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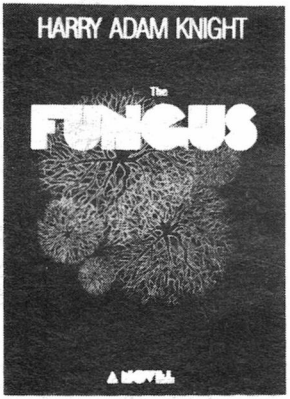

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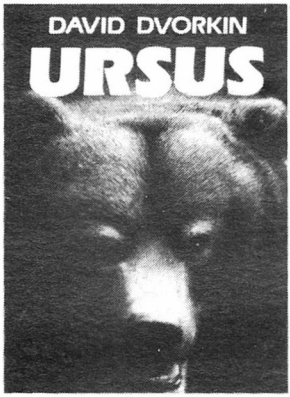

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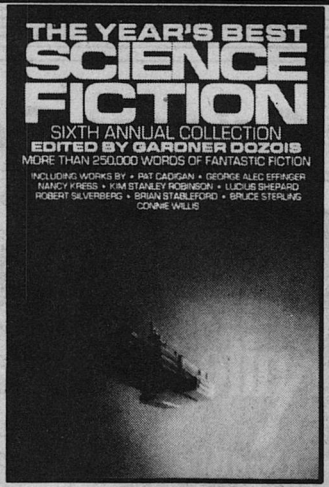

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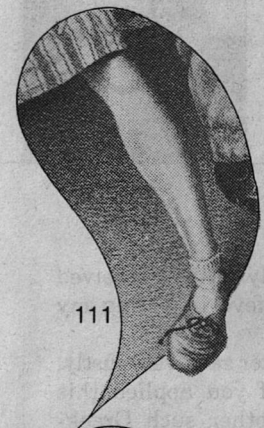

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EDITORIAL

by Isaac Asimov

WRONG!

Fiorello H. LaGuardia, who was once mayor of New York, found that one of his appointees was monumentally unsuited to the position. Whereupon he said, "I don't often make a mistake, but when I do, it's a beaut."

Sometimes I feel the same way. I'm not often wrong (in my own opinion) but just occasionally, I find that I am not only wrong but cataclysmically wrong, and when that happens I might just as well come out and admit it.

In the Mid-December 1988 issue, I dismissed some remarks by the Right Reverend Dean Bekken with a rather flippant statement to the effect that "deist" and "theist" were the same word, each meaning a believer in God, the first being derived from the Latin, the second from the Greek.

I was promptly nailed to the wall by someone who didn't sign his name but used an obvious and frivolous sobriquet, so I didn't care to print it in the letter column. Nor did he (or possibly she) give his full address so that I couldn't answer him directly. Besides I had better make my confession public right here in the editorial because his was not the only letter I received and I don't believe in hiding my mistakes.

My letter-writer said, very justly, "Dr. Asimov, if you applied this method to all other such Greek-Latin doubles you would flatten the English language into featurelessness by neutralizing all its technical vocabularies! Try telling a physical anthropologist that an anthropoid is the same thing as a hominoid."

The writer is correct! Right on the nose!

Another writer wrote and said even more directly that we were not talking about Latin or Greek, but about English.

Again, right on the nose!

The sad part about it is that I was lured by my tendency toward flippancy into being wrong on a subject that I feel very deeply about and that, in my serious moments, I am firmly *right* about. I have frequently stated (in print, even) that English is the most glorious language in the world because it borrows so readily from other languages, because it adds to its vocabulary without stint, because it has more synonyms for any given

concept than any other language, and because no two synonyms are precisely the same in use and meaning.

I will give you an example, not from technical vocabularies but from everyday speech, of three words all derived from the same source in the same language, and meaning somewhat the same but not exactly.

The words are "fragile," "frail," and "frangible." All stem from the Latin word "frangere," meaning "to break," and each word refers to breakability.

