if you go too far into the Rift. Maybe you do, but not at the distances we use. Pauna, I want you to prepare an extract for me to post, about the beacon and the blue sun and the leak, and so on, but use the voder up here in my antechamber and do not let that cassette out of your sight. Realune will help. Rea, I can count on you.

"Now run along and leave the worrying to those who will come after us. Chances are everything's green by now, and they'll come home with the story of the century to tell. Rea, I won't need you again today."

She smiles her great smile and the two junior officers depart.

Exec and her Deputy sit in reflective silence for a few moments. Then she sighs, and says broodingly, "An hour ago we were effectively alone in the Galaxy, Fred. Now . . . we're going to meet the neighbors, like it

or not. I don't know . . . I'm wondering if Asch was wise to ball on in. If only we could message them."

"You're thinking of Torrane's remark about the volume of transmissions on the other side? Implying that there might be another organization there, not just single worlds?"

"Yes. . . . That, and the, ah, subjective phenomena. Fred, I've met Torrane, once, briefly, to be sure, but my impression was, a solid type. If they're all getting this business, the only explanation I can think of is that there's a race over there psychically powerful enough to throw some kind of mental beam or field. Of course I'll take this up with theorists more qualified than I, but I don't see how you can get away from the idea of some kind of *influence*. Frankly it has me a little spooked."

"It would be good to know what Asch was referring to," Fred says, "when he said he'd heard of one other such phenomenon. I'll inquire around."

"Ah, good thought. That might help us a lot." She smiles, then sobers.

Watching her face, Fred comments, "You're wondering . . . what would happen if they react with hostility? Or, if *they* came to *us*?"

She nods grimly. "Fred . . . I find myself wondering an appalling thought: How much of that war matériel we dumped out west is still viable? I can scarcely believe I'd ever ask that."

In a rare gesture of personal sympathy, the Deputy pats one of her strong hands. He knew what that thought must cost someone who had lived through the last stages of the War.

"After all, we have time. You could initiate a confidential consideration of this at the Exec's Council, with Central participation."

She makes a wry face. "I feel like Torrane. How would they take my story of tails and little arms?"

"People like Exec Starheim and Exec Cabrisco have enough imagination to grasp the problem," he tells her reassuringly. "And I can put in an advance word through the Deputies' grapevine." He smiles.

"Thanks, Fred." She brushes imaginary dust off her desk, straightens her shoulders. "You've just given a superb demonstration of the stabilizing powers of the professional Deputy. . . . I've always thought I was very lucky in getting you."

"I too have enjoyed our years together," he replies gravely, and they prepare to leave.

Light-years away, on far Zieltan, it is early morning. Kanaklee, chief of Message Section, is opening his office for the day. The night staff is gone; there will be a few quiet moments while other offices open, before they develop traffic. The incoming day crew is taking over. Kanaklee lingers in the ground-floor rooms, savoring the clean bright day.

Outside the windows the covered way is filled with government people on their way to work. Most are Ziellor; there are a few aliens, probably workers at Archives/History, or in one of their embassy chancelleries.

Suddenly Kanaklee sees his little friend, Zillanoy, of Alien Affairs Section. She's hopping along at a good clip, looking, as usual, pleasurably excited about something. Kanaklee taps on the vitrines.

To his surprise, she turns and hops straight for the doors, evidently intending to visit him. He pushes wide a flange of the big double doors.

"Oh, Kanak, *the* most exciting!" she bursts out.

"It's always the most exciting, little one. What is it this time?"

"Oh, I'm forgetting my manners. How are you? And how is Leiloy? And your parents?"

Leiloy is his bride and intended co-parent. He assures Zillanoy that everyone is well. "But what is your news?"

"Well! You know those warships they sent out east to save those poor Comeno people? Of course you do."

"We had a message in last night," he tells her soberly, "saying they've found a devastated planet on the very borders of the Harmony, Zilla. This trouble is bigger than we thought."

She too sobers briefly. "That makes my plan even more promising, Kanak. You see, Navy has to send a supply fleet to service and fuel the fighters. And Headquarters has been allotted six places on the main ship. And I've applied for one of them! I'm sure I'll get it. Oh, Kanak, isn't that tremendous?"

He is taken aback. "Great suns, Zilla—whatever *for*?"

"To learn the Zhuman language! At least, learn as much as I can before we send them all to rejoin the Oversoul. Don't you think that's a noble idea? No one else will know it, I'll be our expert on that alien tongue and culture!"

"Sounds like a nasty thing to be an expert in. And besides, hopefully they'll soon be extinct. Our Navy won't care to keep those types separated from the Oversoul very long," he says wryly.

"But there must be more Zhumanor someplace. We'll meet them again, and then they'll need me. And I'm young enough to wait."

"And you'll be younger than ever to me, after this trip. How many years will you be asleep?"

"Only about seven, overall. I'll be able to pick up and go on easily."

"Well, if you really want this. But I still think it's mad."

"It's my chance to be something really *different*," she says earnestly, her large eye almost luminous with the intensity of her enthusiasm. "To *be* somebody, to make a little name for myself! And don't think it won't be hard work. I have no illusions; I could fail. I'll be dealing with such horrible creatures, too—and Navy regulations . . ." She looks away,

shaking her neatly chiseled head, with its retroussé snout. "And I'll miss you so, dear Kanak. No, to be honest, I guess I'll be mostly asleep—but I'll miss you terribly when I'm not! There'll be a million problems I'll wish for your advice on. You have such a wonderful feel for aliens—you should have taken the Aliens Office, and been my chief. Probably you'd hate me if I worked for you, always going off on my own tangents! Now, mind you take care of yourself. Can I come round to say goodbye to Leiloy?"

"She'd be most hurt if you didn't, little one."

His workers have been filtering in; time to get at it. As he walks Zillanoy to the door, she says, "Oh! Why, if all goes well, your *baby* will be born and starting school when I get back. I'll really miss seeing all the early Part."

"If all goes well," he agrees.

"It will! I just *know* it."

They tap tails in affectionate parting, and she blows him a kiss with one hand-arm as she hurries out.

His office is on the second floor up; he decides to hop it instead of taking the lift. Must keep fit. As he goes up the long risers, he can feel his pouch beginning to itch slightly. His midriff feels heavy, too—a reminder of the sex-animal now growing within him. It seems to be growing even faster than he expected. Does that mean it will be healthy and strong?

As he passes Floor One he has a moment of quiet panic; the oncoming birth of the murnoo looms up as as a terribly painful and frightening ordeal, which he can't possibly avoid, delay, or hasten. The sex-animal is alive inside him, growing on its own terms without regard for his desires. But the panicky moment passes quickly as he hops on up. He's heard in health class that new fathers often have such moods.

Instead, he turns to wondering what it will look like. What color will it be? Spotted like himself, or white like its mother Leiloy, or golden-brown like most? He hopes it will be white. White excites him, and would make the final reproductive act go easily. But white is the rarest, too much to hope for. If it isn't, Leiloy's whiteness will do for two.

And then there's that mysterious final product, their future child. Supposing *it's* white, like Leiloy, what a darling picture they would make! If the sex-animal is white—but it would be called a nurser then—the baby would have a better chance of being white, too. But any color will do, just so long as it isn't spotted, like himself.

And how mysterious it all is! So complicated yet so precise. If they ever get to the final stages, what a supreme thrill!

Coming up to his floor, he smiles, remembering the kid's manual of

sex instructions his father had given him. He can see it as if it was yesterday: "What You Should Know About Reproduction."

It told him that his race, the Ziello, was unique. "There are other races which need three partners in order to reproduce, but only in the Ziello is the third partner actually created by the original pair. This is true of all the animal life on the beautiful planet of Zieltan.

"The first step," it went on, "is when a male and a female have special body contact, in a way your parents will tell you about. They exchange genetic material, and an embryo begins to grow in the male's pouch. It is the embryo of a Murnoo, often called a 'sex-animal.' The Murnoo is a very important part of the Ziello race, but it isn't a Ziello. You may remember the Murnoo who nursed you when you were a baby. The Murnoo grows very fast, and as soon as it releases the teat in the male's pouch it is born—a tiny furry helpless creature who requires care at first, but grows very fast.

"In only about three years it is full-grown, but it doesn't look much like its Ziello father and mother. It's much shorter, with a rounded face and ears, rudimentary upper arms, and a short tail. At this point it is ready for the original male and female to undertake another special body-contact with it and each other. They must be the original pair; if one or both of the partners is different, either nothing will happen or a monster will be born." (Here Kanaklee recalls the shudder of fascinated horror which touched him at those words.)

"During this second and final contact, more genetic material is exchanged, and the embryo of a Ziello baby begins to grow in the Mother's pouch. It carries full sets of genes from its Father and Mother, and an incomplete but vital third set of genes originally from them but transmitted via the Murnoo.

"After about a month, the tiny Ziello infant releases the teat in its mother's pouch, and she transfers it to the pouch of the Murnoo, who is now called a nurser, because it has developed a special, much stronger milk. The baby Ziello grows to normal baby size in the Murnoo's pouch, and then begins to release the teat and crawl up into the Murnoo's arms.

"The Murnoo cradles it night and day most lovingly, and soon the infant stays permanently outside the pouch. The Murnoo cares for it intensively, sometimes even forgetting to eat and care for itself. Soon the baby is crawling, and the Murnoo teaches it to walk and do the other simple things that it knows. But the Murnoo is now rapidly aging and becoming feeble. At about the time the young Ziello is ready to start nursery-school, the Murnoo retreats to a corner and soon dies quietly of old age. Lucky is the child whose Nurser lives to help it through the first year of school.

"In the old, uncivilized days people used to treat the Murnoo callously,

as if it were a robot or an animal. And when it aged they cruelly turned it out to die. But now we regard it as an honored member of our race, and educate it up to the level of its abilities, and return its care with love. Some Murnoos have proved surprisingly intelligent, although none are able to speak very well because of the different structure of their mouth and throat.

"When you meet other races, you will be impressed by our good fortune in having this strange little second life-form, who is incapable of life on its own—Murnoos cannot, of course, reproduce—and who lives only to love and care for us when we are very young."

Brooding on these matters, Kanaklee had automatically entered his office and stationed himself at his big desk. His aide follows him in, and waits a moment for his absorbed chief to look up.

"Chief," he says. Kanaklee rouses and looks up, grinning guiltily. "Chief, we need your guidance. We've got to figure a way to handle this big increase in Navy traffic. Look—" he points to a pile on the rolling-stand, "—they're starting already."

"I know," says Kanaklee, definitely guilty now. "We can't just go running everything over by courier as it comes in. My thought is, ah, that I should contact Captain Navraneen and arrange for them to station a body with us, to sort their traffic right at input. That way there'd be no risk of delaying anything urgent."

"Or getting blamed for it," says his aide, with a knowing twinkle. "Great."

"I'll get right on it," Kanaklee tells him. The day is starting well.

Life at Human FedBase Nine Hundred continues well, too. The work of the various offices goes on as usual, long months of routine punctuated by times of high interest. Colony Services oversees the fitting-out and departure of three new Human colonies plus a colony of the space-faring Swain people, and optimistic first reports filter back. It is Federation policy to prevent overpopulation and the degradation of environments by draining off breeding-stock to new planets, so long as the supply holds out; the fringe areas of the Rift show a good number of promising star-systems.

The Terraforming Office is called on to help transform four new worlds, and for a while traffic is heavy between Nine Hundred and the new sites. Charts and Navigation fills in a commendable count of blank spaces, in the process discovering a likely group of GO suns. Alien Liaison entertains a steady flow of visitors from within the Fed, and one race of water-dwellers from the west who are just making up their minds to join the Federation. Their accommodation in mobile tanks puts demands on Engineering.

Logistics and Supply services Nine Hundred's fleet of reconnaissance and work ships; Maintenance keeps them flying and retrofits the older models with the latest modifications. The discovery of a very old space derelict, evidently belonging to an unknown, possibly extinct race, provides a point of excitement. The small Research Office has been playing around with an idea to solve the perennial quest for a means of sending message-pipes from the surface of a planet, so that missions won't be out of contact when not space-borne. Their idea suddenly starts to show promise, and the team sends a rep with their data to Fed Central, to see what those massive resources can do with it.

And all personnel cooperate in the reception of a brilliant new androgyne Gridworld star—it being Federation policy to give the FarBases first crack at the newest and best in entertainment. His/her troupe puts on shows for several nights and leaves behind a few cases of heart-burn in the staff.

And all through the years, studded in among these zestful activities, comes a trickle of dark spots—a slowly increasing number of reports from FedBase Three Hundred, far to the east, on the doings of Black Worlders, of the sightings or traces of a fleet, and, twice, of colony planets suddenly gone dead on the bands and found to have been exploded, whether by natural catastrophe or unknown planet-breaker missiles. Exec Jonne developes a tiny vertical crease between her brows.

In due course a new communication arrives from Riftrunner One—this time striped yellow-and-black, which signifies that it is of interest to Charts alone. They are, it seems, at a point about halfway between Beacon Alpha and their target and making a minor course adjustment toward the center of EM traffic ahead. Their target is now tentatively identified as a world whose transmissions start with the computer-analyzed syllables "Zeel-tan." No other message, or anything bearing on the crew's hallucinations at Beacon Alpha is included, save for Captain Asch's scrawled note: "Personnel green—S.Q.A.," meaning *status quo ante*. But which "ante," that of their departure or of Beacon Alpha? No one can tell.

Exec Jonne continues also to worry over the implication of Riftrunner One's first message, which seemed to imply some mental influence from an unknown source. Her Deputy is as good as his word; he prepares the ground for her among the other base executive offices, so that when she comes to broach the problem to her fellow execs she gets a serious reception. With the inevitable exception of a couple of the ultra hard-nosed, they all agree that the phenomenon demands close attention, and that if such a capability were to be found in the possession of a hostile race, it would pose a very great threat to the Federation. Central invites all

concerned to submit suggestions for devising research on ways of meeting such a mental threat.

The whole problem is given credence by a colorful fact unearthed by Nine Hundred's Deputy. He had also promised to look into Captain Asch's remark about having heard of some sort of similar thing, and he sends out a barrage of inquiries through the Spacers' and pilots' network. The answer comes back: The Red Eft Effect.

It seems that a mission exploring far to the south had once crossed a small region of starlessness, an area of low density like a fragment of the Rift. In it they encountered hallucinations; the crew felt that they were, or should be, *lizardlike* in form, and bright shiny red in color, like giant versions of the bright little animals known on earth as red efts, or young newts.

The effect wore off as they came back into normal starfields, but it was a manifestation of something real; another crew who crossed the space on a different course met it also. When it was encountered a third time, a careful charting was made. But nothing was found in the area, beyond two white dwarf stars, the remains of former suns which had gone nova.

"Do you suppose that a race once lived on planets that were destroyed?" Exec Jonne asks. "And they had the power to form or throw such a field—maybe reflecting their own forms? And the field, or what's left of it, remained, in that undisturbed starless region?"

"Sounds plausible," one of her colleagues replies. "I think we might query Central about sending a couple of strong Sensitives down there. Extraordinary, to think we might be receiving impressions of a by-gone race. . . ."

And so it is left.

But Exec Jonne has nightmares. She is no Sensitive, only very prescient, and she's never free from a lurking, shapeless dread. Her nightmares are of planets, green and pleasant, toward which fly dark alien ships with missiles that can tear worlds apart, or scorch to ashes every living thing. And other ships attacking these, on and on, until every hand is against every other hand—or fin or flipper or wing or claw. . . . And the innocent faces, Human and alien, of those about to die in a conflagration they had no part in starting, which will have no end until all life is gone. Burnt, disintegrated, poisoned, crushed in an abyss of broken planets, exploding suns, torn to bloody shards and flamed to flecks in lava; gone, dead, extinguished, inanimate, and silent for all time . . .

Mostly she associates these dreams with the troubling, enigmatic reports of destruction far to the east. But some of them, she knows too, center on the tiny spark of Human life driving, all unaware of evil, toward this planet which may be named Zeeltan.

* * *

During these same years, a young-looking Zillanoy returns to Zieltan from her trip east with the Fleet, where she had gone to learn the language of the invading Zhumanor. She arrives at her office in the evening hours, and as soon as she can goes calling on her old friend Kanaklee.

"Zilla! I thought you might be on that warship that landed today. Ah, it's good to see you back!"

"Oh, Kanak, how are you? How's Leiloy? I have so many—" and there follows the mutual outburst of greetings, inquiries, fragments of news, so-much-to-tell-that-we-can't-get-it-all-out that besets the meetings of star-traveling friends all over the Galaxy. Kanaklee's child, Zillanoy's work, events of the day—all tumble out in a frustrated rush, until Kanaklee finally gets out a straight question: "Zilla, did you really succeed in learning enough of the Zhumanor language to justify the years?"

Zillanoy calms down. "Oh, absolutely, yes. But it was hard, very hard. How much dialog can you record from a being isolated in a bare metal hexagon? That's how the Navy keeps its prisoners. There's nothing to point to and name, unless you bring it. And the Fleet's very strict—they wanted to search me every time I went to the cells. These were the slavers they picked up alive, see. Horrible types. But luckily some of them knew quite a few words of Ziellan, from their Comeno captives.

"And then the prisoners nearly all died from lack of—you won't believe this—*water*! It seems they need it in huge quantities. If I hadn't been there they never would have found out. As it was, they lost several, including one of my best subjects, before they recognized it. And when they saw how much was needed—*every day*—the ship's lab just gave up and said they couldn't make that much. So they told me to select one and they'd send the rest to join the Oversoul.

"But I persuaded them to first let them all mix together, for two days, to talk where I could record it. And in the end Captain Krimheen let me keep two, and I got a he and a she, I think, with enough water. After that I could use the language-teaching kit and things went really well. I have translations of all that group chatter, for instance. But so much of it was slang and swearing, I couldn't have done a thing without an informant.

"When they got a new lot in from a ship we captured I was actually able to converse a little. Our kit is very good, Kanak. It's the first time it's ever had such a test—a totally unknown, unrelated language! I have some improvements I'm going to suggest."

"I see you haven't lost a *stip* of your enthusiasm, little one. And now I must think about closing this office for the day, and arranging when you will come to us for a meal."

"Oh, I'd love it!" Zilla is hopping down the stairs, her large eye momentarily thoughtful. "Kanak, they were so *loathsome*, those Zhumanor.

I couldn't wait for some of them to be sent to the Oversoul. *Killed.* If you'd seen what they did to those poor Comeno people, and their little colonies. Maximum dishonor isn't bad enough for them. . . . The Oversoul teaches us not to be revengeful, but I kept wondering if this means creatures like that. Whewf! Well, anyway, you'll be glad to hear that my work turned out actually useful to the Navy, Captain Krimheen's people were able to question them and find out where their bases were. And we did discover one fact that's going to fascinate Life-Sciences: They claim that they and all their related life-forms actually derive from salt water; they're full of it themselves, almost like bags. Yet they're strictly land-life. Isn't that weird? And they truly are from across the River, across the River Darkness."

"Astonishing."

"And, Kanak—" she ducks her head under an upper hand, like a kid, "—I got a letter of commend. Beautiful. Isn't that something?"

"Why, good for you, my dear little friend." Kanaklee gives her a playful tail-flip as they reach the doors.

Zillanoy must leave him now, to go to her home transit station. Affectionate farewells; and Kanaklee hops on alone, watching the lights come on in the buildings alongside. Just beside him is the Alien Affairs Section, where Zilla works. As he passes it the lights come up in the huge three-di display of the Harmony, colored to show the star systems of all the allied races, of which the green of Ziello are far the most numerous. The stars are connected by the thin golden lines of regular transport routes. It really is impressive, a great hive-shaped brilliance sitting atop a long blackness to the south that represents the River Darkness.

Kanaklee pauses for a moment to look, and notices that someone has already wired in some little red flashers among the Comenor's colonies at the far east end, which must stand for the Zhuman incursions. To his imagination they look ominous, expanding.

Beyond them, around the end of the River, begins the unknown. The Zhumanor must come from there. Zilla has just told him that the Fleet is seeking authority to proceed into that area in search of Zhuman bases. Well, it's no use stamping out the sparks and leaving the source to spread. But Kanaklee flinches mentally; horrible that even the suggestion of war should be raised again. He is just old enough to remember some of the ceremonies of the Great Peace, when the warships were flown away to lie dead forever on a far-away, airless rock. Dreadful that they should fly again, now. But what choice is there? These appalling Zhuman invaders, stealthily killing colony after colony in their ruthless pursuit of riches—they *have* to be stopped.

But what lies beyond them? Are they perhaps the leading edge of some savage alien empire, which might have the power to retaliate?

Shaking his head to clear it of dark thoughts, Kanaklee moves on toward his station. His dear little Zillanoy seems really to have done well, getting a a Navy commendation. That must be from this Captain Krimheen, who seems to be second in command of the whole Fleet, as well as captain of the great warship that sits out there on the field. He has returned to get reinforcements, and to argue in person before the Council for permission to extend operations into the unknown. The good captain had apparently taken quite an interest in little Zilla and her language work.

As he hops into the shelter of the transit station the monorail car for his home area is just approaching. Good. And good for little Zilla. This dreadful war in the east has at least brought some good to his friend. He had been wrong about her plan; it now looks as if she's chosen her field of special knowledge very well.

Back behind him, the night-lights of his own office are on. The duty clerk is just filing a routine message on his desk for the morning shift. It's from a southern Ziello world in the River's fringes, which has just spotted a small unidentified ship that refuses or is unable to acknowledge signals. And it's apparently coming from the River Darkness.

Meanwhile the calendars at Human FedBase Nine Hundred have clicked onwards, bringing their quota of stimulating events. But all are overshadowed now by increasingly ominous reports of trouble in the far east sector. Three Hundred's scoutships' sensors persistently report the presence of elusive somethings out beyond clear range: entities fast-moving, purposive, indubitably not the natural movements of stray rocks or other phenomena of nature. Three more colonies go silent, and their worlds are found destroyed. EM traffic is picked up at extreme distance. It looks more and more as though the operations of some life-form inimical to the Federation are coming closer and more close.

As the bad news reaches Central, responses are evoked. Nine Hundred hears that an expedition is sent out to recover and refit the Class Y warships, long lying abandoned on a dead planet to the south. FedBase Three Hundred turns four of its reconnaissance ships into crudely armed scouts, and six new ones are under construction at Central.

These doings almost eclipse what would have been the exciting rumors of a new break-through of some kind at Central Research. Those who attend to them consider grimly that the advances may come in time to help in a new Last War—provided the unknown enemy hasn't got them, too.

At FedBase Nine Hundred, the old Deputy retires. His replacement

is a young man who is the clone of a man who had been Deputy at Nine Hundred three generations back. The cloning of particularly successful Deputies is quite customary, since their success depends primarily on temperamental qualities, and the job is so important to a base's equilibrium. His nickname is also Fred, that being the informal way of addressing all Deputies—short for Federation Regulatory Executive Deputy.

Exec Jonne is still too young to think of retiring, despite her nightmares. Thus she is still on duty when the third message-pipe from Riftrunner One falls into the Incoming chute.

Down below, Pauna is now Chief Signals Officer. With a thud of her still-excitable heart she opens the battered pipe and threads the message on her voder.

Again she hears the voice of Navigator Torrane, sounding surprisingly young—he has been in cold-sleep these many years: "Riftrunner One to FedBase Nine Hundred, Message Three. We are in the northern fringes of the Rift, approaching the planet tentatively identified as Zeel-tan. Their EM traffic is very heavy—"

This must go at once to Exec. A call brings a quick appointment, and Pauna is trotting up the exercise ramp; her aide handles routine traffic now. She's considering the quality of Torrane's voice. More composed, but strained, she decides.

The decades-old scene reassembles itself in Exec's office. This time Realune, now grey-haired, is invited in from the start. Exec turns to her new Deputy:

"Fred, you'll recall the briefing about Riftrunner One when you first came aboard. Very well, here we go."

Torrane's voice comes on, very calm and formal. "We can now confirm that the fourth planet of this white-star system is a hub of signal activity, both transmitting and receiving. The syllables 'Zeel-tan' are clearly audible at the start of transmissions. There is also quite a volume of traffic between it and its two large moons, suggesting that some industry has been moved off-planet, as Human worlds have done.

"There is a high-density volume of space. We have counted at least fifteen systems originating traffic with Zeel-tan. Some ship-to-ship traffic is also probable, but we're outside the range of reliable detection."

"So formal?" whispers Pauna. "I guess he's making up for last time."

"The poor lad," says Exec. "He may believe we think he's crazy."

"—One highly significant phenomenon," Torrane is saying. "At regular daily intervals—planetary rotation is close to twenty-three hours standard—all traffic falls off abruptly, and Zeel-tan originates a single powerful transmission. This is immediately picked up and rebroadcast outwards to systems beyond; we've counted at least five such relays. We

guess that this is a daily government news broadcast, suggesting that this is one big unified system extending beyond our sensor range.

"The really significant thing here is the speed of pick-up and retransmission. Until we can get more instruments on it, we are tentatively suggesting that they have some faster-than-light means of commo."

"Whew!" The Deputy whistles. Exec just looks more intent and grave.

"I am now closing down while we near the planet. Our plan is to approach within orbital range, broadcasting standard First Contact signals. If there is no hostile response, we will spiral in and land wherever seems suitable. Navigator Torrane signing—"

There is another voice in the background, and then Torrane says, "Oh. Yes, well, I wish I didn't have to say this. The former hallucinations, or, uh, whatever, are still with us. It's almost as though we have imaginary outer bodies. But we're getting better at ignoring these symptoms. As Captain Asch says, they don't really interfere with carrying out our duties. Kathy—Lieutenant Ekaterina Ku—says that she thinks hers are getting weaker, or easier to live with, as we get into populated space." His voice has relaxed now. "We have a strong feeling that the people out here, the people on Zeel-tan, must look like we feel—for whatever that's worth.

"I will now lay this aside while we go closer. The maneuvers will put us near the end of our allotment of outbound fuel, but this is certainly the best target we can reach. If for any reason we have to use more, we can always get back to Beacon Alpha and wait there to be rescued . . . Navigator Torrane out."

Clicks and more clicks from the voder. Suddenly another deeper voice speaks.

"This is Captain Asch, commanding. It occurs to me that while we go in, you might welcome confirmation of the subjective phenomena Navigator Torrane has reported. His description of imaginary outer bodies is very apt. In my case, the hallucinatory impression that I have a, er, a muscular, ah, *tail* strong enough to brace me or even propel me, is strong enough to make me stumble occasionally, even in our minimal gee. My normal Human body seems to feel as if I were in some way crippled or missing parts. And I wish to record here a general commendation for the crew, and Lieutenant Torrane in particular, who met these symptoms alone, for constancy and perseverance to duty in the face of a seriously disorienting and stressful challenge. Asch out."

A female voice replaces him.

"Lieutenant Sharana here, Linguist and Logistics. Everything Torry says is true. Everybody looks weird to me, arms missing, wrong faces, too many eyes, no tails—it's weird. And if I try to pick one more thing

up with my imaginary hands I'll—well, no I won't. It's just as bad for everyone. Shara out. Oh, our Asch-o has been tremendous."

Another woman takes over.

"Lieutenant Ku, co-pilot and Sensitive. Yes, it's all so. I may have felt it more strongly than others, I've been almost paralyzed for awhile. Everything is so *wrong*. But now I'm feeling more like it's normal, only I'm so clumsy. And I hear voices, every so often I can understand what they say. Like about the Oversoul." Her tone has an odd tinge of involuntary reverence or awe. "Some of the others tell me they hear things too, in a kind of whisper or mumble, like they *should* be able to understand. It's my strong belief that the nature of the life-forms here is transmitting itself to us . . . Kathy Ku out."

The last member is Lieutenant Dingañar, Engineer and Para-med.

"Yeah, it's all true. I'm afraid I'll fall all over myself when we get in real gee. I figure this type body normally hops. Or has a tripedal gait, using the tail. Maybe the arms that correspond to our regular ones are occasionally used for support, too. And somebody should mention that it's hard to drink enough water. It feels dangerous, like it'd be corrosive. Whoever this is must sure be a dry type . . . That's all except I really hope this wears off soon. And Cap'n and the others have been great. Dinger out."

The voder clicks off.

Exec nods, satisfied, and puffs a breath up through her fluffy grey mop of hair.

"That confirms Torrane," the Deputy agrees.

"Yes. . . . Frankly, though, I think I'd rather have had one mad navigator than what this implies. *And* with FTL transmission."

The voder comes back on; Torrane.

"Seventy-five Standard Hours later. Approach completed. Deceleration and spiral to landing orbit. No reaction of any sort observed from the planet. We have had what appeared to be hailing signals as we came through the outer systems a day or so back. We are starting standard First Contact hailing broadcast, with extra time on most-used planetary frequencies. Computer analysis of all transmissions in the area so far appears to indicate that there are no video signals. Maybe they don't have this technology. But FTL transmission appears more and more likely.

"—Ah. Answering hail, we're pretty sure. It starts with a pretty good imitation of 'Riftrunner One.' But beyond that we can't get a thing. . . . They seem to be trying different languages now. Still nothing remotely familiar. But the voice-sounds themselves sound a lot like Human . . . and there's this feeling we *should* understand it.

"We see two space-ports. The largest is near or in the largest city, we'll

land there. There are no bodies of water on the whole planet, only a dust of some kind of ice at one pole. The place looks dry. If we didn't see and hear them; I'd say it looks an unlikely place for life.

"The scope just found what looks like a warship sitting on that port. Missile-racks tentatively confirmed. Plus some small type of ship that could be armed scouts. . . . There are several other large ships on that port, and a lot of activity everywhere. Oh, hey—there's one of those probable newscast things starting right now!"

He pauses.

"What it comes to, I guess, is that we're approaching a large civilization, maybe very large, certainly well linked up together, and armed; possibly at war somewhere. Possibly with FTL transmission, maybe FTL transport, and with the approach mined with some peculiar confusing mental effect. Whew. . . . Funny, I feel as if I shouldn't joke. I get a feeling of, well, reverence. Maybe that's my unreliable Sensitivity—no, Kathy is signaling she gets it too."

He pauses, and then says with a peculiar slow accent, "The Garden . . . the Garden of the . . . Oversoul . . . Ah."

"Out," snaps Captain Asch's voice.

"Yes . . . sir," says Torrane. "We'll dispatch . . . this now."

The voder controls click.

"I believe that's all," says Pauna. "I'll run it all to be sure, but that was the cassette control snapping off. The other item that was in the pipe are some starfield holos, I'll run them over to Charts."

There's a silence.

"Big and armed and technologically advanced," says Exec heavily. "And we're entirely unable to communicate with them. It's vital that this contact come off peacefully, that we don't provoke hostilities or leave a hostile impression. And we've got five untrained, uninstructed starhoppers crashing in. Oh, gods—how short-sighted whoever laid on this mission was!

"If we could only communicate—no, *have communicated*, this is all long in the past. Whatever was going to happen has happened . . . Do we start setting up defenses? What in the hells is happening *right now*?"

Pauna and Realune stare at Exec, curious and a little frightened. It's the first time either has known her to lose her cool. A sense of the reality of danger, of genuine gravity, begins to percolate through to them.

Meanwhile, the Deputy is saying something to her in a low voice. Visibly, effortfully, she regains her calm, and glances at the others, smiling again.

"All right, girls. I'm an old worrier. Remember I'm paid to worry. You're not. All we have to do is to wait, constructively.

"Pauna, can you make a copy of this, leaving out all the body-hallu-

cinations stuff? I'd like to have it posted in the main lounge before dinner tonight. And Realune, we'll get back on that communication to the Ammourabi, green? I'll be with you in a minim, as soon as I ask Fred something."

Renewed smiles all round.

As the two women leave, they hear her say, "Fred, will you encode the gist of this for rush transmission to Central and to the other Section Execs? And never forgetting the Deputies' grapevine."

Only five days after the arrival of Riftrunner's third message at FedBase Nine Hundred, Message Number Four drops down the chute to Pauna. A few minim later she is in Exec's office, with the group assembled to listen.

". . . Riftrunner One to FedBase Nine Hundred," comes Torrane's voice. "We're starting this as we come in for landing on Zeel-tan, although it can't be sent till we're back in space again.

"We've just done, ah, what might be regarded as, ah, a strange thing. Telling it sounds weirder than doing it. Anyway, on the way in, Kathy—Lieutenant Ku—got very disturbed. She kept looking at us as if she wanted to say something, and then going off into kind of a trance-like, you know the way Sensitives do. Finally Captain Asch asked her what was wrong.

" 'You are!' she sort of burst out. 'I mean, we are! All wrong. Look, I'd never forgive myself if I don't warn you. After all, this is my job, isn't it? That's why I'm along, to pick up stuff? Well, what I've picked up is that if we land looking like we do we'll be in terrible danger. Maybe killed. There's a, a feeling of hate for us—for our forms—that's so thick I can't see why no one else gets it. From all over! Don't you pick up anything, Torry?' she asks me.

"Well, to tell the truth, I *had* been picking up something just like this, only I know I'm unreliable. So I told her. She sighs, like greatly relieved. 'Yes. Captain Asch, I'm formally requesting that we disguise our appearance . . . And I know just how to do it, too.' She points to our bundle of tents, you know, those long thin pointy duffels.

" 'We take our ground-suits, and those tent brace-cases and sew them on, and maybe tie one brace around our waists to go inside with padding, they're flexible. And put some wads of stuff inside the chests, like arms folded up inside, and do something about our eyes. Make-up. Oh, we won't look exactly like Ziello—now where did I get that? Oh, from Ziel-tan—but we'll look, you know, Ziel*loid*, like the races around Old Terra look Humanoid. See?'

" 'Huh?' says Dinger. Captain Asch just watches her. 'Tie 'em on—where? What for?' Dinger asks, and Shara joins in.

" 'To look like *tails*, of course. Like we feel.'

"Well, we went round and round it, but in the end Captain agreed that was what she'd been picked for and we should go along. My confirmation seemed to carry weight too, I guess—frankly the idea seemed great, to me. I hated the thought of facing whoever was down there just as I was. And we've been spending the days ever since we woke up maneuvering and dodging those tails that don't exist, and trying to remember we don't have spare arms.

"So we spent the time coming in doing just like she said, and it works pretty well. They really do look like real tails, of course, not prehensile or strong, but sticking out flexible, like alive. Shara got laughing and we all broke up. But really, they feel natural. And Kathy painted a few spots on her face, right where I thought they should be.

"Now I'm going to put this aside until we're down, and then keep a log to send you when we're up again. Lords, I wish somebody would come up with that atmosphere-to-space pipe they're always predicting. There's nothing new to report from out here, except that warship on the port is confirmed. The scope picks up the armor and missile-racks. The smaller racks are empty, but they're carrying eight big ones, like planet-busters. Oh, and for the time we've been observing, the weather has been completely stable. Dry and clear, no rain at all. Torrane out."

The voder clicks.

Pauna looks at Exec with a half-grin at the idea of those tails, but sobers when she sees the older woman's face. Exec is imperceptibly nodding her head, as if to say Yes, quite somberly.

"A chance they'll never connect that ship with us, if anything goes wrong," the Deputy says low-voiced. Exec nods definitively.

Torrane's voice comes back.

"Well, here we are on Zeel-tan. Down at eight-twenty-four-fifteen, eleven hundred hours Terratime, that's early morning here.

"We got a good look at the ships here as we came in. Their drive is definitely different from ours, and their fuel-tanks are huge. Possibly indicating less fuel-effciency. We identify a probable tractor-beam head on that warship, too.

"We're getting a pretty cool reception, no interest at all. These people must be used to receiving unidentified alien ships. The air-samples proved out green, but very dry, so we cracked the port and rolled the gangway half out. We're all wearing our modified work-suits. Dinger finished up those tails really nice.

"Shara and I prepared a selection of First Contact materials as per regs, three sets of basic picture-talkies and three advanced. It looks like we can't hope for any verbal commo whatever. The picture-talkies should help, they're the new models with a small hand-held video cassette that

shows a moving picture on the plate to illustrate each spoken word when you press the button. If you learn one, you have a basic pidgin-Galactic, no pronouns or prepositions or tenses or any trimming at all. The thing is, you have to learn it yourself to use it, we've all been doing that.

"Then Shara and I pulled a sequence of fish-eye shots of the starfields all the way from outside of the Rift to a scope closeup of Zeel-tan. Captain Asch said that in view of the apparent size and unknown nature of this system, we should omit the holos showing exactly where Base Nine Hundred is. So we start with a general one that's clearly in the fringes of the Rift seen from our side."

Here Exec sighs relievedly.

"So far all we've seen is a port crew who pointed to where we should park, and took off before we opened up. They put us on a spot covered with like big lichens, probably not much used. And their body shapes, as far as we could see, are just like what we expected—taller and bigger than us, extra pair of upper arms, one big single eye, and a long heavy pointed tail they brace on. Their skins are covered with very short fur, like that cloth, velvet. Mostly brownish-gold. We took all the holos we could.

"Aha—Here comes a port official, or somebody in what looks like a staff car. Much rounder shape than ours, more headroom. And insignia on the side like a big jointed wreath. The driver is alone. He's getting out now. Captain Asch will greet him from the top of the gangway, with us behind him as back-up."

The voder clicks off—on.

"Well, that was something! We let the gangway down and turned out as pianned, and this official hops right up to the Captain, giving us a kind of perfunctory once-over, as if he'd seen everything and we were just one more. Captain Asch salutes, and gives a real short speech in Galactic, the official clearly not understanding a word. When Asch finishes he says something incomprehensible that sounds like 'Same to you.'

"Then he just hops straight at Asch as if he expected Asch to step back and let him by and into the ship, through us. Asch didn't want this booger loose in there, so he says low, 'Close up,' and just stands there with us jammed up behind him. The alien grunts, and fishes in his suit and flashes some kind of badge, as if that gives him the right to enter. But Asch just stands there with us behind him, and Dinger pulls the inner port closed.

"So the alien says something like Asch was being ornery about some standard regulation, with lots of irritated-sounding grunts. But Asch pulls out a big fancy gold Federation pilots' ID and flashes that, saying, 'No way, Myr Three-legs.'

"And just when things are getting a little sticky, another vehicle ar-

rives. This one has the same wreath; it's bigger, with a driver. There gets out two aliens in long blue robes, and a third in what looks like a uniform, bright orange.

"The port official starts bitching to them, but Asch cuts through with his short official speech, of which they plainly get nothing. Then he signals Shara and me to go forward to them and present a set of our materials, which we do. I try to show them how the holos are in series, ending with Zeel-tan. But when Shara shows them the movie-talkie they're fascinated—I guess they really don't have video—but they just press buttons at random, apparently making no effort to learn. Asch finally gestures to them to take the set away with them.

"Then the officer and the two robed types—maybe priests?—start arguing over who should have the things, and in the end Asch takes the chance of giving them another whole set, leaving us one more. He figures they will probably go up through different offices or chains of command.

"It looks like we're going to have trouble getting to meet any of the big honchos of this world.

"But Shara got a lot of good out of her interview. The planet is definitely 'Zieltan,' with a little 'i' sound in it, and they are the 'Ziello,' I mean the 'Ziellor,' 'r' or 'or' is their plural. And she's got 'yes' and 'no' and a probable 'this,' and indications that they raise the tone up for a question just like we do, I guess that's one reason their speech sounds so familiar. She's putting in a little cassette with her findings, just in case this is all you get back from us and somebody has to meet them again."

Realune gives a little gasp at that. Exec pats her hand and says quietly, "They did get off safely, Rea, we have the pipe." Then she quickly turns back to the voder, because Torrane is saying:

"—strange thing happened. When Shara told them we were Humans, one of the robed ones kind of burst out, 'Yoo-manz—Zhumanor? Zhumanor—' and some stuff I can't say right. They have trouble with 'h,' Shara says. And they all make the negative sound, as if denying that we could be Humans, see. And the officer gets quite worked up when Shara insists, so she goes back to the pictures. And then the really weird thing happens.

"Kathy has been inconspicuously photographing everything of interest. All of a sudden she pushes the camera into my hands and runs after the aliens as they start getting back in their car.