Would I say that they are three identical words that can be substituted for each other freely? If I did say that, not only would I be wrong, but I would reveal myself as incompetent in the handling of the English language, which is, of course, my chief tool as a writer.

Something is "frangible" if it is breakable. If you drop a plastic dish, it does not break because it is not frangible. If you drop a porcelain dish, it breaks because it *is* frangible. However, a frangible object does not have to be *easily* breakable. If it is *easily* breakable, then it is "fragile." A house of cards is a fragile structure, but it would be silly to characterize it as frangible. That would give it a false impression of being stronger and stabler than it is.

The word "fragile" is usually used for an inanimate object. A paper lantern is fragile, but you wouldn't say that a human being is fragile unless you were trying to

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be a bit funny. The word for a living object, especially a human being, is "frail." An old man in delicate health is frail, but you are not likely to speak of a frail goblet.

In addition, the word "frail" has a special meaning the other two share only faintly, if at all. Someone is frail if he or she finds it difficult to resist temptation. There is a tendency to breakability, in other words, in the sense that the person easily breaks the rules of morality or convention.

Thus, when Hamlet bemoans the fact that his mother so quickly wed her brother-in-law after the death of her husband, he blames it, in sexist fashion, on the supposed inferior ability of women (as compared with men) to withstand temptation. So he cries out, "Frailty, thy name is woman!"

Try saying, "Fragility, thy name is woman!" or "Frangibility, thy name is woman!" and you'll see how little it matters that all three words are derived from the same Latin word, and how important it is to distinguish among them.

And I fell into the trap in connection with "deist" and "theist." Mea culpa! Mea maxima culpa!

In the same Mid-December 1988 issue, I had an editorial entitled "Feminism." I got a number of letters on that, too, including several very long ones from articulate women who set me straight on a number of things in no uncertain terms.

There my error might have been that of not making it plain what was bugging me. The thing that bothered me was that women were not *sufficiently* feminist; that they played along with male sexism; that many avoided mathematics because they had somehow allowed themselves to be convinced that their brains weren't strong enough or bright enough for it; that they made use of "makeup" to exaggerate those facets of their appearance designed to advertise their sexuality so as to encourage male advances which they might then claim to be "harassment."

To be honest, I *thought* I had made that plain, but apparently I didn't.

Some wrote to me to denounce me for thinking that women were becoming lawyers because that was one profession that involved no mathematics. Apparently, lawyers *do* have to know mathematics, some who wrote me explained with great indignation, because they had to make out bills and sometimes had to be able to handle compound interest.

That's true enough, I suppose. Tellers in banks do that, too, and they're almost all women these days. And there, I admit, I made a mistake.

When I talked about mathematics in connection with engineering and science, I suppose I took it for granted that everyone would know that what I meant was calculus and beyond. It didn't occur to me that anyone would think I meant grade-school arithmetic, only.

Then, as far as makeup was concerned, some wrote to me to point out that men shaved, didn't they? Yes, they do. Social pressures are extreme and I disapprove of that, too. There are some young men who wear peculiar hairdos with odd coloring and who wear strangely designed clothes, all of which are the equivalent of feminine makeup. It strikes me, though, that these men who decorate the outside and leave the inside blank are not the real achievers of the world, either. (To which I can hear the cries of "Well, who says we have to be achievers?"—To that I have no answer except that I can't help but think that it would be nice to have a *few* achievers around just to keep human society from degenerating altogether.)

Some correspondents were unkind enough to point out my own mutton chops in derogatory terms, and to say they're the equivalent of makeup. Impossible! Makeup is designed to attract favorable attention and my mutton chops attract disbelief and laughter.

That's my defense! No one can possibly suggest that I grow those things in order to make myself look sexually attractive and to lure young women into following me, panting, whenever I walk the streets of Manhattan.

Why do I wear them, then? Simple! It's a matter of convenience. Twenty years ago, it dawned on me that I spent an unconscionable time at the barber's trying to make my hair take on an unnatural shape and I thought: Why bother? So for twenty years, I've been letting my hair grow as it wishes. Occasionally my dear wife Janet, snips it a little, over my loud protests, or it would be even longer.