" 'The Ritual!' she cries. 'Remember the Ritual!' And she pulls the top of her suit open, and we see she's drawn big spots all over her chest and shoulders too. She looks up and calls out something in a strange voice—alien words, like. I feel I half-understand. Like she's calling to the sky over their heads.

"The robed aliens turn back to her, seeming to understand. One of

them replies something, bowing his head. And the officer says their 'yes.' Then they get in and drive straight off.

"The port official has kind of faded into the background while we talked with the others. Now he says something to Kathy, pointing to the sun and moving his hand like he means afternoon. Then he gets in his car and leaves too.

"By this time Kathy is kneeling on the hot ground with her face to her hands. We think she's crying, but when Captain Asch goes out and helps her up, we see she's smiling, like trembling, as if she's crying for joy. Her face has a weird exalted look.

" 'What was that about, Kathy?' I ask when she comes in the ship. And yet I feel like I almost know.

" 'The Thanksgiving,' she says. 'We reached here.'

" 'That's right,' Dinger says. Then he like shakes himself and blinks.

" 'There are strange influences here,' Shara says, putting her little cassette on the voder. 'I want to practice these alien sounds. I'm sure we got a 'Who are you?' Shara's good.

"Then Asch indicates he has something to say. I'll put it on the recorder."

The Captain's voice comes on, deeper and grave.

"This seems to be a world where things that are nonrational in our terms go on. I'm not certain that we, including myself, are entirely ourselves here. Now, there must be some explanation for all this. We just don't know it yet. We just have to keep remembering who we are, and that we're contacting something totally new in Human experience. *And* that nothing suspends the laws of Nature. Then we simply go on and play it as it comes.

"However, I feel it best that we remain prepared to take off unexpectedly. A lot depends on whether they locate somebody here who can communicate with us. At the moment it looks unlikely. If they don't, I think we should take off tomorrow noon. Federation can send a second, better-equipped expedition now we know what's here.

"Meanwhile we should collect as many observations of this place as we can. It might even be worth making an expedition to the port office to collect more speech-samples for Shara's base, so the experts back home will have something to work with."

The voder clicks, and then Torrane's voice comes back.

"Later. Well, that settled us all down. And nothing happens for awhile. Dinger and I made a trip outside to collect specimens of the lichen and any insect life he could catch. We're all feeling the effects of the total dryness everywhere. Even the ground acts funny; if you spit on bare earth, it boils.

"Dinger's preliminary analysis of the plant life shows it just the reverse

of Terroid: It gives off CO_2, carbon dioxide. Maybe that accounts for the high percentage of CO_2 in this atmosphere. Dinger says you can smell it if you put your nose down at plant-level. I'll bet Life-Sciences will love the biochemistry here.

"We watched some ships take off or land and picked up their transmissions, and we were thinking of going over to the port office, when a heavy vehicle drives up beside our ramp. It's loaded with construction equipment. The boss shouts something to Captain Asch, and then his crew gets out and starts building something just beyond our gangway. Since it isn't touching the ship or in our way, the Captain doesn't interfere. It turns out to be an obviously temporary low scaffolding, not menacing as far as we can see. On the scaffold they set up a big basin, like a child's wading-pool. Then they lift out of the truck several carboys of clear liquid, like you'd store chemicals in, and start filling up the basin. That's what they're doing now. To judge from their cautious behaviour, the stuff must be corrosive.

"Captain and Shara are going down to check on it . . . Crew are waving them to keep back. Shara has a piece of sample cloth, and she manages to dunk one end in the liquid. They're bringing it back to the ship."

"If it wasn't for the way these people are acting," comes Captain Asch's voice, "I'd say it was water or some mild basic solution. Dinger's doing a quick electrophoresis."

"Look, Captain," says Torrane, "here comes another delegation. Why don't I just record live?"

"Green. Dinger, you finish that. The rest of you come out with me."

"Five aliens are getting out. Looks like the same two in robes—no, these look bigger and older. Three more types holding gadgets of some sort—could be musical instruments? Everybody's out now.

"The aliens are lined up by the scaffolding. You'll hear—"

A definitely alien voice speaks, or intones, from farther away.

Then—*Moo-oo Hoo-La-La-LAA-AA-Hoo*—a blast of what must be music comes from the voder. Over it Torrane is shouting:

"Two of them are singing to musical accompaniment—Oh, by the gods—" And there is a rising babble of Human voices while the music wails on.

"I feel funny—Oh, no—"

"The music! Stop the godlost music!"

"My Ritual! It's my Ritual, can't you *see*? Let me by!"

"Kathy! Kathy, stop! Oh—"

"Kathy, you can't go down there stark naked—"

"Lieutenant Ku!" roars Asch's voice. "Halt!"

"Stop her!"

A confusion of voices and sounds, moving farther away amid the braying music. "Kathy, Kathy—"

"It's just water," Dinger's voice shouts. "Plain water!"

Clamor of voices, slap and slosh of splashing, the hoots of music, and through it a high female voice yelling, "Help! Help! Hold me down, I can't—" More splashes. "Get her out! Get her out!" shouts Asch. "Here, I—" The music gets louder.

Far away, in Exec's office at FedBase Nine Hundred, the hearers look at the voder, look at each other, while the minims tick away filled with incomprehensible uproar.

Then come heavy footsteps on the ramp. The music quits.

"Get her to the med station," says Asch's voice.

"She hasn't been breathing for—for—"

As the footsteps pass, someone clicks off the recorder.

In a minim it clicks on again.

"It is now about three hours later," says Torrane shakenly. "Captain Asch will speak."

"Lieutenant Ekatarina Ku is dead," Asch says stiffly. "Dead by drowning. We were unable to revive her before irreversible brain damage had occurred. The cause of her death was partially self-induced. When she jumped into the water-pond she first attempted to drown herself by holding herself face-down in the relatively shallow tank. When she failed in this she called to us to help her by holding her under water. Some of her words were, 'Help me, I must die so the Ritual will be right! It's my chance!' She seemed to feel some good end would be served by her death.

"We on the contrary attempted to pull her out, or at least hold her head out. But in the crowded quarters and the slippery tank, and the clumsiness of our actions—and not helped by Kathy's—by the Lieutenant's—" his voice chokes "—long dark hair, we somehow pressed her upper body farther into the water, face down. The influence of the alien music on our perceptions and actions was very great. I consider we were temporarily deranged by it.

"After too long a time we realized that her lungs were full of water—she must have deliberately inhaled while she was under—and she was no longer breathing. At that point the alien music stopped. We quickly got Ka—Lieutenant Ku into the ship's emergency apparatus. But as I said, it was too late.

"We have placed her body in the appropriate refrigeration compartment and held a brief service. In ending I should say that there is no question that Lieutenant Ku perished in the line of duty. Her dedication to our mission was complete, and as a high-order Sensitive she was subject to inimical influences peculiar to this area. The disaster that befell her should be taken as a warning in selecting personnel for future

missions here. This is not to say that Sensitives should be avoided; on the contrary, her perceptions have, I feel, been invaluable. But great care must be exercised by the commanding officer in the event that self-destructive patterns become imprinted on the mind.

"It is clear in retrospect that something of this Ritual pattern was perceived or imprinted on Lieutenant Ku as far back as Beacon Alpha. And it was not confined to her. All of us in some degree *expected* and both welcomed and feared just some event. It appears to be the alien custom of ritual sacrifice in thanksgiving for a safe voyage. Lieutenant Torrane was also heard to say, when the alien influence was strong, 'The spotted ones are preferred.' There was also the general idea, in all our minds, of joining with, or rejoining in death, some great supernal power—call it the Oversoul—under conditions of great honor. Thus the vital force of these aliens is such that their psychic patterns are to some degree imprinted upon all our minds.

"Except under extraordinary conditions, however, such as the playing of that music, I believe we are still capable of functioning Humanly and carrying out our mission. I propose to depart tomorrow, which should give them time to come up with a Galactic translator, if one exists here. I may say that none of us have any premonitions of further alien happenings ahead.

"In closing, I blame myself very severely for not having faced and taken seriously the earlier presentiments about this Ritual by Lieutenant Ku and others. My negligence in this matter must be considered an indirect cause of her death . . . Asch out."

Exec's eyes are grave.

"To lose a crew member like that, the first day . . ." says her Deputy.

"He shouldn't blame himself," Realune protests. "Who could guess she intended to try to die in a kid's wading pool?"

"That's what captains are for," says Exec shortly, and they turn back to the voder, where Torrane's voice has come on.

"—wants me to tell you. We couldn't help noticing even in the—the confusion, and our sort of paralyzed minds—that the aliens were also very excited. Both the big shots and the construction crew crowded in close, like they couldn't believe their eyes, pointing at our wet legs and arms and all, and confirming we were actually in the tank. They themselves jumped back to avoid every splash, and took extreme care not to step on any damp, boiling places. Water is evidently dangerous to these people. We think they expected Kathy to die just by going in it. And we think they were confused and thought that the Human shape of Lieutenant Ku's, uh, nude body was damage caused by the water. We still had our work suits on, see, with the tails, and like extra arms folded in.

"I don't think we'll try any more contact today, unless somebody comes

to us. We're taking in the gangway, and making use of the one-gee-minus here to grab a little real sleep. None of us rest too good in zero-grav. This is all for this cassette, I'll start a new one. Torrane out."

Pauna gets up. "I have the second cassette here." She opens the voder.

"I don't know," says Exec thoughtfully. "Asch appears perfectly functional, and yet . . . I feel he's somehow not a hundred percent himself. Don't ask me why. Unless possibly I'd have been happier to see him lift off right then and forget about waiting for a non-existent translator. . . . But yet they've come all that way, it would seem a shame to leave without learning more about this great new alien complex. If only its size and extent."

Fred nods understandingly. "This does confirm all that was implied by the third message pre-landing. That warship is operational. If it'd been converted to civilian use it wouldn't go about with planet-breakers racked up. Hence they *are* fighting, or preparing to fight, somewhere. Perhaps they are still having religious wars, as we did.

"On the other hand, we have those reports of vanished planets from down Sector Three Hundred way, and here's a live alien ship with probable world-blasters at about the same time. . . . And only the gods know what's been happening down there since we heard . . . Our hope is that they have enough on their plates not to desire more hostilities. Or even to welcome a possible ally. It would be good if our people are able to depart as they came, apparently unnoticed."

"Um'm," says Exec. "Fred, what do you make of the first group's reaction to the crew's claim that they were Human? Does somebody there know what Humans look like? Is it even common knowledge, say, that we don't have tails?"

"We're ready to go, Ma'am," says Pauna. "The second half."

And the voder starts to spin.

On far Zieltan, it is evening of the day Kathy Ku died. Zillanoy of Alien Languages is recording a courier letter to her friend Kanaklee, Chief of Messages, who is home with an inflamed eye.

"Oh, Kanak, my dear, I shall simply explode if I can't vent this! Maybe it'll amuse you on your bed of pain. I know you can't read so I'm doing this. Give my love to Leiloy and the little one and prepare to listen to an outrage.

"It's about what's happening with that alien ship that just landed, what Admin has done—or rather, not done! Honestly, it's so shameful it makes me stamp, but I'll try to be coherent. And we do have quite a puzzle on our hands, you'll be interested.

"You know your office sent me a transcript of that hailing broadcast they put out on their way in—thanks, dear Kanak, without you this

place would go straight to max entropy! Well, I could actually get some of it, although the accent is strange as can be.

"I recognized several instances of the word *yooman*, which could be a form of 'Zhuman,' And they referred to a *federation*, which I picked up as something those eastern Zhumanor were afraid of. A bad thing. And *we come in peece* may mean that they're just a piece or part of a group of ships out there. Definitely, it's similar to the Zhuman tongue, or, as I'm beginning to think, of a larger language the Zhumanor and others use. Anyway, I sent a flash up to Admin saying that I recognized a Zhuman affinity, and to send every bit of recorded speech to me, top priority. Our good boss Kenta Graveen authorizing. And, since the Zhumanor are such bad actors, to watch themselves—of course I said it in officialese.

"Well, I guess that flash is still moldering in some Upper Official's in-pot—Really, that whole top echelon below the Council is purely useless and hopeless and ought to be fired. They just slow everything to a standstill—'Scuse, where was I? Oh, yes.

"So the Port heard nothing, and they just went ahead with a Class D reception—the aliens refused arms inspection, by the way—until the aliens demanded a Ritual. They've clearly come a long way. They claim to be from across the River Darkness, I don't believe that, of course. They haven't got the fuel tanks for it. But I'm jumping ahead.

"Anyway, at the Ritual—with only *three* musicians, and a pool so small it looked like a child's sandbox. Which it probably was, Reception is conserving funds for the big All-Harmony Conference next Dusedan—at their Ritual, *all* the aliens *got into the water* with the Ritual Person. Just hopped in and splashed! Imagine!

"That's tolerance to water, see—a Zhuman trait. The Zhumanor claim they and all life on their worlds originated in water—Did you know that? Weird. So, when I heard this, I thought, Zhuman for sure. And what goes on? Here we are hunting them all around the east of the River, and a shipload of them lands right on our door-pads!

"But I got Kenta Graveen to get me some pictures—the driver had been taking pictures to sell to the news-services—and these aliens aren't Zhumanor at all. They look like little cartoons of us, kind of limp and sickly.

"But I'm forgetting the main thing, Kanak. The aliens presented Reception with two sets of the most marvelous artifacts! In each set was a packet of wide-angle holographs of the whole skyfield at intervals on their trip. I've seen one group over at Charts, that's where they finally ended. The Charts person told me the early ones seem to show the sky from the far side of the River, but of course that's a hoax or an extrapolation. But the things are of superb quality. Charts says they're price-

less. I don't know where the second set is, or rather, I can guess. I only hope they're both the same.

"But it's the second artifacts that are the marvel and the crying shame. Each one is a little folding cassette, with a speaker at one end and a shiny plate at the other. And when you press a button, the speaker says a word, several times and—listen!—the plate lights up and shows a *moving* picture! Showing what the word means, see? Some are holographs, some are diagrams, or drawings. About a hundred and fifty different ones, at a wild guess. Absolutely exquisite, way beyond the state of any art here. And what it is, it's both a teacher *and* a message, I'm positive.

"Now here's the crying part. Reception sent these things up to the Council, probably by slow freight. And when they finally got them, the stupid councillors spent the time playing with them! Just *playing* with them. As if they were personal gifts! Punching buttons in any order, to see the pretty pictures, not learning anything and *not getting their message*! Oh, Kanak—how do you bear it? The little Administrator was with them, but you can forgive him, he's a real boy. But the others are grown-ups—supposed to be our wisest people!

"So here sits the alien ship, and there lies their messages, being played with by a covey of ancient dolts and a little boy! Honestly.

"Well, the gods know how long this would have gone on, but my good chief Graveen got wind of them, and he just kept boring in till he got through the dust layer—that's what I call the Upper Echelon—and a couple of the councillors *finally* had the bright idea that maybe some expert ought to get a look at these things. So they sent a packet of holos down to Charts. And one cassette went to Research, who tried to take it apart and promptly broke it. And Graveen brought the second cassette to me, and I'm about to start a night's work on it. Kanak, I think this thing has over a hundred words and pictures in it! Oh, I hope the two were identical—but we'll never know now, will we?

"What's clear at once is that these things were never prepared en route. That means they have a home office where such things are made, for use in contacting strangers. Which in turn implies a lot of things. Oh, Kanak, I have a hunch, as though things I can't see clearly are connecting up. Like the Zhumanor in the east and these people coming here—and I think the Navy should be in on it.

"I'm going to pluck up my nerve and get in touch with Captain Krimheen, he's the big commander who brought our ship here, and he's a live light. I should mention that there was some junior Fleet officer who went out to look them over for weapons, but he didn't see anything. But what occurs to me is, if this is the state of their technology, would we recognize their weapons if we saw them? But it's funny, what I'm concerned with

isn't weapons on that little ship. It's what's behind it all. To use a military term I learned, I think the problem here isn't tactical. It's *strategic*. Meaning bigger and deeper and maybe indirect.

"So there's my bedtime story for you, Kanak dear. Can you see why I got mad? And who'd have thought, when we said goodbye for me to go study an obscure, possibly extinct language out east, that a week after I got home the language would be right here on our main landing-field!

"Rest well, get better quick, and love again to Leiloy and little Kanlie. Fondly, your friend Zilla."

In Exec's office at Human FedBase Nine Hundred, the second part of that long-ago message begins to unreel on the voder. It's Torrane.

"We were pretty depressed about Kathy. Shara and I collected her things and stowed them away. And we rolled in the gangway, and took off our wet worksuits and hung them in the cabin to dry. The moisture in the air really felt good. And nothing else happened from outside, so we had chow and turned in early, taking one last look around the space-port from the lock. I guess I didn't tell you it's all surrounded with a covered roadway, with roofed alleys out to the different hardstands. These people must be really leery of rain. So far we haven't seen any change in the weather at all, just high cirrus. And there's a lot of dust in the air that makes the sunsets something to see. We watched the lights come on. The port office down at the end looks busy; the military vessel only has stand-by lights.

"In the morning we start preparing for liftoff, securing the cabin, and taking the back-starfield holo strip out of the aft camera and threading it in the computer so we can go on automatic guidance in a hurry if need be. More of Kathy's little stuff turns up. We still can't believe she's gone, stiff and cold back there . . . 'Scuse.

"Anyway, no outside action at all, until a little before noon, when a big staff-car drives up. It has the thing we think is a government symbol on the doors, and also two little orange flags on the front, and the driver is sitting outside. Maybe big shots.

"Out gets a big male in orange uniform. He's got up fancier than the other uniformed type, with a line of what could be medals. Then comes a smaller male in plain uniform, with shoulder-loops; he acts like an aide. And then a still smaller, red-colored alien dressed in some kind of silky outfit that suggests it's a female. It turns out that's right.

"She hops out and makes a bee-line for the ship, and slaps the side with her tail,—Pow! We just have the lock cracked, see. And she calls out, 'Herroo! Herroo, Herro? You come out? I come in!'

"By the gods, they've got a Galactic-speaker here at last! We whip open

the port and let down the gangway. She bounces straight up to meet Asch, holding out one of her top hands with a glove on it.

" 'Me Zillanoy,' she announces, pointing to herself. 'Zilla. Fee-male.'

" 'Hello, Zilla,' we all say, and she gives a chortle, like it's all great, and shakes all round, getting names. While this goes on I'm busy setting up another recorder. I figure there's going to be an extended talk in pidgin-Galactic and I'll put that on a separate record so you can have the whole thing verbatim. I'll just give the gist of it here.

"She introduces the big alien as Something Krim-heen, probably like a title, 'Captain,' because she says 'Big chief fight-ship.' Captain Asch offers to shake hands, but she slaps at him with her gloved hand, 'No, no! *Kifa*! Bad *kifa*.'

"At this Shara points to the water-flask in our mess rack, and asks, '*Kifa?*'

" 'Yess,' says the alien, 'Wa-ta. Wa-ta bad *na* Ziello.' I get it; it's the moisture in our skins they fear.

" 'There's something strange about her accent,' Shara says. 'And she knows the word *chief*. That isn't in our Basic.'

"By this time we're all in the ship, except for the aide, whom Captain Krimheen sends back to the car. We settle around the mess-table as well as we can, with their size, and all those tails. And I lay out a ready-ref spread of the talking-pictures kit, and a big holo showing the whole Rift and both sides. All this seems to delight Zilla, she goes off in peals of laughter that sounds a lot like ours, although at first we thought she was choking. She seems like a nice girl. 'Go-od! Class-ee!' she says at the spread.

Captain Asch starts off by introducing us formally as Humans from the Federation, coming in peace on an exploration mission. 'We come look what here,' he says, pointing to his eyes and all around. 'Zeel-tan big!'

"But Zilla is staring at him with that big single eye, all giggles gone. So is Krimheen.

" 'Yoomanss? Zhumanor? No!' she explodes. And gives us a blast I'll try to reproduce. 'You no Zhumanor! I know Zhumanss! Zhumanor kill people, come Comeno planetss, do bad things. Catch people, make dig di-monss, zera-navths, kill Comenor. Ziello ship come, catch two–three Zhumanor, no ship. Ziellor kill Zhumanor, look more. Look much Zhumanor, kill all! Look ship, Zhumanor fly, Ziellor catch. Look Zhumanor base, blow up—*Pzeh*! Zhumanor want shipss, want di-monss. Kill all Zhumanor! Yess!'

"Well, this about knocks us flat.

" 'That's a Black Worlds accent,' Shara exclaims.

"And that's the key. After a lot of go-round, you'll get it on the other

cassette, we figure it out. Black Worlds Humans have been capturing and killing an allied race called the Comenor. The Ziello have gone to their rescue, chasing and killing the Black Worlders. That's where Zilla learned her scraps of Galactic; she's sort of an official translator.

"Anyway, all Zeel-tan hates what they call the Zhumanor. At one point Zilla gets up and scoots out to the car—those hoppers can really travel when they're in a hurry—and comes back with a folded, printed-looking kind of kidskin stuff—a daily paper. Two big photos front and center: one shows a clearly Human Black Worlds type with pointy hair, crouching and pointing a stunner at the camera. The photographer must have been right with the troops. The other is a pathetic huddle of corpses, or creatures nearly dead. They look partly like little Ziellos and partly like big rabbits.

" 'Comenor!' says Zilla. 'Zhu-man! Pfeh!' "

"Well, with those photos in everybody's hands, it's obvious that if we'd landed in our natural forms we'd probably have been lynched on sight. That must have been what Kathy and I picked up. Kathy saved our lives, all right . . . but now what do we do?

"All this time, big Captain Krimheen never really softens up. He's giving everything the hard look-over, and while Zilla's talking, he gets up and studies our controls, and all the instrument banks. Captain Asch quietly keeps an eye on him.

"It's also apparent that the two females can communicate much better than the rest of us, natural since Shara's a linguist and I think Zilla is too, and Zilla's talked with Galactic-speakers before. (We give her the advanced movie-talkie cassette, too.) So Captain Asch lets Shara do the explaining, how we are *good* Humans from the *good* Federation, we don't kill or enslave people and we don't want diamonds or zěra-navths. And the Humans she's seen aren't from the Federation but from the Black Worlds outside, and we hate them too.

"That gets a response. Zilla says thoughtfully, 'I lis-ten, Black planetss. Yess.'

"But that sets her off on a new tack. 'I think Zhumanor do bad things you,' she exclaims. 'I think you Yoomanor want come *na Allowateera!* Much people come *na Allowateera*—good, good! Why you talk fekey, talk you Zhumanor?'

"It takes all Shara's skill to unscramble this. It seems Zilla now has the idea that we come from a race that's been persecuted by the Black Worlders, and are seeking refuge in their alliance, or union, or whatever the *Allowateera* means. But the best Shara can do is to keep the question open whether our 'Yooman' is really the same as 'Zhumanor,' which is how they pronounce Black Worlders.

"Captain Asch is using a stylus on the big holo to show where the

Federation is, and draw in our cross-Rift trip. But Krimheen takes the stylus, and pin-points some systems out east.

" 'Zhumanor here,' he says. Then, watching Asch through his narrowed eye, he drags the stylus along from the east through the southern fringes of the Rift, to Zeel-tan. 'You come *na* this, here, I think,' he says drily.

" 'No! No!' we all say.

"But he just gets up and goes out and down the ramp. We see him conferring with his aide, who picks up what could be a caller in the car, in the flash I get of it.

" 'I don't like this,' mutters Asch. Neither do I.

"But when he comes back he seems quite affable, and makes a little speech. It's an invitation to us to come into the city with him to meet some people we gather are government high officials. Zilla is enthusiastic. 'You look Zieltan, is good! You look *Allowateera* big shits!' she says, in her hair-raising mix of Galactic and Black World lingo. 'Good you come look!'

"Well, it's pretty tempting after the endless time cooped up here. Captain Asch agrees to go, with Shara and me, leaving Dinger to guard the ship.

"We all troop out to the car with him, and Krimheen directs me to sit out in front with the driver. He's being real cordial; he personally opens and closes the door for me.

"This disconcerts me so that it's a minim before I realize he's slammed the thing on the tip of my fake tail, which should be, I guess, excruciating. As quick as I can I make to flinch and holler. But I was slow, slow. Does this big devil suspect it's a fake? He gives no sign. But looking back, I seem to recall his nudging or bumping myself and Dinger quite a bit. I'd put it down to the cramped quarters . . . Oh, no—this is bad! How do I get word to Asch, closed in the back with him and the aide and the girls?

"And the car has started. In no time we're in the middle of the port. It's clouded up. Zilla is happily explaining something to Shara, when suddenly Captain Asch's caller blats. I hear Dinger's voice.

" 'Mayday! Mayday! They're draining the fuel from our tank!'

"At that very instant, the driver beside me screams. Really *screams*. I see a couple of drops of rain have hit the windscreen. He slams to a stop, and starts to pull up curtains.

" 'Everybody out! Run for it!' shouts Asch.

"We tumble out and start pounding as fast as we can. But it would have been pathetic—those hoppers can fly. I didn't dare look back, but I hear what sounds like a stun-bolt go by my ear. And some orange figures—troops—in the walkway to my right, start out into the field to cut us off.

"But—talk about crazy luck—the whole field lights up with a thun-

derclap and a blast of hard rain hits us. We race on. But I see the soldiers skid to a halt and high-tail it back to shelter, where they start yanking out some rain gear. No sounds of pursuit behind us.

"As we near the ship we see three or four more soldiers by the tubes, struggling into stuff. The gangway is half up. One of the soldiers tries a shot at us, but he's half into his gear and I guess the rain is burning him. I can hear one actually crying out with pain. But one big fellow is about dressed. He blocks the way.

"For a convinced pacifist, our Captain Asch has a mean body-hook. He decks the big hopper, and Dinger drops the gangway right on top of him. We scoot up it and Asch throws himself into the pilot-couch. Dinger has everything set. In two minim we're digging air, clawing our way up off Zeel-tan—I hope for keeps.

"I waste a second hoping Zilla didn't get burned too badly. By the time I can see down, the port's almost gone. So is the rain, and the thunderhead is thinning out below. They seem to have these little thermal storms that come from nowhere and disperse at once.

"Dinger tells us that as soon as we were on our way, this squad of soldiers appeared, and surrounded the ship. They located the outer fuel cap, opened up and stuck a hose down it so they could siphon without Dinger being able to use the choke-off. Dinger goes out to try to stop them, but the leader pulls a weapon and points it at his head, waving him to get back in.

"So he does—and grabs the waste-water hose and extends it to the port, below their line of sight. And he drenches them good, and hoses down the tank input area with suds. That way he saves most of the fuel—they were out to drain us dry, making the ship a neat jail for us. And of course that blessed shower came just in the nick.

"On the way up their hose blew off, and we're using the emergency choke until somebody can go EVA and replace the cap. We've lost a lot, though. We'll have to do some figuring.

"We'll send this as soon as we have a fuel estimate. And—Oh, oh, Dinger says the scope is showing some activity below, around that warship. Are they preparing to take off after us? This is going to take some close instrument work, we can't hang around to watch. Riftrunner temporarily out."

Vast distances away and forward in time, the voder in Base Nine Hundred clicks. Off—On.

"It is now forty-five minim later. Take-off of a massive vessel confirmed. It looks as if we have that warship on our tail, with a thirty-nine minim lead.

"And we have a fuel check. We do not, repeat not, have enough left to get back to Base. But we can make Beacon Alpha . . . In a way it

doesn't matter, because Captain Asch is not about to lead that battleship armed with planet breakers into the Federation, if they follow us all that way. Of course, they may overhaul us earlier and grab us with that tractor-beam, which I guess is what Krimheen intends to do. If that happens we'll try to get off a message before we're hauled in. We'll set all kinds of alarms, and keep a pipe ready for update, but this may be the last you hear from Riftrunner One.

"The best outcome, we figure, is that we reach Beacon Alpha ahead of him and then play an evade-and-wait game there, hoping you can send some kind of relief. Ah, the Captain has a word."

"Asch here," says the deeper voice. "I am sorry to have to record that this peaceful exploration mission ends with us running for our lives from unprovoked hostilities. I wish to point out that something has been seriously amiss in Sector Three Hundred, which is supposed to keep a watch on the Black Worlds beyond. Their reports, when I left, stated that no off-planet activity was observed, and the population was supposed to be diminishing. But as near as I can judge, these Black Worlds raids on the race called Comenos were already starting. There is also the possibility that they were emigrating out to attractive worlds in that area, hence the, quotes, diminishing population. Those Black Worlds activities are poisoning the minds of people against Humans all along to the south edge of the Rift, and maybe beyond. Distasteful as the thought is, I strongly suggest that the Black Worlders be reduced or eliminated—and steps taken to separate them from the Federation and Federation Humans, in alien minds.

"Now, when and if you come to our relief at Beacon Alpha, do not underestimate the probable Ziello strength there. Depending on the time elapsed, they may have called in reinforcements. Above all, I do not wish that more Human lives be endangered by our mission.

"Our plight may well be judged my fault for having insisted that we were Human, in the face of the Ziellos' apparent feelings, and our Sensitive's earlier warning that Humanity was 'hateful.'

"We will have forwarded all the useful information we have been able to obtain on this mission, especially if we succeed in doing as I intend, which is to include estimates of fuel use, speed and other flight characteristics and Ziello capabilities, in the event of our being overtaken and captured. No useful aim would be served by endangering people to rescue our persons, beyond the humanitarian one. And in considering this, I insist that you give weight to our desire to have no more Human deaths on our consciences.

"I will now turn this back to Lieutenants Sharana, Dingañar, and Torrane for their provisional and preferably private farewells . . . As to

my own mate, now in cold-sleep, I believe she has recorded her wishes in the event of my non-return.

"Lutho Asch, commanding, out."

In FedBase Nine Hundred, Pauna had caught Exec's glance; she jumps up and switches off as the voder clicks.

"We can defer the rest until after receipt of any message reporting their capture," says Exec quietly. "Or until so much time has elapsed that we must believe they are lost."

All four Humans sit for a time in silence. Exec's chin is on her fist, her expression grim. Just as Fred is about to dismiss Pauna and Realune, she speaks.

"Well . . . The worst outcome. I've already said all I feel. Fred, we'll have to get at some careful planning tonight.

"Meanwhile, Pauna, I want you to run a careful checkback to the times of sending and arrival of Messages One, Two, and Three, to get an estimate of the time it will take Riftrunner to get to Beacon Alpha. And Charts has their starfield holos for the whole trip; please drop by and warn them I'm going to be needing their best estimates of the same thing, plus—important—the distance from here to the beacon. Thus we'll have two independent estimates. The one thing I don't want is to have those people dodging a battleship or worse around Alpha for years, waiting for us to get to them.

"And Realune, ask Charts to make a set of close-ups of the Alpha region, so our rescue mission can locate them promptly if they're not transmitting."

"Will that be all, Myr Exec?"

"Right. Thank you."

As they leave they hear her say, "Fred, even if we start yesterday, we're going to be late. Maybe too late . . . I wonder—we've been hearing these rumors out of Central. If by any chance they have something that works . . . we need it. I'm going to start hammering on some doors, life-or-death priority."

On far Zieltan, while that message is being recorded above them, Alien Languages Officer Zillanoy is calling up her friend Kanaklee, at his office.

"Oh, Kanak—Something so exciting! I'm going into space on a real mission! I wish I could say a proper goodbye, but Captain Krimheen says I must get myself aboard in thirty *stor* or be left behind. Of course they wouldn't leave me, because I'm the only Zhuman-speaker they have, but I just will not hold them up.

"What I called about, aside from goodbye, my dear: It occurs to me that we should take a Ritual Person with us in case we have to offer thanks-

giving. Or we might have a Ritual when we return, if we have many adventures. Which I have a hunch we will. The aliens might fight, or who knows what. Just between us, I think it'll be a longer chase than Captain Krimheen does. And I believe they've come a longer way than he thinks. They're surprising!

"So I thought of your old nurser Tomlo. It must be getting pretty old and feeble now that Kanlie's so far in school. And I think it's educated enough to appreciate a beautiful return to the Oversoul with honor, don't you? What do you think . . . ?"

". . . Oh, I'm so glad, I thought you'd agree. Then if it's all right, I'll just pick it up at your home on my way to the port, and I can say goodbye to Leiloy too."

The years pass . . .

In the dark of space, in the depths of the empty Rift, a beacon's soundless voice wails.

Drawn by that voice, the silvery fish that is a Human space-ship approaches. It begins to decelerate. The beacon—Beacon Alpha—is circling a big ice-planet, that in turn is in far slow orbit around a great blue sun.

But the little ship is not alone. Behind it, almost out of sensor range, there follows a much bigger ship. A warship of the Ziello from Zieltan, nosing implacably down the trail.

In the small ship, four Human bodies tumble out of sleep-chests. Their first thought is fear; have they been wakened by an alarm? Is the warship closing in? But the alarms are still. Only the amplified wail of Beacon Alpha sounds in the bridge.

Lieutenant Dingañar flings himself at the scope, rubbing the last mists of cold-sleep from his eyes. He scans around quickly, glances up at mass-proximity indicators, swivels the space-radar, goes back to the scope.

"We've lost her!" he shouts. "Those indications at Beacon Beta were true, she can't match our running-speed. Oh joy, Oh boy."

"That is a big help," says Captain Asch soberly, to the general jubilation. When they had last clocked the warship, before fatigue had forced them to rest, the computer had given them a good probability of outrunning their pursuer. It was only a probability then. Now it's certain.

But it's not salvation. Only a help, as Asch has said, in the game of out-waiting the warship at Beacon Alpha. There is no hope of losing her, of holing up and hiding; they are leaving an ion trail in virtually virgin space. However they double and hide, sooner or later the enemy will be coming down on them.

"What now?" Dinger asks.

"Now I take us off-course and tuck us back of that planet to wait," says Asch. "And then we play kittimousle with that thing, around the beacon,

around the planet, around the star . . . until help comes. Only we can't; we haven't the fuel. So my plan is to evade her for awhile until we get good estimates of her turning radius, acceleration, and other flight characteristics. Then, if they seem to be serious about catching us, . . . then I intend to try to parley."

"They know we don't have much fuel," Dinger comments. "Maybe they don't, either. But unless they're real short, why should they bother to parley?"

"We have to figure they have a resupply coming," says Asch. "If I were that Captain, Captain Krimheen, I guess, messaging for reinforcements and supply would be the first thing I'd do once I saw I was heading into the Rift. Especially if I had FTL commo. Whatever we do, we should do it before any reinforcements show up."

"So?"

"We have one threat," Asch says slowly. "I think we'll find we have enough extra speed and mobility to ram them. Suicide-style. We could probably remove them as a threat to the Federation. Of course there'd be enough scraps left so that their reinforcements could guess what happened. But their command would be gone. And we'd tell the base our intentions. But do we mean it? That's what I need your vote on: Do we in fact ram, before letting ourselves be taken? Think over the implications; would that bring us closer to war?"

A silence, as each considered years in an alien prison on a waterless planet, interrogations, the possibilities of the base's rescue mission, their personal lives and hopes.

"I say, ram," Dinger says at length.

"Ram," says Shara. "Pfoo!"

"There's this too," says Torrane, "his reinforcements, if and when they get here, might not be able to figure what happened. They might conclude we had some super-weapon, and get a healthy scare. I vote ram, while we still have enough fuel to afford a miss or two."

"So let it be recorded," Asch says somberly. "Lieutenant Torrane, will you cut a message to Nine Hundred outlining our plan? We'll send it as soon as we can add a few specs on the capabilities of that ship. Lieutenant Sharana, I'll need a lot of help on composing a parley message in Pidgin. General idea is peace, not war; inviting them to base—preferably minus their planet-breakers—and a later exchange of trade-goods. We have our video technology, they have FTL transmission, for starters. Do you think you can get all that?"

"Assuming that little Zilla-something is aboard, and she's looked at the advanced language-pack. I better make a simple one in case she's not . . ." Shara's moving up to the co-pilot's couch. "Oh, whew, by the

gods!—do you feel it? We've lost those extra imaginary bodies and tails and all!"

"Hey, yes!"

"Great!"

"Oh, it's wonderful not to feel so *clumsy*!" Shara cuts a cartwheel through the rotating compartment that holds their sleep-chests; its spin provides a minimal gee to keep them healthy during the long sleeps.

"I don't know," says Dinger the joker, "I may miss that tail. It was interesting."

"We've apparently run out of the Ziello influence," Asch observes. "But why? It set in at the beacon here. No, wait—we're on the base side of the planet's orbit now. Could we have cut it that fine by chance, to locate the beacon right on the border of the, ah, influence?"

"Stranger things have happened," Dinger remarks.

"I have a theory," says Shara, irrepressibly cheerful. "Maybe we Humans put out a field too! Why not? And if we're right where they overlap, mightn't that give a really sharp border? And maybe it kind of fluctuates back and forth a little."

Captain Asch is rummaging through the software. "There's an E and E program here. Evasion and escape. We'll have to run it by hand until we know that ship's maneuverability and what constraints to put in. Unless they've loaded on some smaller stuff, we don't have to worry about being shot at; those planet-buster missiles are too big and slow to hit a small mobile target. I'm assuming they aim to pick us up with that tractor beam. Range and strength, unknown; we better estimate one-fifty percent of ours, just to be safe . . . It'll be awhile before we get much sleep, at least all at the same time."

"They may knock out the beacon. Run over it," reflects Dinger, still at the scope. "But we could put out another . . . If they get to breaking up planets to keep us from using them as temporary hidey-holes, the debris will serve just as well, for awhile. . . . Oh, by the gods, it's a crime the way things have turned out. There're some great planets here for meeting and trade, just at the half-way point, too . . ."

"That's the way things have turned out," Asch says grimly.

"Reverting to my theory," says Shara, "I still don't see why Humans couldn't be putting out a field of influence too."

"Our alien visitors would have reported it," says Torrane from where he's readying the message-pipe.

"Maybe not," Shara persists. "Because maybe these things work only in real empty space. And nobody comes to us through the Rift. Didn't you say your red-lizard thing was in an empty place like a piece of Rift, Captain?"

"Possibly so, I can't be certain. It's a nice theory, Shara, but . . ."

"But don't measure your velocity until you're sure your engines start, as Mama used to say, huh? Sure . . . But I'd like to think Humans have everything anybody else has. Hey—Maybe every race throws a field, some stronger, some weaker—but they're only noticeable if they're near a real low-density region! . . . If it turns out the Ziello in that ship are feeling like imaginary Humans—remember you heard it here first. And *I* better get to work. Our grim pursuer should be showing up pretty soon."

"When it does," Asch says to Dinger, "take a reading so we'll know where any reinforcements will be likely to appear."

"Message recorded through status so far," says Torrane. "Including the intent to ram, if the attempt at parley fails . . . Does anybody have any objections to naming that big blue sun 'Ekatarina'?"

General approval. But at the memory of the girl now lying frozen and lifeless in their cargo, the temporary euphoria vanishes. What's ahead looms bleak—a life-and-death contest of maneuver with a largely unknown enemy, which may indeed have to end with self-inflicted death. And their home-haven, to which they dare not point the enemy, so relatively near. And all so needless, so nearly inexplicable—having for enemies the alien peoples who should have been met with friendship; the terrible prospect of interstellar war overshadows all—a crime, as Dinger had said. A crime of which they're entirely innocent, the pawns of evil fortune . . . The words of the little interpreter: "Kill all Humans!" echo in their heads.

"Got her!" says Dinger, pointing to his instruments. "There she comes. . . . If her sensors are as good as ours, she ought to start decelerating pretty soon. . . . I'm getting a trace of excess I.R.—could be caused by personnel in the cargo-bay."

"Marines in cold-sleep, at a guess," says Asch.

"The seeing's very good—I could be getting those missile racks in a minim or two."

By this time the great warship is a naked-eye object, a bright splinter barreling along on their former course past the beacon.

"I intend to wait until they've picked us up and are headed right at us," says Asch. "Then I'll bust out at about one-seventy-five degrees to them, put the planet between us and make a U-turn around the next planet in and wait for him again. Give Torry the missile data as soon as you pick it up, and we'll send the pipe after we're in motion, on his off-side. Green?"

"Green."

They wait. The warship is decelerating now, its retros bursting on the night like great blossoms. Dinger picks up the smaller missile racks. They're empty; the warship is still armed only with the eight probable planet-breakers.