It also occurred to me that if I grew sideburns I wouldn't have to waste time shaving my cheeks, so there they are.

You might ask, then, why I don't grow a mustache and beard, too.

Well, there I find I object. Not because I want to stay pretty, you understand, since that would be a lost cause from the start. Rather, I have the opinion that hair about the mouth is unhygienic; that it traps food; is hard to keep clean; and is one of evolution's mistakes.

(I'm sure I will now get letters disputing that and telling me that beards are not only beautiful but that they act as nature's antiseptics and deodorants.) ●

LETTERS

Dear Dr. Asimov,
Editor Dozois, et al.

Ah, yes—thank you, thank you, *thank you* for the delightful Avram Davidson story "One Morning With Samuel, Dorothy, and William," in the Mid-December 1988 *IAsfm!* Reading an Avram Davidson story is akin to getting struck smartly on the noggin with a ton of witticisms—and being left with the satisfying sensation of "now-*that*-was-a-unique-story!" You'll often hear us old-time SF and fantasy fans lamenting a lack of the "sense of wonder" in many of today's stories. Not so with Mr. Davidson's work. He takes the "What if?" factor, stretches it to its limits, then takes it *beyond*. The result is almost always bizarrely hilarious—and thought-provoking. Now that's a difficult feat to successfully pull off—but Avram invariably does it. Keep 'em coming, Mr. D.!

Bobby G. Warner
5 Melrose Drive
Wedgefield, SC 29168

I agree with you completely. Keep 'em coming, Mr. D. (Unfortunately, that's easy to say and hard to expect. Mr. D. is not one of these perpetual writers who can't be kept away from the typewriter—like certain people I see whenever I look in the mirror.)
—Isaac Asimov

Dear Dr. Asimov and Friends,

I have enjoyed your magazine for many years, first by reading my friend's copies, then as a subscriber myself.

The quality of the writing keeps me eager for each issue, and for that I thank you.

I don't mean to pick nits, but here goes: I'd like to ask the writers to please stick to writing about what they know, when including details about humans. Specifically, I am referring to one scene in "A Midwinter's Tale" (December 1988). It is a childbirth scene, and important to the story, yet the author has the woman arching her back. That is not how babies get born! A quick phone call to any obstetrician's office could have cleared up the matter, if the author had bothered to check his facts.

A detail out of sync is like stubbing one's toe: a small annoyance but still annoying. It breaks up one's concentration on the story. There are similar incongruities concerning female anatomy and functions in Heinlein's books, so Michael Swanwick is in good company!

Sincerely,
Kate Magrath
Landenberg, PA

You know, even the best of us know so little that to restrict us only

to areas in which we possess expertise may stop us from writing altogether. The reason I originally started writing science fiction was that when I was a teenager I knew nothing, absolutely nothing, *about the here and now. (I'm not much better off today.) Yet even in science fiction I keep stubbing my toe on various little items, even though I'm an expert on science and have never had the bad judgment to try to describe childbirth.*

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Messrs. Asimov & Dozois:

The last time I wrote was to complain, this time to praise. The story "A Midwinter's Tale" by Michael Swanwick is excellent. It is one of the few short stories I have read that stayed with me long after I had read it. The lyrical quality, and the haunting larl; mythology and space flight mixing so well. I felt that I was reading a story of the human past. Kudos to you all.

I am a struggling writer, and to read such a jewel inspires me to keep on trying. I am grateful to you all for every single issue. Keep on!