"Little uneven on the navigation there," says Asch critically.

Their enemy is making a wide turn, evidently questing for their spoor. As they watch, it straightens out on a course from which they must be plainly visible. Then there's another flare, and as it clears they see it heading straight at them. But it isn't a clean aim; the alien pilot makes two—no, three course corrections. Asch is frowning.

As the enemy warship grows in the viewport, he says, "Get ready for a quickie." Closer and bigger yet it comes, until Shara can't help glancing nervously at Asch, poised like a hawk over the controls. Bigger, closer—and suddenly the giant fist of acceleration is punching them down, as Asch cuts everything into a dash past the bigger ship and back along its course.

"He should swing around on that planet," Asch says, and straining to look back they can see the enemy warship doing just that. All can see, too, that there's a raggedness in his maneuver.

"I'm not going to park by any more planets. Makes it too easy for him to turn," Asch says, frowning at himself. They accelerate out of there as the other ship comes out of its turn, following them.

"Message pipe released," Torry says. "I think I sent it off while we were out of his field."

They run straight for a time, with the big ship falling ever-farther behind. "Curse the fuel," Asch mutters. "This could be fun . . . I'm going to get on his tail to talk. How're you coming with my speech, Shara?"

The beacon's wail is growing faint. Dinger turns it up.

"Don't want to lose track of that," Asch says. He starts a swing to the northeast, watching his pursuer. At the instant the warship's jets flare to turn with him, Asch rams on his opposing thrusters, knocking them round a hundred and eighty degrees, accelerating.

"Now show us what you've got," he tells the enemy under his breath.

The big ship torches by, still turning the wrong way. Asch fires another turn that sends stuff winging and banging all over the cabin. A correction—and they end up following the warship's tail. "That was easier than it should have been," Asch comments, frowning harder.

"For what it's worth, I . . ." Torrane speaks up, hesitates.

"Yes, what? You picking up something?"

"I don't know. Just trouble, faint. Faint . . . Oh, devils, probably I'm crazy."

"No. They're not reacting right."

Shara hands her noter-recorder to him. "Here's a draft of what you could say. All words are in the basic movie-talkie pack."

"Um'm . . . good. Gods, it's like baby-talk, isn't it?"

"Pidgin is almost a language. I've tried to exploit their distinction between 'Zhuman' and 'Yooman,' see. It's to our advantage. And I thought

you should repeat the whole thing so they get a second crack at it. You won't want to read it twice, just record it—flip that switch when you start to speak—and replay."

"Green. I don't see anything here to change. All right, go." He thumbs the caller open. "Riftrunner—Federation ship Riftrunner here. Federation Yoomanor calling Ziello fightship. Federation Yoomanor calling you. Come in, Ziello ship. You hear? Captain Krimheen, you hear?"

No reply from the receiver except a shuffling, jangling sound. Then there is what might be a faint grunt. "At least they have their pick-up open," Torrane says.

"Captain Krimheen?" Asch repeats. Then he quickly puts his hand over the caller, and says to the others, "Listen, you guys . . . I'd be obliged if you sort of don't listen to this. I feel a perfect fool!"

"Right." All turn ostentatiously to other tasks, and Asch starts his speech. Despite their best efforts, his authoritative tones cut through.

". . . We want talk. We want talk you, we no want fight. Why you fight? Why you make war with Federation? Federation no want war, want peace. Federation no do bad things. We from Federation, no same Black Worlds Zhumanor. We Yoomans from Federation, no same with Black Worlds Zhumanor. Black Worlds Zhumanor do bad things. Catch people, kill people. Make people dig Dimons, zĕra-navths. We no want dimons. We want peace with Ziello. We fight with Black Worlds Zhumanor . . ." And on and on, to an invitation to an exchange of visits—"You come Federation, say Hello. Federation come Zieltan, say Hello." And a final vista of trade and a warning of the horrors of war.

In spite of Asch's professed scorn, he really puts his heart into the peroration: "You catch us, kill us; Federation come catch you, kill you. You come Federation, blow up base, kill all people—Federation come Zieltan, blow up Zieltan, kill all. You come Federation, blow up many bases—Federation come you, blow up more Ziello planets, kill more—Ziello big, Federation big! All peoples kill all peoples! War, war, war, long war. Bad, bad war no finish. Why we start war? We want talk, we want make peace."

Even as he speaks, faint sounds are coming from the receiver. Without pausing, Asch gestures Torrane to come closer, put his ear to it.

"Now talk come two time," Asch signs off, and puts the recorder to the caller. "Whew! What're you getting, Torry?"

In reply Torrane turns the volume up. Nothing—and then a childish voice says, "He'p!"

Asch picks up the caller. "What? Say more!"

"He'p," cries the little voice. "Come he'p? Big peopre sick. Big peopre ve'y ve'y sick. . . . Go O'ersou' now . . . He'p, come."

There is a sound like things falling. No more voice.

The Humans stare at each other. "What do we make of *that*?"

"Some kind of trick?" Shara wonders.

"If it's a trap it's a good one," Asch turns to the caller. "Who are you? Identify, identify yourself. Are you calling Riftrunner?"

But the little voice, childish but no Human child, only says again weakly, "He'p . . . Come he'p."

"You want us to come to your ship?"

No answer but vague scratching.

Asch draws a breath, turns to face the others. "I'm inclined to think something *is* wrong. But I could be fooled. I can't risk all your lives."

"I vote we go help them," Shara says.

"Yeah," says Dinger. "Better'n ramming, anyway."

"Oh, the hells." Torrane makes the motion of slapping a flipped coin, peeking under his hand. "Yes."

"Well . . . green then," says Asch. "Provided we carry weapons."

"Weapons—" Dinger paws into the stowage. "Where'd I put those stunners? Ah!"

"And one more thing," says Asch in his Captain's tone. "We have to realize these Ziello have only met Black World Humans. They know how Black Worlders operate. Maybe they've learned from them, maybe they have some cute tricks of their own. If this is a trap, we're doing for free exactly what they looked to do with that tractor beam—walking right in. Now, what if they decide to get our further cooperation the easy way, by taking a hostage or two?"

Grunts, as they think this over.

"I don't know about you, but I do *not* guarantee my continued resistance if they start mutilating one of you. Blinding, say . . ."

"For once I'm ahead of you, Captain," says Shara. "I thought I was a likely hostage. So I remembered our emergency stuff." She pats her jaw. "It's going to make eating a little tricky, though."

"You've already got that trick tooth in place?" Asch is surprised. "Well, good for you. May you never have to think about using it. All right—Torry, Dinger, that goes for us, too. You do have your drop-deads with you?"

"Yeah."

"Well put 'em in place now. Shara, take the controls a minim—and keep your ears open for any whisper from that ship. Let's hope she doesn't move."

They get up and make for their duffel compartments.

When they return they are waggling their jaws experimentally around the little weapon of self-deliverance. "I feel like a hologrid star," Dinger complains. "But I guess it's the practical thing."

"It is," Asch assures him. "And the gods are with us, that ship hasn't

accelerated. I guess they want us." He starts the maneuver that will bring Riftrunner alongside.

"Their caller is still open," Shara reports, "but I haven't heard a thing except a set of uneven footsteps, fading away . . . Oh, wait—Somebody groaned, very faint."

"Artistic," Asch comments dryly. "Look at the size of that port. I just hope our flanges cover it."

The warship is gently rolling, or wallowing, on her course. It takes all Asch's skill to match with her and grapple their smaller port flange into a tight dock.

Just as they do so, there comes a clashing rattle through the linked hulls. Shara, suiting up by the viewport, sees one of the warship's big missiles detach itself in a burst of silent fire. They all watch as it goes hurtling off on its course to nowhere.

"Looks like somebody sick and crazy," comments Asch. "Not to mention, hostile . . . All right. Let's open up and try to go on in. Take your safeties off when we get their port open."

But getting the big ship's port open proves not so easy. The emergency handle that should permit ingress won't engage.

"Open your port! Open up!" Asch calls.

"Shall we go EVA and look in a viewer?" Shara asks.

But clickings are coming from the other side. The childish voice cries, "I t'y! I t'y open."

And finally the port gives. They open it quietly, and slip into a big, empty, silent lock. As they cross the threshold of the joined ships they hit the jolt of almost full gravity.

"Artificial gee," Dinger whispers. "The lucky so-and-sos."

The inner port is ajar; oxygen-rich air is drifting out. Asch pushes it open, stunner ready. He looks right, looks left—and then stands staring at the sight before him. The others crowd in behind.

The big bridge is almost empty. To their right and forward is the pilot's well, with two Ziello figures slumped, half-off the couches. To their left is the front of a lighted herbarium—not a hydroponics set-up, among these water-shy people—which somehow looks wrong. Directly in front of them, on the floor, is a small creamy-furred alien which seems to be feebly trying to crawl toward the herbarium. It is visibly gasping for breath. Huge sleep-chests, with occupancy lights on, stand against the far side of the hull.

"Hello!" says Asch. "We come help. What, ah, what bad thing here?"

But the figure on the deck makes no response, only gasps harder.

Dinger and Shara go to it. It's an attractive little creature, rather like the antique toy called a teddy-bear; but its pink mouth is open, its face

screwed up as though strangling. To their questions it says nothing, but only continues to try to crawl toward the shelves of plants.

"Let us help you," Shara says. They each put a gloved arm under the alien's upper arms—it is shaped like a big Ziello—though only about half its height—and start to carry it toward the bank of plant-trays. As they lift its head it makes a sound of protest, so they let it drag, and merely pull it towards the trays.

Once there, the creature suddenly writhes from their hands and rises up, thrusting its snout and head in among the lichen-like, reddish plants and breathing deeply.

"Something's wrong with their set-up—look, the stuff is almost all dead!" Dinger waves a hand over the stand of plants, and they suddenly crumble to powder in the wake of his moving arm. "They're just dust, standing there!"

"The trouble must be lack of whatever these put out. Look, they've rigged an emergency collector." Asch points to a long air-scoop along the front of the bank, which feeds into a funnel-shaped duct. "That runs over to the pilot couches."

"What those things put out is CO_2," says Dinger. "Carbon dioxide. At least the ones I examined did. That makes sense, see, that fan is driving the stuff toward this front edge. It's heavier than air, so it would flow down into this collector. They must *need* CO_2 in their air-mix. Something happened to their set-up and they're dying without it."

"What has carbon dioxide in it?" asks Shara practically. "I know—our breath!" Her face-plate is open. She stoops to the gasping little alien and gently exhales across its muzzle. The creature suddenly inhales greedily, and lifts its face to almost touch her nose.

Captain Asch and Torrane have been investigating the big aliens in the pilot well.

"It's Zilla and Krimheen," Torrane tells them. "They're semi-conscious. Wearing nose-masks connected to that collector. Krimheen has a death-grip on some kind of gun."

"I don't think those masks are doing them much good by now," Dinger observes. "There's only a few plants left alive in here. It's CO_2 they're short of. I'll try disconnecting those hoses and you each breathe into one. Our exhaled breath has about four percent CO_2, that must be pretty close to their atmosphere. If it'd been over five we'd have felt it."

"Our analysis showed three point six," Asch confirms him.

Dinger has unscrewed Zilla's hose from the central pipe. "Here, Torry."

Torrane takes the hose and blows into it. As his breath reaches Zilla, she gives a convulsive gasp, and another. In a minim her eyes open, focus wonderingly on them. Her mouth is free to talk.

"Zhumanor!" she exclaims feebly. "No do bad thing!"

"We Yoomans, no Zhamanor," Asch tells her. "We no do bad things."

Dinger has the big alien captain's hose free. He hands it to Asch. "Rank hath its privilege," he quotes wryly. Asch takes it, and presently Krimheen stirs and wakes.

His first move is to jerk loose the hose and point the weapon at Asch. "I catch you!"

"Oh, mother," says Dinger disgustedly. As Krimheen chokes, strangles, and slumps back into unconsciousness, Asch disengages the gun and lays it atop the control board. Dinger gives the big alien measured breaths.

"You'll have to take him over, Captain," he tells Asch. "I got to go get a bunch of supplies—fire extinguishers, one of the CO_2 cannisters for our hydroponics, plus anything I can think of."

"I've thought of . . . something, but someone . . . will have to go EVA," says Torrane between breaths. "That dry ice . . . around our vent. If . . . it's in the shade."

Dinger runs to the alien's big viewport. "By the gods, it is. It'll keep till I get the easy stuff rigged. Torry, you're a genius. I should have thought of that!"

"Only at . . . times," says Torrane. "The prospect of giving mouth-to-mouth . . . resuscitation for a couple of years . . . stimulated me."

There follows an awkward, hectic time of trying to arrange the aliens in some reasonable manner so that a conference can be had. It becomes soon apparent that Torrane's vision of prolonged mouth-to-mouth revival is only for emergencies; the aliens' noses are becoming painfully burned by the moisture in the Humans' breaths. Zilla shows them this; Captain Krimheen remains scornfully stoic and silent, watching their every move. After Zilla has replenished her CO_2 levels, she finds that she can be without it for brief periods, and volunteers to go to their medical supplies for some salve—"good thing nose."

But when she rises to hurry across the deck, her usual fluid hopping gait has changed to a shuffling run. Moreover, her upper arms hang limp, and her tail flails about loosely.

"Why me same you?" she demands. "Same Zhumanor? No arms! See—You same!" She points to Captain Krimheen, and they realize he has kept his normally active upper arms folded close to his body. Yes, he had held the weapon in one of his larger, rough-work lower hands, too, and his tail hangs limp.

"They're getting Human-hallucinations!" Shara exclaims. "Remember?"

"It certainly looks like it," Asch admits.

As Zilla roots her pot of salve out of a drawer in the aft wall, they try to explain to her their own reverse problem in this part of space. "We think we same you, on Zieltan." Krimheen, silent, is following intently.

"We make tails same we think." Something of the idea apparently gets across, but they have no common word for "feeling."

When Zilla, starting to gasp, stumbles back with her salve, her illusion is so strong that the image of a red-skinned girl running across the deck flickers in Torrane's head. She snatches up their interconnecting hose, and fairly sucks at his breath. Breath of my breath, he thinks, and for an instant feels an intense protectiveness. The little being is far from home, at the mercy of aliens for her very life. He beams at her; maybe this gets across a little, too. The idea of war between them looms behind Krimheen. An obscenity.

Krimheen haughtily accepts the burn-salve from Zilla, but when it comes to the idea that they should get their heads down lower, where CO_2 is accumulating, he is adamant. Zilla however is acquiescent, and stretches out comfortably, hand-moving her tail, on a carpeted area of the well. "It's a natural heavy gas-sink," Dinger says. "Thank the Lords they weren't up high, or they'd be dead."

He is arranging fire-extinguisher foam in the gas-collector funnel. "There's a slow fan in that duct," he tells them. "It goes in by gravity, and then the fan pushes it to them. Nice. Try them on it now. Screw your ends into that central pipe. If it seems like they have enough, Shara, you can bring your patient over and hook it in too. I saw an extra nose-piece down there."

They do this, and the arrangement seems to work well, provided some Human stands by to refill the CO_2 input.

When Shara carries the strange little alien over, its big eye is oozing a bluish powder. "Pain from its muzzle, I think," Shara says. "Its name is Tomlo."

Zilla swabs salve on its mouth-burns from Shara's breath. "Is murnoo," she tells them. "Murnoo for Ziello, eh, children. Is Ziello but no same. Good murnoo," she assures it. "Die soon."

"I ca', I ta'k he'p," the thing says feebly but proudly.

"It saved your lives," Shara says indignantly. "I mean, it help you no die."

"Yes, good Tomlo. Is old, die soon."

The mystery remains.

As to what happened to the air-plant, this also is obscure. Zilla seems to be trying to say that the plants unexpectedly formed flowers and seed, and died at the end of that cycle, an apparently rare event. "Probably they expected to be in cold-sleep, or back at Zieltan," Torrane says. "I think she's saying that it'll regrow; there do seem to be seedlings coming . . . This crisis may come to an end if the whole bank regenerates."

"And that reminds me!" Dinger slaps his head. "Brain, wake up!" He hastens out the big port and back into Riftrunner while Torrane and

Shara are getting Tomlo into a nose-piece and showing it how to draw from the central duct.

Dinger returns with a big plastic wad, which proves to contain the plants he dug up at the space-port.

"Good for air? I put in there?" he asks the alien captain. Krimheen unbends enough to give the Ziell an affirmative chin-jerk. Zilla is ecstatic.

"Oh, good! Oh, good! Come more quick now!" She shuffle-hops over to help him bury the roots of the first one, then buries her nose in it. "Zieltan," she says lovingly. "Beau-ti-ful Zieltan," before she gasps and has to return to the well.

"You talk Galactic more good," Torrane tells her.

"We learn, we work, learn," she replies. "Before sleep."

"All right," says Asch who has been quietly and thoroughly examining the bridge and its workings. "Now is time we talk. I want talk. You listen, ah, you want hear me?" His question to Krimheen hangs in the air, finally getting a reluctant assent-nod from the alien. "Good."

But he notices that Krimheen has been glancing at the row of sleep-chests, in which presumably are the rest of the crew. Zilla has intimated that they went in when the plants first started to go bad. Two on the right end are dark; it is the lighted one next to these that Krimheen seems concerned with. Asch walks over and points to it. "Trouble?" he asks.

Krimheen gives a curt "No" chin-point. But Zilla says, "Malloreen sick." She puts her hand on her long chest and makes a fast, flapping movement, at the same time pantomiming a person gasping for air. "No go box quick e-nough."

Krimheen grunts disgustedly at these admissions to the enemy.

Asch considers. A struggle with asphixiation can mean trouble for a wonky heart—assuming these aliens have pumps for whatever flows in their veins, as most of them do. But . . . "Do we have enough CO_2 for one more Ziello?" he asks Dinger. "Can you estimate time?"

Dinger looks sharply at the slowly sinking foam-level in the collector and calculates their reserves.

"I'd say . . . with four, two days. Forty-eight hours. But then something *has* to happen. Like, they all get in the chests."

Asch walks back and approaches Krimheen, holding up a sheet of plastic to protect the alien from the water-vapor of his breath.

"Captain Krimheen. We want help. No do bad thing. If sick people—" he repeats Zilla's flapping-heart gesture "—sick people go in sleep box, is no good. Bad. You know I say true?" Krimheen watches him grimly. "We have good air for four Ziellor for two days, if this people come out. Four Ziellor, two days. Now; you think you Number Two ship—" He

points back at their course "—you fuel ship come in two days. Have more good air for you?"

If Krimheen is surprised that they have guessed that he has reinforcements coming, he shows no sign, but only remains staring hard at Asch with his great single eye above the nose-piece.

"All right," Asch sighs. "Try another way. Now you know how much air you have . . . You want we open box, help Malloreen?"

"Captain," says Dinger, as the alien stirs, frowns, "I think he's too uncomfortable, tied down to that nose-tube. Suppose I get them some dry ice in a bag, so they can move around?"

"Good thought."

"I'll go with you," says Shara. "We're almost suited up." They had kept on the clumsy suits as the easiest way of avoiding moisture-burning the aliens.

They go out through the big port so they can use Riftrunner's EVA exit. While they're gone, Torrane tries to tell Zilla what they're up to, and teaches her the name "See-Oh-Two" by a series of gestures that has her giggling. He's pleased to see she hasn't lost the chortling laugh he remembers from Zieltan; finds himself thinking of her as a girl rather than an alien. Her work-suit is an attractive silky stuff, nicer than theirs.

Dinger and Shara return with four deep insulated tumblers and a bundle of dry-ice chips in a quilted bag.

"We've got to move our ship in a couple of hours, or that vent will be in sunlight," Dinger warns.

Shara tries to explain that the stuff will turn to gas without making a liquid, but the concept of subliming is beyond their language capability. The aliens seem unfamiliar with frozen CO_2. "Well, they're not chemists or engineers," Torrane says. "How many of us have seen frozen oxygen?"

They hand each alien a tumbler containing chips of dry ice, pantomime that they are to sniff it as needed. "Cold! Very cold! No touch!"

But Zilla has already probed the mysterious stuff; a squeal, and she puts her finger in her mouth. Shara hugs her and goes for the salve. The finger is startlingly Human.

"I do bad thing," Zilla says. "Same children." From Krimheen comes a faint snort. He now removes his nose-piece, picks up the tumbler cautiously, and shuffle-walks with as much dignity as he can over to the sleep-chest holding the supposedly sick Malloreen.

As Dinger had guessed, the regained freedom to move has loosened his reserve. "Yes," he says slowly. "O-pen." And stands back, waiting for the Humans to obey.

Asch steps back with him, thinking that his guess at Ziellan reinforcements is now a certainty. Within two days—possibly much

sooner—they will be outnumbered, maybe out-run and under fire. Not good.

Zilla shows Torrane and Dinger how the big sleep-chest works, and punches it onto waking-opening cycle. Apparently it doesn't decant its occupant, as the Human ones do; when the cycle is over, the heavy outer lid lifts, revealing a light inner cover. Presumably it has injected or otherwise administered a hibernation-stasis breaker to Malloreen. But the inner cover heaves, falls back; Malloreen is too weak to throw it open. Dinger grabs it and flings it wide, revealing a reddish-colored Ziello twisting and starting to choke. Dinger whips a tumbler of dry-ice under the alien's nose, and holds his head, while Zilla bends over him, speaking reassurances. As the CO_2 gets to him, Malloreen relaxes and lies back. They can see that he looks unhealthy; his brown velvet fur is lusterless, his big eye is hollow and half-closed.

Dinger has produced a stethoscope. He applies it first to Zilla's clothed chest to hear a normal Ziellan heart, and then brings it down to Malloreen's.

"Oo-oof. Bad. If he were a Human, I'd say a goner without help. Heart's ragged and fluttery; instead of a steady thrum I'm getting clusters, and some kind of crazy PTL beats." He addresses Zilla and Krimheen. "You have good thing for heart?"

"N-No . . ." Krimheen chin-points negatively.

"Who is people for sick, here?"

Zilla points in the sleep-chest. "Malloreen."

"It would be. Cap'n, I think Malloreen's their medico . . . If he were a Human, I'd try digitalis. There's no chance that drug is native to Zieltan, it's originally from a Terran plant. But maybe anything's better than watching him pass out." He bends to the med-kit, extracts a vial.

"Captain Krimheen, here is Human thing, good for heart. But I think no good for Ziello. No is bad thing, see—" He cracks half a tab, and swallows it. "You have no thing for Ziello. He very bad, no live. You want I try this?"

Krimheen approaches the chest, looks down. Dinger hands him the stethoscope, with which he seems familiar, and motions to him to listen through it. His face changes to what even the Humans can read as a bleak expression.

"Shall I try this?" Dinger asks.

Krimheen's eyelid droops. Slowly he nods his chin: Affirmative. Then he stoops over and says something in Ziellan to Malloreen, brief and grave.

"Oh gods," whispers Shara. "I think he's saying goodbye."

"I don't want him to die in there," says Asch. "Shara, fix up that place in the well where Zilla was, that'll give him the best air."

Dinger has managed to get a tab of digitalis into the alien's mouth, with Zilla persuading him to swallow. He gives one puzzled, despairing look about, but is too weak to care why aliens he thinks of as evil Zhumanor are ministering to him. His eye closes, nor does it open while they lift him gently out of the chest and carry him over to the well. He is half suited-up; they pull the stiff fabric off to ease him, and put a thin pillow under his head, in the deeper part of the well. He is slight, slender, perhaps quite young. Dinger pulls one of the nose-pieces over and ties it on him, and Zilla tries to tell him to breathe through it about every ten breaths. But it's doubtful he understands.

All they can do for him now is wait. And every minim brings that Ziellan ship, or ships, closer. Captain Asch must parley with Krimheen now.

Krimheen has returned to his pilot's chair, turned so he can keep an eye on Malloreen. Asch seats himself on the well's step.

"Captain Krimheen. Number one, we no catch you. We come help you, no more. And we want talk. No fight. When you no sick, we go to our ship—" he points, gestures "—and we go. We give you all our CO_2. We go. You go where you want. You hear?" he asks, trying to convey cordiality.

But as he speaks, he realizes he cannot mean this. To turn Krimheen loose in his present frame of mind would be to risk the terrible danger that he might follow someone or something to FedBase—blow it up on sight—and go on a glory-trip through the Federation, blowing up colonies until his missiles ran out. Or, if he returned to Zieltan, he might well return with hostile forces . . . No; Asch must somehow soften him up, keep him in contact.

"We *want* you come Federation, look Federation, say Hello. Federation no do bad things you. No catch you. Federation want peace. No fighting, no war—" And here Asch delivers a shortened version of his speech that was never heard.

Krimheen listens impassively. He seems abstracted, as though half his mind is on something else. On Malloreen, Asch hopes.

Shara has jumped up meanwhile and gone over to their ship. She returns with an armful of holographs. "Maybe he'd like to see the base," she whispers to Asch. "And I brought a starfield of the Rift."

This gives Asch an idea. He stands the big holo up before Krimheen, and comes beside him, taking care with his breath. "Captain, see. Here we are. Here is Zieltan, and the—give me the word, Shar—the Allowateera." He draws a big vague circle on the northern side of the Rift. "And here—" he makes a similar circle on the south "—is Federation. My base here, more bases here, here, here." His finger runs along the fringes, eastward. "And *here*—" he points to the far southeast— *"Here*

are the Black Worlds. Black Worlds no in Federation. Is bad people. Federation fight Black Worlds. And here," he points to the Ziello side of them, "I think here is your fleet. You ships fighting Zhumanor. Yes?" Krimheen only blinks once. "Anyway, I think so. Now look. Is good way for you to go home—" Oops, he has overrun the Captain's Galactic word-power. But Zilla has come beside them, and translates.

"You come to Nine Hundred with me, say Hello. Then you go east on Federation side, say Hello at bases here, here, here, get fuel, air, whatever you need, and come to your ships here. More good than go back long way—" He traces the route back to Zieltan and through Ziellan space around to far south-east. "See is more long? Go back by Federation more quick. More good. Yes?"

Krimheen seems to come out of his trance. "Is good plan," he says carefully. But Asch detects some overtone, as though the alien were deciding a purely hypothetical question. Uneasily, Asch sits back.

"Show him the base holos, Shara. I'm gibbered dry."

With help from Zilla, Shara starts handing him the colorful holographs. "This topside landing . . . this Number One port . . . this meeting-hall, er, place . . . this big chief in office, name Exec . . . This Captain Asch's mate—mate, Zilla? Yes. She in cold-sleep now . . . Place for eating . . . Place for people who come see, say Hello. You like stay in this place?"

Zilla is exclaiming excitedly at the exotic scenes. But Krimheen glances at the guest-rooms critically, and points to a fountain. "This . . . wa-teh?"

"Oh yes, I forgot—you no want, we stop it quick."

The show winds to an end. Asch gets up to confront Krimheen.

"Well, what you think, Captain Krimheen? You want come to FedBase with me, go back to your ships by Federation?"

To his surprise, Krimheen again inclines his head yes, saying judiciously, "Good plan." But again, it is as if in abstract approval. Well, Asch has done all he can on the big issues. Base diplomatics will have to take it from here. Now for their practical problem—fuel.

Krimheen's resupply of fuel will obviously arrive first; theirs may not come for . . . years—don't think of it. So Asch will have to persuade Krimheen to let him hook on, and, when he is refuelled, tow Riftrunner to FedBase. No problem with that in space, once acceleration has been achieved; and surely this huge craft can manage that.

"Good. Now, how we get to base?" he begins. "I no have fuel, you no have fuel. Federation come here, but your Number Two ship come more quick."

Krimheen is listening with sudden intensity. Asch makes the motion of joining two ships together with his hands. "You want use that big port

for you fuel ship, I think?" And he goes on to the complex question of where and how to hook up, in which Dinger joins them.

"We have to move our ship now," he says. "Bad for sun to come on ship. CO_2 go!"

With Zilla and Shara's help, the concept is explained, and the question of where to dock their ship is put to the alien, who is keenly attentive. He takes up his dry-ice tumbler, and goes to the port to examine their docking mechanism. Then he seems to consult some inner complexities, and comes back to the well, where he points to the hull alongside and behind the pilot's chair.

"Is port for, ah, for trouble. You come here."

"An emergency port. He thinks our lock will fit it. Good thing! And it's on the shady side. Let's move her right now, Captain."

"Green. Right, Dinger, I think you and I can do it. Captain Krimheen, my ship come here now?"

"Yes." With emphatic chin-nod.

And in a very few minim Torrane and Shara find themselves alone on the alien bridge, watching through the big viewport as Riftrunner, looking very small, pulls away.

After a lonely time, there comes a grating jar at the warship's bow. They go behind the pilot's chair, and remove some equipment and padding, revealing an emergency lock. From beyond it sound grindings and clankings.

"Open up!" comes Asch's muffled voice. They do, revealing a tunnel crawl-through onto which Riftrunner is docked and locked.

Captain Asch crawls through to them, looking pleased. "All secure. I think that'll hold her on through a gravity vortex. This ship is old, but her fittings are well made. Captain Krimheen, your ship good ship!"

But Krimheen has turned away, and is suddenly intent on his sensor bank. When he turns back, he is a changed being, all abstractedness gone. He picks up his caller, and barks a phrase in Ziellan. There is an answering faint voice from the receiver.

"My fuel ship come," he announces. There is an odd gleam in his eye.

"Well, good!" says Shara. "Now we all go to FedBase. When we start?"

Captain Asch says nothing, but watches Krimheen.

Krimheen gets ponderously to his feet.

"You plan good," he says heavily. "You plan . . . very . . . good—for *you*. You Zhumanor catch me, catch two ships. Very good for you. But I think, No!"

With a sudden uncoiling movement he has grabbed Shara round the neck, and next instant is holding a small weapon to her head.

"You . . . now . . . go . . . in . . . sleep-boxes. Yes! You think you catch me. I catch you. You go to Zieltan!"

In the astounded silence, Zillanoy cries, "No! What for, this?" Then she switches to Ziellan and fires protests at Krimheen.

"Oh, by the All!" exclaims Dinger disgustedly.

A stunner has leapt into Captain Asch's fist. But Krimheen has Shara over his front, covering him. No attempt at a shoot-out will work, with that thing at Shara's head. Even if they could take over the warship from him, it's out of fuel. And his relief-ship is near. They can't get away.

Sick at heart, blazingly angry with himself for having been fooled, Asch tries to think coolly. Their whole effort has failed—the big alien captain hasn't changed his mind-set. He still believes they may be some kind of Black Worlds operation. Even if he has some doubts, they only strengthen his intention to get the Humans back to Zieltan, where all can be straightened out—under Ziello control.

And that would mean years of imprisonment, of interrogation; chances are they'd never see home again. Neither he nor the others will endure that. Well, they have the means, the means of desperation, to avoid it. He tongues the lethal little fake tooth. Has it really come to this?

Once they consent to go in the sleep-chests, they're helpless. They'll wake up in Zieltan, under guard. And Riftrunner has no fuel; there's no hope of escape in her. Which means, no hope.

And worse—when the Federation gets here and finds everyone gone, they'll assume he was destroyed or taken. Which is true—they *are* taken. The Fed will assume that the Ziellor are at war with them up here, in addition to the shootings out east. So the Fed will arm, and think about retaliation . . . Has Riftrunner started Galactic war? It looks like it.

What can he do? What can he do, but talk as long as he can?—to this obtusely suspicious military alien. Talk that's already failed once.

If it fails again, there's nothing to do but bite down on the deadly little thing in their jaws.

As these thoughts race through Asch's head, Krimheen is saying: "I want guns. Zillanoy!"

Zilla is staring at the scene, eye wide with astonishment and dismay. Now she starts to protest in Ziellan, but the big alien tightens his grip so that Shara involuntarily yelps, gasping for air against his powerful lower arm.

"No! No!" Zilla cries. Krimheen hisses something at her in Ziellan, and tightens his grip still more. Reluctantly, Zilla goes to Asch, holding out her hand. He gives her the weapon.

"Two more," says Krimheen. Dingañar and Torrane surrender their stunners.

"Now! You go in sleep-boxes! Go, *na* I kill this one. Finish with Zhuman thing!"

"Don't . . . let him . . . blackmail you," Shara gasps. "I'll die . . . first."

"No talk!" snaps Krimheen. "Go!"

But Asch says gently, "No heroics yet, Lieutenant Sharana. Krimheen! I no go. You want kill me? What good this?"

"I won't go either," says Dinger, and Torrane says, "No."

"Go!" Krimheen tightens his grip until Shara cries out again.

"Captain Krimheen," says Asch desperately, "You no know Yoomans. We want die, we die. If you do bad things, we die. You have four dead Yoomans, one small ship—Federation give you ship same that—what good? If you do bad thing Shara, she die. Why you do bad thing? We saved your cursed lives—we help you no die, we give you all our CO_2. Why you make war?"

Krimheen only blinks a couple of times, as if a fly was bothering him. Zilla chatters at him. Incongruously, he has to take a sniff of breath from the Human tumbler he holds in his upper hand.

"So die," he says. But not, Asch thinks, with full conviction.

Just then Dinger gives an exclamation.

"Look at Malloreen, hey!"—and runs to the well beside Krimheen and Shara.

All turn to see. Malloreen is moving, is propping himself up on an elbow. Dinger puts his stethoscope to the young alien's chest, and whistles. "By the gods—his heart's compensated! It's almost steady."

He looks up at Krimheen and Shara. She has taken advantage of the distraction to get a hand behind Krimheen's arm, and is trying to look down at Malloreen.

Dinger holds out the stethoscope. "Here, Captain Krimheen, take a listen. His heart is good . . . I think I give one more heart-thing. What you think?"

Krimheen takes the instrument and bends low over Malloreen, ignoring that he has crumpled Shara. Dinger holds the pick-up to the patient's chest; Krimheen listens intently. Then he straightens up—Shara scrambling with him—and says as if to himself, "Is good." He looks down at Malloreen and says something more in Ziellan; an unmistakable softening of his features, almost a smile, is seen by all. Either this alien Captain is deeply involved with his crew, or Malloreen means something special to him, Asch thinks.

As Krimheen turns to go back to his command post, he nearly trips over a small figure on the floor by his feet. It's Tomlo.

"No fight!" it pleads. "No fight. Is good peopre. No kill."

Krimheen addresses it sharply in Ziellan, but the little creature persists. "Tomlo unne'stan' fight!" it sobs. "Fight bad."

Zilla draws it away gently, and returns to help Dinger administer another tab of digitalis to Malloreen. Malloreen gasps out what seems to be a question. They catch the word, *Zhumanor*.

Shara, from Krimheen's grip, suddenly speaks up. "No Zhumanor! We Yoomans."

Krimheen grunts angrily, feeling control of the confrontation slipping away. "Yoomanor—Zhumanor," he says. "You look same Zhuman, you talk same Zhuman, you smell same Zhuman, you have wa-teh same Zhuman—"

"No!" Shara interrupts him twisting round. "Maybe we look Zhuman, talk Zhuman, maybe we have water in us—but we no *smell* same Zhuman! Zhumanor smell bad!" She looks up at her big captor, with the hint of a mischievous smile.

"Talk finish!" Exasperated, Krimheen regains his arm-hold on her neck with a jolt that sends her lower jaw upward. There's an audible click of teeth.

"Now—" begins Krimheen, but breaks off as he sees the intensity which which the others are staring at the woman in his arm. He looks down too, as a great shudder racks her from feet to shoulders. Her head drops sideways. "Uh-h-h," she sighs—a strange, mournful sound. Krimheen loosens his arm-grip. Unsupported, Shara crumples to the floor at his feet.

One last shudder convulses her, so that she lies supine. A trace of vomit bubbles from her mouth.

"Oh my gods—you've killed her!" Dinger cries, and dives down on the floor by her, his head on her chest.

Torrane has drawn closer to Zilla, who is staring horrified. "Sh-She *dead*?" Torrane nods, and opens his mouth to say more, when Captain Asch's voice cuts him off.

Under his shock and grief, Asch has been thinking hard. "There will be no explications," he says sharply, choosing the word with care. "This is a terrible happening. But Shara would want it to count for something, she knew the stakes are peace or an unspeakable war. . . . Captain Krimheen: I told you—I talk you—you no know Yoomans. I talk you, no do bad thing, Shara, she die. Now you see Yoomans no Zhumanor? We help you sick friend—" Asch points to Malloreen, who is gazing at the scene with large, uncomprehending eye. "Why you kill our friend?"

As he says this, the sight of the figure on the floor, and his own past tense for one who a moment before had been a living, irrepressibly merry girl, chokes him up. Through blurred eyes he sees that Krimheen looks a shade uncertain. Good. "Zilla," he asks, "You have word for *accident*? Thing that come when no want?"

Confusedly, sniffling, she checks her Human talkie-book. "Mis-stake? I think is mis-stake?"

"I no want kill . . . this Yooman," Krimheen says reluctantly.

"Right. And you no want kill us, I think? . . . Zilla, tell him this is

what will come to us all if he do same. And then come war with Federation. Bad war. What he do now very big. He must think big. Tell him he must come to Federation with us, talk what mistake he do. Then will be no war—will come peace!"

"Good." Zilla takes a sniff of her CO_2 and addresses the big captain squarely, in resonant-sounding Ziellan phrases. He seems to listen, but at her repeated mention of the *Federation*, he suddenly bursts out:

"Feder-ation! Feder-ation! I no see Feder-ation, I no *coluf* Feder-ation! I no know Feder-ation. I think you Feder-ation big *Magglegg*! I see four—three—Zhumanor, *na* Yoomanss. I think you want I go Zhumanor base. Feder-ation, I sick!"

Asch holds his temper with all his might. "No. Federation is big, is same like Allowateera. No make one more mis-stake! Federation make bad war, have big ships. But Federation no want war. Federation want make friends."

Krimheen seems to think this over, glancing down at where Dinger and Torrane sit guard beside Shara's composed body, glancing at Malloreen. "What is *friends*?"

"I know," says Zillanoy. Asch silently thanks whoever made up the talking books that the word is there for Zilla to explain. It is becoming unhappily clear to him that even if Krimheen assents to their plan, in the immediate influence of Shara's sudden death, his consent could come unstuck again at any moment. When his ship is here, say; and at every step of the way, he will have to be re-persuaded all over again. Oh, if only the Federation—but don't think of it. It's up to him alone.

"Be friends," he goes on when Zilla has finished. "Friends is this: When we come here, you sick. You go die. Very easy, very quick we kill you, take ship. But do we catch you, kill you? Do we do bad things? No! Same friends, we do all good things. We work help you no die. Look Malloreen! We do same friends, we do same Federation. Now I want you come Federation, say Hello, look we good people. You talk of Zieltan, make friends. That's all, no more! Oh, don't you see, you obdurate ape—we *must* be friends or there will come a terrible war! Long, long war, everybody die. Zieltan die . . . We must trust one another—trust one another or die!"

Krimheen says nothing for a moment. Then he asks, "What this, *trust*?"

"*Trust* . . ." Asch has the feeling that deeper and deeper waters are swirling round him, while he is armed only with a leaden splinter. Vaguely he realizes that Krimheen now has his weapon pointed, as if absentmindedly, at his head. No matter. "*Trust* is—I know you talk true, you know I talk true. And I know you want do good things, you know I want do good things . . . Look! I show you *trust*: If you say you go FedBase, we go in sleep-boxes. I *trust* you talk true. See?"

Krimheen is frowning hard. "You do . . . this? You go in sleep-boxes?"

Asch holds up a hand. "If—*if* you say you go to FedBase. We trust you talk true, no go to Zieltan. We go in boxes. What you say?"

Is he crazy? Asch wonders. To venture all on this alien mind? Well, if it fails, they can always use the damned little kill-teeth. He stares hard, trying to read Krimheen—but he can't; he knows only that the alien has turned on them once, after they had saved his life.

Krimheen stares back, steel-hard. Then he glances at Malloreen, and his face changes slightly, in what manner Asch can't tell.

"Fede—" Krimheen starts.

But what he is about to say is never known.

A cutting flash hits the view-ports, and their artificial gravity judders. All turn to look outside.

Floating an indeterminate distance away is a shiny metal sphere. A few antennae-like devices protrude from it. As they stare at it, the callers in both ships crackle and boom.