Sincerely,

Cheryl M.B. Chamberlain
4424 S.W. Lord's Lane
Lake Grove, OR 97035

By all means, keep on trying, as long as you find writing a pleasure or a challenge or both.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Dr. Asimov and Co.,

I have never before written a fan letter, but after reading your Mid-December issue, I felt that I simply could not hold back from writing. I enjoyed Norman Spinrad's essay "The Graphic Novel." However, I feel that he has ignored one very important root of this new artform. I am referring specifically to the Japanese "manga," which are at least as important precursors of the American graphic novel as the French *bande desinée*. Like those works, the manga treat the artform seriously, and they frequently deal with very complex stories. Furthermore, the manga have heavily influenced the art of film animation in Japan, creating the "Japanimation" which we in America see only in watered-down Americanized form. Interestingly enough, some of these manga have apparently been translated into English, since at my local bookstore I have seen several graphic novels concerning two Japanese characters, Lone Wolf and Cub. (For anyone who would like to read more about the fascinating world of manga and Japanimation, there is an excellent series—the *Robotech Art* books. I got my first introduction to real Japanese graphic art and animation through them.)

Sincerely,

Karen Boyer
Champaign, IL

I can't fault Spinrad for not knowing about the "manga." I never heard of them myself till I read this letter.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Dr. Asimov,

I am writing in response to Michael Sklar's letter in your November 1988 Letters column. While I

would be the first to agree that Jack McDevitt's "To Hell With the Stars" is an excellent story, I believe Sklar's views about NASA managers need some thought.

More specifically, Mr. Sklar states that "perhaps each NASA manager needs to read Jack McDevitt's 'To Hell With the Stars' to remember their purpose and recapture the vision that animated the space program of the 1960s." Where is such sweeping generalization coming from? Note that Sklar uses the words "*each* NASA manager," and "*needs* to read." One gets the impression that nobody at NASA cares at all about space!

While it would be unfair to hold NASA completely above criticism—we all must work to make our space program the best it can be—the senseless "NASA-bashing" so common in the media (including science fiction magazines) of late is equally unjustified. NASA has been accused of everything from lack of vision to not being a good airline. Never mind that TWA is a pretty lousy R&D agency.

Let me put things back in perspective. The men and women of NASA on a regular basis have done what has *never* been done before. They have put men on another world and have sent real working robots to the outer planets and they are about to build a space station. In short, they are turning science fiction into reality. It is not uncommon to find within NASA halls and offices posters of O'Neill habitats, or blueprints for the *Starship Enterprise*. Overall, these are some of the most dedicated and visionary people I know.

Perhaps the most important point of Jack McDevitt's story is that through dedication and hard work we can build a magnificent future—but it probably won't happen in the ways we currently expect and hope for. What NASA needs most now is real support from the American people, and just as importantly, PRIDE.

Sincerely,

Bruce D. Carter
Tucson, AZ

I think that, on the whole, the American people are *proud of NASA and its accomplishments. However, there is bound to be* some *bashing (think of the bashing that Congress or the Post Office or the I.R.S. routinely get, even though all try to do a difficult job as best they can) and we can't stop it, or even want to stop it, without subverting all that America means.*

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Dr. Asimov:

In the Letters column of the December 1988 issue of *Asimov's*, Erik M. Dutton asks: "What . . . is wrong with sex?" I observed that you did not address that question in your reply. My answer to that question would be: "There is nothing wrong with sex per se. But there is no earthly reason for sexually explicit scenes in any reasonably respectable publication, any more than there is a need for explicit descriptions of bowel movements or any other of our natural bodily functions."

It seems that in a majority of your "science fiction" stories, when a man and woman meet, it isn't long before they are in bed together

(figuratively speaking, of course, as many of these episodes do not involve a bed).

I consider these episodes to be purely imaginative and not true to life in the real world, and therefore included in the stories for whatever erotic value they have for a certain class of reader. I am seventy-two years old and have been married for forty-three of those years without a single extra-marital sexual encounter. To the best of my knowledge, the opportunity has not presented itself, although there have been many times I would have been willing (and eager) to have that experience, had I received any encouragement.