Krimheen quickly turns his volume down, still staring at the strange vessel

"Hello?" says a Federation voice. It sounds young and excited. "Ah, Riftrunner there? Federation Experimental FTL craft XK-five calling Riftrunner. They tell me you need a lift."

The voice becomes even more informal. "How about thirty-six hours round trip? I had breakfast at base this morning. Ah, and who's your big friends?"

" 'FTL!' " mutters Dinger, quick on the uptake. "By the All! We've been away a long time . . . Oh, Shara, Shara . . . Poor kid."

Before either of the astonished captains can reply, the voice gives a muffled squawk. "Hey—What's happening to me? I feel like I'm growing extra arms—and a tail?"

Captain Asch draws a deep relieved breath for the first time in a long while.

"I think," he says to Krimheen, "I think now you see our Federation!"

"And that was about it," FedBase Executive Jonne tells her visitor, who has been out of touch for many years.

"We ferried them here in three trips, after Krimheen's fuel-ship had arrived and docked on and got their air-plant started again. Captain Krimheen woke up his second-in-command and instructed him to proceed here, emitting a signal so they could be rendezvoused en route. And after he'd had a good look at Nine Hundred, he asked to go back to his ship so he could use their FTL communications to contact his fleet out east and get the attacks on Federation colonies called off.

"Of course it was horribly sad about Shara, dying like that so close to

home. But you know, we discovered that Captain K. felt genuinely bad about it? At the services, he suddenly unpinned a big decoration from his chest and laid it on her hands. Such a good gesture—and suitable too; her death certainly played a part in convincing him that we weren't Black Worlders, and averting war between his people and ours.

"Of course we turned ourselves inside-out to give Krimheen a royal-type reception. And the hospital staff was ready with a big roll-bed for Malloreen. He got steadily better, such a nice young person. What an uncanny thing, that digitalis worked on his heart! But apparently the neuro-electrical aspect of their bodies is quite similar to ours. The rest is wildly different from anything on this side of the Rift. A wonderful mystery, life forming in gas and dust-clouds.

"Their reproductive system is another wonderful mystery, too. At first we thought we were in for trouble—the little *murnoo*, Tomlo, dropped dead at the main entrance! But this seemed to be accepted as a form of their Ritual; they gathered round and sang a long song of thanksgiving for peace, in which I may say we all joined.

"Their housing here was no problem, once the nutrition staff had learned to synthesize palatable food. Of course we had their quarters air-conditioned to the right CO_2, and dry, with plenty of spare tanks. And we were working on a portable tank, until we found that they really were quite happy strolling round with their tumblers of dry ice. So we just assigned a courier to trail after them with a load of the stuff. We also assigned a nice girl as official translator—what a loss, Shara!—and she soon got on wonderfully with them both. Would you believe Captain K. turned out to have a keen sense of humor?

"It was his reception here that decided him to take a flying tour of the Fed via our FTL ship, while his warships proceeded straight out east. Zilla asked for Lieutenant Torrane to come along and help finish a Ziello-Human handbook they're working up. From what I hear, we may be having our first Ziello-Human romance. And the translator went along, too. I'm getting them back, though; for chauvinistic reasons I kind of want Nine Hundred to keep its lead as a center of Ziello expertise . . ."

Exec chuckles at her own pride, and picks up the bottle of Eldorado VIII wine they have been sharing.

"Let me refill yours, and have another of these—" she offers a plate of morpleases.

"The trade prospects look very good, don't they?" her visitor asks. "You say they don't have video technology. But they have, I gather, artificial gravity and FTL communication, which seems to be based on a different principle than our *c*-skip drive ships . . . Of course, the *c*-skip costs an arm and a leg to operate; after the first glory period of damn-the-costs flying, Central is making it clear it has to be reserved for bona fide life-

or-death emergencies. Unless the Ziello can cheapen it, they'll have to do the same thing."

"Of course. But the thing is, with both FTL transmission *and* transport, the chances of war by inadvertence go down exponentially . . . My gods! What a blessing!"

Exec leans back and focuses her grave eyes on her visitor.

"Do you realize how close we came to that? If it hadn't been for a dozen tiny things—blind chances—we'd be at war with the Harmony right now. We were closer even than Captain Asch knew; he knew that Humans had committed atrocities on those Ziello allies, but he wasn't aware that Ziello ships were already blowing up Federation planets in Sector Three Hundred. If nothing had happened to change our views of each other, we'd have blundered into full-scale war."

She sighs, sips her wine.

"The thing that impresses me—hells, *scares* my hair up— is the *precariousness* of the whole great balance. If any one of a host of little things had gone differently—a rain-shower not coming just when it did, say, we'd have had war.

"Only the whim of that alien girl to study the Black Worlders' language, and her return when she did, made everything that followed possible. It's as if the great issue rode, from moment to moment, on the tiny acts of individuals. Even that strange little being Tomlo carried the whole weight in its feathery paws when it bravely decided to call for help to the enemy, and let them in.

"Even poor Kathy's death played a part, by alerting Zilla to them. And Shara's putting in that fatal tooth, that made her die so easily, that gave Krimheen pause. We'll have to disabuse him about that one day, by the way . . .

"And if Malloreen hadn't been who he was—Krimheen's sister's son, the only child in their family; sheer luck that he was on that ship. And sheer luck that a plant-derived chemical the Ziello couldn't possibly have, worked on him. And sheer luck again that the FTL ship was ready—"

"But your moving stars and suns to get the use of it," her visitor puts in. "That wasn't exactly chance."

"Yes, I expect I was one of the tiny individuals for a moment . . . Oh, so many crucial little happenings tipped the enormous scales." She sighs again, more relaxed than she has been for many years, and smiles.

"And never forgetting the sheer indomitable will of Captain Asch, arguing over and over with a bull-headed, patriotic battleship commander with planet-breakers in his racks, and what he thought was the enemy in sight . . . I drink to that, to a man who rose to the challenge of defining *trust* in pidgin-Galactic—with a gun at his head!" ●

ON BOOKS by Norman Spinrad

THE NEUROMANTICS

Of late it would appear that we have a new literary movement within the SF field, the first group of SF writers to be labeled with a name since the "New Wave" of the 1960s. I refer, of course, to the so-called "Cyberpunks," though for reasons which I hope will eventually become apparent, I prefer to call the writers in question the "Neuromantics," a name suggested by Tappan King. Some of my reasons for wanting to change the nomenclature may be rather trivial, but some cut to the heart of the matter, and while a rose by any other name may smell as sweet, it's hard to imagine the Third Reich clicking its heels, saluting in unison, and chanting "Heil Schicklegruber!"

It is generally agreed that the generative novel of this movement is William Gibson's *Neuromancer*, and it is also generally agreed that the term "Cyberpunk" was coined by Gardner Dozois, who does not consider himself one, and who is not considered one by those who do, just as the term "New Wave" was coined by Judith Merril, a critic avidly sympathetic to the new SF of the 1960s, but not really a central practitioner thereof. So if we must have a label, I prefer "Neuromantics," a name coined from the title of a central work in the phenomenon, a term without pejorative connotation, and a more accurate description of what the phenomenon is all about, as we shall soon see.

But *do* we really need a name at all? After all, in the 1960s, one could, paradoxically enough, identify oneself as a card-carrying member of the "New Wave" by the very act of denying that any such phenomenon as the New Wave existed. The "New Wave," according to most of us labeled "New Wave" writers, was a post-facto critical description applied by others to writers who had little in common stylistically, ideologically, or even philosophically, save their dedication to the idea of diversity. Calling such a collection of iconoclastic individualists the "New Wave Movement" was a bit like speaking of well-ordered anarchy.

However, while there are many similarities between the New Wave of the 1960s and the Neuromantic movement of the 1980s, the denial that any such communal weltan-

shauung in fact exists is not one of them.

There *is* a core group of writers quite willing to declare their mutual literary kinship in the 1980s, even to the point of sometimes accepting the "Cyberpunk" label, under which rubric a number of them appeared on a somewhat disjointed panel at the 1985 North American Science Fiction Convention in Austin, Texas. The panelists in question were Bruce Sterling, John Shirley, Lewis Shiner, Pat Cadigan and Rudy Rucker. William Gibson was certainly there in spirit and reference if not in the flesh, a state of being quite appropriate to a Neuromantic. Other writers who have been claimed as antecedents and/or fellow travelers include Alfred Bester, Fritz Leiber, Cordwainer Smith, K.W. Jeter, and yours truly. And while there is no fiction magazine which serves as the Neuromantic showcase the way *New Worlds* did for the New Wave and no dominant editor like Michael Moorcock, there is a Neuromantic critical journal called *Cheap Truth* published pseudonymously out of Austin, and Ellen Datlow, fiction editor of *Omni*, has from time to time been willing to proclaim herself the "Queen of Punk SF," and has published many stories by these writers, including quite a few collaborations between them.

So we *are* dealing with some kind of real literary movement here, and, moreover, one whose existence is acknowledged by many of its key members. However, as we shall see, when it comes to the actual fiction being produced in the Neuromantic vein, there is more to it than the work of the writers who have thus far been willing to own to being "Cyberpunks."

The logical place to begin any discussion of the Neuromantic movement is, of course, William Gibson's Hugo, Nebula, and Philip K. Dick Award winning novel, *Neuromancer*, the archetypal template for the core group of writers, and the book most accurately described by the term "Cyberpunk."

Case, the "hero" of *Neuromancer* certainly has what one might fairly call a punk sensibility in the current extended meaning of the term. He is an ex-speed freak, and the ex not as a matter of his own choice, but courtesy of "therapeutic" tampering with his brain against his will. He is a marginal man living on the razor edge of the underworld of his future, and his sometime lady-love is a mercenary killer with permanently implanted mirror-shades.

So far we could be dealing with a not terribly atypical Harlan Ellison protagonist of a certain period. And indeed there is a strong Ellison influence underlying at least one aspect of the core Neuromantic sensibility.

For it was Ellison, writing SF and contemporary "gang" or "street" fiction simultaneously, who did the most to bring the sensibility, style, rhythm, and characters of the de-

mimonde of the street into the clean white middle class worlds of 1950s SF, though it would seem that William Burroughs might have been at least as direct an influence on Gibson. Certainly the Ellison oeuvre abounds with "punk" protagonists, in the 1950s sense of the word.

But by the end of the 1970s, "punk" had taken on new meanings, though curiously enough black leather jackets and defiantly artificial hairdos had once more become the trappings of a kind of rebellion. The black leather and DA punks of the 1950s were rebelling against Mom, Apple Pie, sexual repression, intellectuality, and the America of Dwight Eisenhower and Norman Rockwell, and their libidinal marching music was, interestingly enough, already primitively electronic, to wit, early primary stage rock and roll.

These punks disappeared into history in the 1960s, their fate being sealed when Bob Dylan and the Beatles began the transformation of rock and roll from the ass-kicking music of Elvis and street gangs into the music of the politically conscious transcendental revolutionary utopianism that spawned the Counterculture.

So the "punks" or "new wavers" who emerged towards the middle of the 1970s were not at all the same as the punks of the 1950s, despite the superficial trappings, for these *nouvelle* punks were in rebellion against the countercultural sensibilities of the *1960s*, not the long-gone innocent ennui of the 1950s.

What *they* were in rebellion against was the self-conscious artsiness of early 1970s rock, the failed laid-back utopianism of the Counterculture, mysticalism, and the naïve supposition that the future would be better if youthful idealism kept the faith. If the punks of the 1950s really *were* anti-intellectual hoods, the nouvelle punks of the 1970s were *intellectual* anti-intellectuals; not naïve natural nihilistic rebels without a cause, but *self-consciously* nihilistic pessimists capable of raising cynicism to a more or less coherent philosophy and sophisticated enough to know they were doing it.

Neuromancer's Case is a "Punk" in the nouvelle mode, an intellectual punk rather than a simple greaser, and it is the "cyber" half of the equation which informs his intellectuality. This is precisely what makes *Neuromancer* a watershed book, what distinguishes the Neuromantics from the New Wave, and what begins to define what this Neuromantic movement means to science fiction.

Case is the "Neuromancer" of the title, and the word is of course a pun on "necromancer," meaning magician, and "neuro," meaning pertaining to the nervous system. The Neuromancer is a contemporary (or in this case intermediate future) magician whose wizardry consists of directly interfacing his protoplasmic nervous system with the electronic nervous system of

the computersphere, manipulating it imagistically (and being manipulated by it) much as more traditional shamans interact imagistically with more traditional mythic realms via drugs or trance states.

Now of course as a science fictional idea, this is not exactly new. I did something like this myself in *Riding the Torch*, there is Vernor Vinge's *True Names*, Alfred Bester's *Golem 100*, and the recent endless spate of stories and novels in which human protagonists find themselves acting and living in some kind of "cyberspace." The Disney studio even did it in a special effects extravaganza called *Tron*.

But what *is* new, and what is esthetically critical, is that Gibson's Neuromancer is not a computer *wimp* or a computer *hacker* but a computer *punk*. A *cyberpunk*, if you will.

While certain hard science fiction writers have complained that Gibson's computer science is somewhat less than expertly rendered, even they, by the very act of even bothering to seriously criticize his scientific expertise in this area, are acknowledging that *Neuromancer* *is* a work of hard science fiction, in terms of its content.

But what *really* upsets the hard science types about the book, aside from the scientific quibbles, is that *stylistically* and *characterologically* *Neuromancer* is unlike any previous hard SF novel. And this seems to be a bit upsetting to the more literary types too, for congruent reasons.

Gibson writes hard science fiction.

But he doesn't write it like Heinlein or Poul Anderson or Hal Clement or even Gregory Benford.

Stylistically, philosophically, esthetically, and in terms of the consciousness-style of his protagonist, Gibson is instead a kinsman of Ellison, William Burroughs, the Michael Moorcock of the Jerry Cornelius stories, and, ahem, the Spinrad of "The Big Flash," *Bug Jack Barron*, or "Street Meat."

Neuromancer is that seeming contradiction in terms, a *New Wave* hard science fiction novel.

Neuromantic.

Neuro-romantic.

But also *new romantic*.

When Bob Dylan appeared at a Newport Folk Festival in the early 1960s playing an *electric* guitar, the assembled beats, bohemians, and folkies were scandalized. This was a folk festival, these people were intellectuals, Dylan was their hero and his lyrics spoke for what was later through this very instrumentality to become the spirit of the Counterculture.

But the electric guitar was the instrument of *rock and roll*, the music of pinheaded greasy hoods in black leather jackets, in British terms of the Rockers (the lumpen-proletariat skinheads), not of the Mods (nascent countercultural types).

Yes indeed, kiddies, difficult as

it is to believe now, once upon a time, Rock was regarded as *antithetical* to the spiritual, cultural, esthetic, and class values of the elitist bohemian realm that Rock itself, transmogrified by Dylan and the Beatles, was to transform into the shared values of an entire generation in the form of the Counterculture!

And there remained a strange contradiction at the heart of the Counterculture throughout the 1960s and well into the 1970s; to wit that its anti-technological ideology, the neo-Ludditism, the suspicion of the works of science and technology, the bucolic mysticism, the back to the soil movement, the ecological awareness, the whole tie-dyed ball of candle wax, was characteristically expressed by *rock and roll*, a musical mode whose dominant instruments were the electrically-amplified guitar and the entirely electronics-based synthesizer.

New Wave science fiction was also to a certain extent a Countercultural phenomenon, and the strident conflict between the New Wavers and SF's Old Guard mirrored and to some extent was only a literary aspect of the polarization and generational conflict going on in society at large.

We all know the litany. The New Wave stood for sexual liberation and cultural pluralism, and the Old Guard for traditional moral values. The New Wave stood for stylistic experimentalism, and the Old Guard for a good tale told in simple transparent prose. The New Wave was anti-Establishment and anti-war, and the Old Guard supported Our Boys in Viet Nam.

And the Old Guard was forever accusing the New Wave of being nihilistically against science and technology, while the New Wave chided the Old Guard for its naive assumption that the upward evolution of science and technology led ipso facto to the improvement of the human condition.

The point being that the political polarizations of the time led to the entirely false perception on *both* sides that there was an irreconcilable dichotomy between the things of science and the things of the spirit, between hard science fiction and stylistic experimentalism, between logical positivism and streetwise sensibility, between a science fiction grounded in rigorous scientific extrapolation, and a science fiction grounded in characterological realism, between computer hackers and hippies, between the scientific worldview and the romantic impulse.

It has taken us a long time to begin to understand that this dichotomy is an illusion. Yet we should have seen it all along, or rather heard it, for the expression of the romantic impulse through high tech instrumentalities is the heart of rock and roll.

Rock has always been the music of libidinal anarchy and the romantic and transcendental impulses; without this message, it just ain't rock and roll. Yet Rock has

also always been by definition *technological* music, for without the electric guitar and the synthesizer, it sure as shit ain't rock and roll either.

The ideological politics of the 1960s and early 1970s obscured this obvious truth, obscured our perception of the possibility, and indeed the actual existence, of high tech romanticism and cyborged transcendentalism. On one side, long natural hair, ecology, organic food, bucolic back to nature romanticism, Eastern mysticism, and doing your own thing. On the other side, the uptight, morally righteous, militaristic, coldly rational realm of science, technology, and the technocratic servants of Amerika with a K.

But in the middle 1970s the nouvelle punks rebelled against the anti-artificial anti-technological esthetic of the Counterculture, against what was seen as the reactionary wimpish denial of the esthetic possibilities of the technosphere. Out went flowery tie-dyed earth colors, and in came shiny black leather and high-tech high-gloss chrome. Out went rose-colored granny glasses and in came mirror-shades. Out went long natural hair and in came defiantly artificial spiked, color-frosted, and sculptured hair-dos.

A new, forthrightly high-tech, romanticism.

The nouvelle punks are not nose-to-the-grindstone technocrats but anarchistic rockers in the old romantic tradition. But they are rockers who have finally come to embrace wholeheartedly the real world that science and technology have made, the technosphere, the cybersphere, the reality of the last quarter of the twentieth century and as far ahead as the visionary eye can see.

So too the Neuromantics.

Some, like Gibson and especially John Shirley, *are* cyberpunks, in that much of their work is directly informed by the trappings and surface texture of contemporary rocker style. Others, like Bruce Sterling, Lewis Shiner, and Greg Bear (quite bemused to find himself on the Cyberpunk Panel in Austin), are writing stories set in milieus in which any sort of punk esthetic is entirely absent. Gibson, and even more so Sterling and Bear, are into scientific extrapolation quite as thoroughly as recognized hard SF writers like Larry Niven or Hal Clement, and then some.

But one way or another, none of the Neuromantics would seem to view scientific speculation as the be all and end all of their work, as the thematic core of what they are about. And while few of the others attempt quite the idiosyncratic edge of Gibson's prose, all of them focus directly on character with an intensity and subtlety that we do not associate with the virtues of traditional hard science fiction.

Nevertheless, the Neuromantics *are* writing hard science fiction by every positive definition of the term, just as they are also writing stories of character. For what they share

in common is a general subject of discourse intrinsic to both hard science fiction and characterological science fiction, and therefore arguably the core subject of all really ambitious science fiction, period.

Namely, how our increasingly intimate feedback relationship with the technosphere we are creating has been, is, and will be, altering our definition of what it means to be human itself.

John Shirley's latest novel, *Eclipse*, is as forthrightly and specifically political as any SF novel published in the past decade and a half and then some. Set fairly early in the next century, it uses multiple viewpoints to tell the complex story of a complex resistance to a complicated fascist conspiracy to take over the United States and Western Europe. Over the past few years, Shirley has spent quite a bit of time in Europe, and he has been writing political action thrillers under various names, and *Eclipse* shows it. One may argue with Shirley's politics, and no doubt many people will, but no science fiction writer has really dealt with sub rosa and not-so-sub-rosa international terror politics any more realistically than Shirley has done here, for the simple reason that you just can't get much more realistic about future politics than this. Shirley may not actually name names, but the movements and conspiracies in *Eclipse* clearly derive from movements and conspiracies already underway today. *Eclipse* is that current rarity, an angry, politically committed science fiction novel, and Shirley makes no bones about it.

What makes Shirley a card-carrying Neuromantic? Well, for one thing most of the characters in *Eclipse*, at any rate most of the sympathetic ones, derive from the same marginal underbelly of high tech society we see in *Neuromancer*, and Shirley's overall stylistic sensibility is even more self-consciously streetwise than Gibson's. But here we see this "punk" sensibility applied to very subtle and sophisticated political analysis, so that if we accept *political* science as a science, *Eclipse* is a hard science fiction novel quite literally with a vengeance.

More to the current point, perhaps, while there is plenty of conventional combat and action in *Eclipse*, the key arena of the struggle between the forces of religious-corporate fascism and the amorphous resistance is what Shirley calls the Grid, the international media net that permeates the planet. The fascist forces use it subliminally and subtly. Soviet society simply cannot cope with its existence. The resistance fights to gain a measure of access. The point being that what is perceived via our extended electronic senses has more psychic reality than actual events in the so-called real world, and hence *determines* political reality more certainly than the outcome of physical combat.

At the climax of *Eclipse* (alas, it

is the first book of a trilogy), the fascist SA forces literally crunch the Arc de Triomphe, the ultimate symbol of the resistance, under the treads of their juggernaut. But Rickenharp, rock musician resistance fighter, has occupied the top of the Arc with instruments, microphones, and amplifiers, and his final performance unto death before the world via the Grid transmutes the fact of the fascist triumph into a symbolic apotheosis of resistance, and Shirley makes you believe it.

This is about as romantic as the Neuromantics, read as New Romantics, can get, and it is entirely appropriate that the technological instrumentalities of this triumph of symbol over raw physical reality are the microphones, amplifiers, and electric guitar of rock and roll.

Eclipse may be more of a "cyberpunk" novel than a full-blown Neuromantic work, in that the hard science content is marginal, but the absolute thematic centrality of rock and roll to its climax is critical to a kind of ur-Neuromantic core sensibility. For Rickenharp's triumph at the end is a *cyborged* triumph made possible at all only through the electronic augmentation of his fleshly musical powers, and what it demonstrates in words of one syllable is that cyborgs, romantic cyborgs, *Neuromantic* cyborgs, have in fact been using technological augments for transcendental purposes ever since Dylan picked up that electric guitar. When it comes to the characteristic music of our times, we have all been accepting Neuromanticism as a given for a quarter of a century.

And *Eclipse* does one more thing. Rickenharp is a devotee of a drug called blue mesc, and it is shown to enhance his musical creativity, though not without psychic cost. Throughout the book Shirley draws the connection between electronic amplifications and alterations of the naturally evolved human being and chemical amplifications of same, reminding us of something else that we already know, that chemical alteration of consciousness is technology too, that it already permeates our culture, and that it is no accident that drugs and rock are so intimately intertwined. Electronic amplification and consciousness-altering drugs have *already* changed the parameters of the human sensorium, and altered, thereby, our perceptual and psychic definitions of what it means to be human.

Other Neuromantics carry the technological alteration of our definitions of humanity much further, and indeed it is precisely the *acceptance* of the technological evolution and alteration of our definition of our humanity, the *romantic* acceptance of the technological alteration of the species, rather than the more traditional posture of cautionary warnings against the dangers of same, which ultimately defines the Neuromantic sensibility.

Greg Bear, who wondered aloud what a square hard science type

like himself was doing up there on a panel with these cyberpunks in Austin, unwittingly answered his own question when he rather stunned all present, including yours truly, with the most radical Neuromantic statement uttered during the whole proceedings.

"How many of you think people will look recognizably human fifty years from now?" he asked the audience.

A forest of hands

"You're all wrong," Bear declared with his usual calm geniality.

In the short story version of Bear's "Blood Music," an experiment with biochips, that is with using DNA as read-write computer memory, goes awry. The altered molecules become *sapient*, that is, consciousness descends to the precellular level. These "noocytes" spread like a plague, and infect the human populace. People evolve (or devolve, depending on your point of view), into colonial organisms, each molecule of which is possessed of human-level intelligence. The noocytes end up dissolving the human forms into their constituent molecules, and humanity disappears, replaced entirely by the new form of intelligent life. Something of a scientific horror story.

But somehow, in the process of turning the short story into the novel, *Blood Music*, Bear turned around philosophically, and transformed himself into a Neuromantic. While the short story ends with the replacement of humanity by the noocytes, the novel goes on to explore the new world the noocytes make. The personalities of the vanished humans are replicated, multiplied, and stored on the noocyte level, they are treasured by the noocytes as obsolete but revered ancestors, achieving a kind of multiplexed immortality, among other things. We see the intelligence of a slightly retarded girl amplified by the translation of her personality to the "Noosphere." And the Noosphere itself becomes a kind of transcendent software reality, a realm of illusion, perhaps, but a higher state of being as well, ultimately detaching itself from the physical universe in a mystical apotheosis.

In the novel, Bear's attitude towards this supercession of humanity as we know it by this higher form of sapience, indeed this higher form of spirit, is approving, positive, romantic, *Neuromantic* in the extreme, for here we have an ultimate expression of the fusion of hard science and romantic transcendentalism, the transcendence of the physical universe itself via the instrumentality of science and technology.

However, even *Blood Music* is not quite *the* current ultimate expression of the Neuromantic ethos. While Bear brings human evolution to a convergent transcendent endpoint in which human form is subsumed by a higher consciousness which then transcends the physical universe, this is a notion with plenty of antecedents,

ranging from the works of Olaf Stapledon, to Arthur C. Clarke's *Childhood's End*, to, for that matter, Hindu and Buddhist scriptures. But Bruce Sterling's novel *Schismatrix* does something quite different and in its way even more radically disturbing to our cozy definitions of humanity.

Schismatrix is the somewhat picaresque story of diplomat and "sundog" (a kind of footloose high level space hobo) Abelard Lindsay's wanderings through the space and history of the solar system. From circumlunar space colony, to the asteroid belt, to the outer satellites, Lindsay wanders and machinates through a series of entirely artificial environments, conveniently giving the reader interior access to a long stretch of history in the process.

The historical dynamic of Sterling's solar system is the long, sometimes hostile, sometimes interpenetrating, dialectic between the Mechs and the Shapers. The Mechs are devotees of the arts and sciences of cyborging humans, and the Shapers are genetic engineers and biological transformers. Their endless conflicts are occasionally military, but mostly economic, diplomatic, technological, and esthetic, and as the fortunes of either side wax and wane, waves of defectors and refugees, including Lindsay, pass back and forth between them.

What finally begins to emerge out of all this is the Schismatrix of the title, a solar system of bewildering human complexity, in which the key concepts are "post-humanism" and "moving in clades."

"Post-humanism" is basically a description of the situation that evolves in the Schismatrix after decades of genetic engineering, cyborging, cloning, and combinations of the two lines of species-altering technology. The original human form has been so diversely transmogrified by these technologies that it persists mainly in a circumlunar colony set up as a kind of nature preserve. "Post-humanists" view this as positive, and not at all with horror.

"Moving in clades" is the current most extreme statement of the Neuromantic concept of human evolution through science and technology. Bear has humanity evolve first into a *singular* "post-human" physical form and then to a transcendence of the physical universe. But Sterling introduces the concept of evolutionary *multiplexity* through technology.

Evolution, chez Sterling, "moves in clades," or "daughter species"; it does not move linearly, it *radiates*. Successful species do not evolve in a straight line into a *single* daughter species, they radiate into a *multitude* of successor species.

The fully developed Schismatrix contains a vast complexity of "post-human" species, all the product, not of natural selection, but of technological development. "Lobsters" so cyborged into their spacesuits that they abhor atmospheres. Hu-

mans biologically adapted to methane oceans. Even an entire space colony whose interior structure is the altered protoplasm of a single woman, Lindsay's sometime lover, who retains her human personality.

Schismatrix is a thorough-going hard science fiction novel, in that all the scientific and technological extrapolation and all the descriptions of space habitats, and there certainly are plenty of both, is done with a rigor and attention to detail of which a Heinlein, Niven, or even Benford could be proud, and then some. But while the prose follows the straightforward transparent line we have come to expect from the hard science mode, Sterling uses it to ground his novel with equal attention to psychological depth and details. The characters, Lindsay in particular, no matter how weird their physiognomies become, are believably human on a psychological level.

And that, perhaps, is what makes *Schismatrix* even more radical and disturbing than *Blood Music*. Whereas Bear's singular "daughter" species, the Noosphere, is a mystical transcendent endpoint with precedents in Stapledon, Clarke, and perhaps most directly Teilhard de Chardin, and one which ultimately confronts primarily our spiritual definition of humanity, Sterling's nontranscendental rendering of the relatively ordinary and indisputably human psyches of all these physically transmogrified "human clades" forces us to confront the inevitable alteration of our *body images* by science and technology. Strangely enough it is Sterling, not Bear, at least at this juncture, who has gone the furthest in the Neuromantic direction proposed by Bear in Austin. For the people in *Schismatrix*, or more properly the peoples, while rendered as our psychic brothers and sisters, are, physically speaking, anything but recognizably human.

Through science and technology, we will meet the aliens, and they will be us.

Only at the very end does Sterling lapse into a somewhat vague transcendental denouement at variance with the hard-edged structure he has so carefully constructed, bringing Lindsay to an evolutionary endpoint in which we, and perhaps the author himself, cannot quite believe. For the whole thrust of the novel has been that there *is* no endpoint to the evolution of our species through science and technology, only an endless process of radiation.

Thus, perhaps, do the Neuromantics themselves shrink back, at least at this stage, from the ultimate consequences of their explorations of the frontiers of technologically based human evolution. Beyond this point, perhaps, even the visionaries of our species are not yet equipped to travel.

Evolution moves in clades. So does science fiction. Perhaps there will always be a point beyond which further explorations must be left to daughter species. ●

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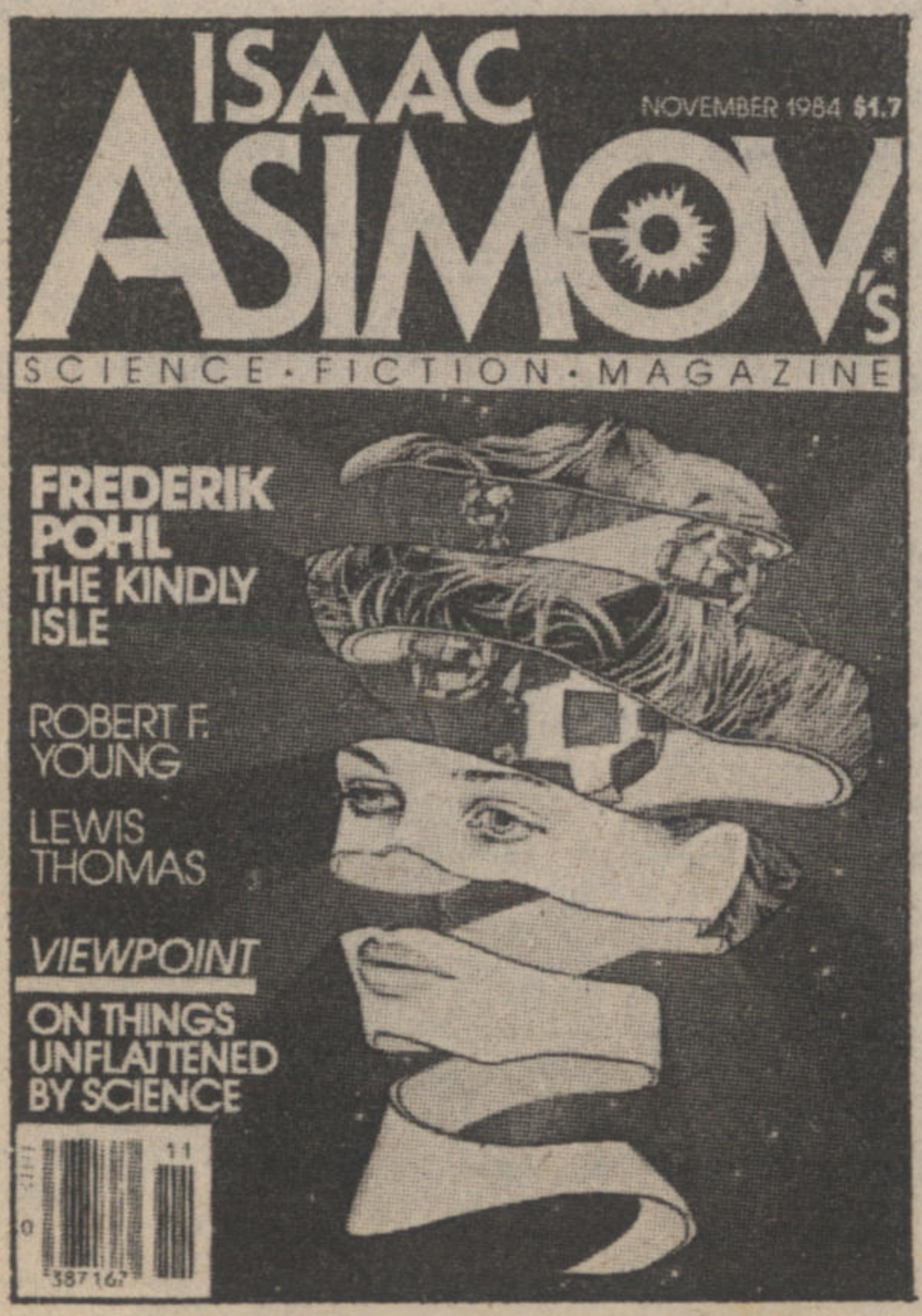

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SF CONVENTIONAL CALENDAR

by Erwin S. Strauss

This is a big time for cons away from the coasts. Make plans now for social weekends with your favorite SF authors, editors, artists, and fellow fans. For a later, longer list, an explanation of cons, and a sample of SF folksongs, send me an SASE (addressed, stamped #10 (long) envelope) at 4271 Duke St. #D-10, Alexandria VA 22304. (703) 823-3117 is the hot line. If a machine answers, leave your area code & number. I'll call back on my nickel. Send an SASE when writing cons. Early evening is often a good time to call cons; give your name & reason for calling right off. Look for me at cons behind an iridescent "Filthy Pierre" badge, with a musical keyboard.

APRIL, 1986

3–6—**AggieCon.** For info, write: **Box J-1, MSC, Texas A & M U., College Station TX 77844.** Or phone: (409) 845-1515 (10 am to 10 pm only, not collect). Con will be held in: College Station TX (if city omitted, same as in address) on the A & M campus. Guests will include: G. R. R. Martin, O. S. Card.

4–6—**WichaCon.** Holiday Inn Plaza, Wichita KS. M. Z. Bradley, J. Gephardt, R. Vardeman, G. Garb.

4–6—**GeneriCon.** Renssaelaer P. I., Troy NY. Artist Mark Rogers, Martin "Marty the Vampire" Gear.

4–6—**CoastCon.** Gulf Coast Convention Center, Biloxi MS. Masquerade. Ninth annual Gulf Coast con.

18–20—**Star City Con, 1305 Burks St. NW, Roanoke VA 24015. (703) 342–4969.** Orson Scott Card.

25–27—**ConTretemps, Box 45, Omaha NE 68101.** L. S. & C. C. deCamp, V. Poyser, Hevelin, Wu.

25–27—**CinClave, 310 Oak #66, Cincinnati OH 45219.** Ed Bryant, Joan Hanke Woods. Hyatt Regency.

2–4—**GalaCon, Box 8726, Virginia Beach VA 23450.** Joe Haldeman, G. L. Whitney, C. Doran, A. Rowe.

MAY, 1986

2–4—**TexarKon, Rt. 4, Box 708X, Texarkana AR 75502. (501) 645–2459.** Freas, G. Dickson, R. Asprin.

16–18—**MisCon, Box 9363, Missoula MT 59807.** L. Niven, artist S. Gallacci, T. Hickman, M. Kenin.

16–18—**KeyCon, Box 3178, Winnipeg MB R3C 4E6.** Anne McCaffrey, artist E. McKee, fan B. Friedman.

16–18—**MarCon, Box 14078, Columbus OH 43214.** R. Zelazny, A. J. & J. Offutt, K. & P. Freas, M. Porath, J. Gilpatrick, B. Maraschiello, C. Flynt, B. Sutton. Masquerade, twin 24-hour video room.

16–18—**ConQuest, Box 36212, Kansas City MO 64111.** T. Powers, Ed Bryant, A. Chancellor. Costumes.

23–25—**Kubla Khan, c/o Moore, 647 Devon Dr., Nashville TN 37220.** Tim Zahn, V. Poyser, A. Offutt.

23–26—**ConJuration, Box 690064, Tulsa OK 74169.** Stasheff, Goulart, Berdak, G. Cook, R. Jones.

23–26—**CostumeCon, 13657 Rayen, Arleta CA 91331.** Pasadena CA. SF/fantasy costumers' annual meet.

23–26—**AltiEgo's, Box 261000, Lakewood CO 80226. (303) 443–7866.** At Stouffer's Concourse Hotel.

AUGUST, 1986

28–Sep. 1—**ConFederation, 3277 Roswell Rd. #1986, Atlanta GA 30305.** Ray Bradbury, fan/editor Terry Carr, Bob (Slow Glass) Shaw. The WorldCon for 1986. Join early for less.

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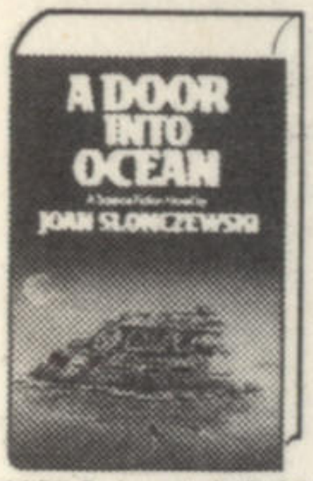

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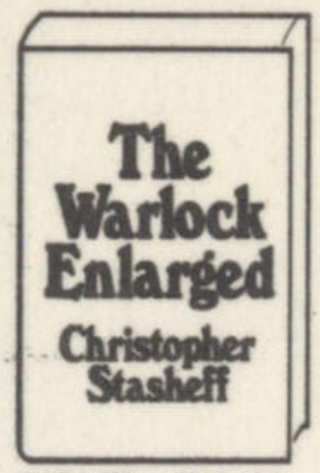

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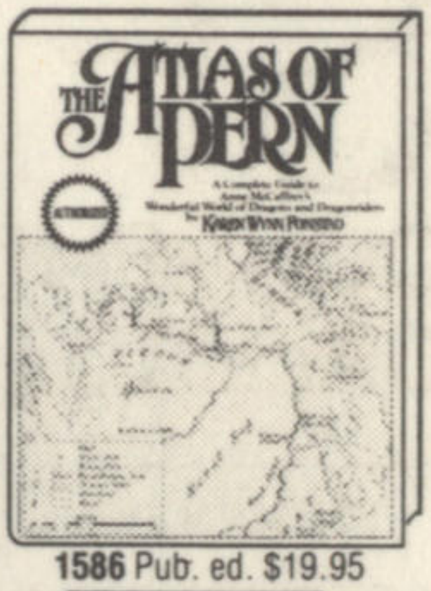

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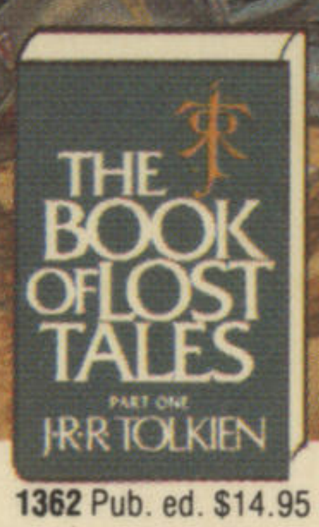

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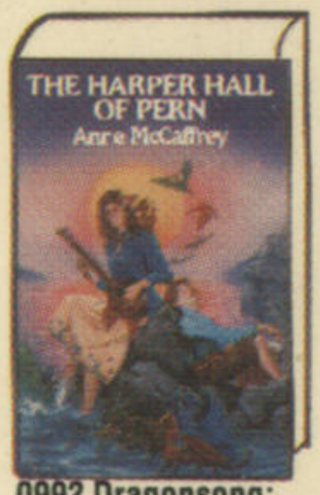

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