Ben Johnson
213 Coventry Drive
Campbell, CA

Oh, well, in real life women are never as beautiful; men never as handsome and heroic; good never as good; evil never as evil, as in fiction. There are exceptions, of course, but, in general, fiction tends to make life more dramatic than it is. Hence, fictional characters seem to have more sex, and fewer unwanted pregnancies and venereal diseases, than real-life characters do.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear folks,

Why, oh why, do Norman Spinrad's columns purport to be book reviews when they really belong under the old "Viewpoint" heading, or perhaps under a new heading with a title such as Literature 102?

Two letters in the December 1988 issue have finally prompted me to voice my dismay. Erik M. Dutton decried Mr. Spinrad's tendency to come across as an "obnoxious SOB," with which I must agree. Philip J. Backers echoed my own inability to understand the "literati" of today, and recommended that the Good Doctor's editorial on "Academe" (Mid-Dec. 1987) be required reading for them all. Mr. Spinrad would be well advised to read that column, too.

When Baird Searles writes the "On Books" section, I can count on coherent reviews and synopses of books presented in a way that allows me to decide whether I want to read the book being reviewed. His informative and interesting reviews have induced me to read quite a few enjoyable books, and to avoid some which I might otherwise have tried and not enjoyed.

When Mr. Spinrad takes over, which seems to be every other issue, I have two choices. I can wade through his lengthy literary dissertations and not-so-veiled derision of certain writers, hoping that he will eventually say something coherent about a new book or two, or I can just wait another month to see what Baird Searles has been reading lately.

There undoubtedly are readers who find Mr. Spinrad's mini-literature classes enjoyable. But I read "On Books" for its informational value, not as a substitute for attending college literature classes.

Very truly yours,

Chuck Johnson
Larkspur, CA

It's healthy to have more than one point of view in a magazine, at least under our American system of free

speech and toleration of diversity. I will freely admit that Norman Spinrad's knowledge of literature far outstrips mine (I am, after all, no more than a simple chemist) and my own views are merely advanced as my own views. They carry no authority.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Dr. Asimov:

You quite often apostrophize Mr. Dozois as Chestertonian. Although I am second, perhaps, only to yourself in my admiration for Ms. McCarthy's editing of your eponymous magazine, I recall inevitably the occasion upon which Mrs. Chesterton *(mére),* worried about her son's scholastic progress, spoke with the headmaster of St. Paul's School. "Mrs. Chesterton," he replied, "you have six feet of genius, cherish him."[1]

I can only conclude that this is what you mean by your Chestertonian reference, and beg you to implore Davis Publications to heed the advice.

A. M. King
3-375 River Avenue
Winnipeg, Manitoba
Canada

[1]Michael Ffinch, *G. K. Chesterton,* Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1986.

That is not quite *what I mean by Chestertonian, but I'll accept it.*

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Isaac and Crew:
(surely the Good Doctor will forgive my use of the first name, for I've lived in his universe since childhood)

Keep Norman Spinrad! He does infuriate me at times, and can be brutal to writers I admire, but dog-gone it, he makes me *think!*

If I only want to hear my *own* opinions, why buy the magazine? I can always talk to myself! Anyone smart enough (in both senses) to make an impact will sometimes annoy, and Spinrad *is* one of the smartest!

Matthew D. Healy
Durham, NC

I don't in the least mind having my first name used in a spirit of friendliness. As everyone knows, I cultivate an informal writing style in my editorials and it would be silly for me to act like an Isaac and to insist I be treated as an Asimov. So Isaac it is to anyone who feels friendly.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Dr. Asimov:

I have been reading your magazine since its inception and have many times meant to write to praise it, but it was your editorial "Frivolity" (*IAsfm,* Nov. '88) that prompted this missive.

I heartily enjoy all of your "George and Azazel" stories. Their predictable (or formulaic) nature displeases me not; in fact I find it comfortable. I do not read science fiction for edification, but for enjoyment and relaxation, the simple pleasure of a "good read." This is not to say that my curiosity for science fact is never piqued by my reading or that humor and irony escape me; my devoted monthly devouring of your "Science" essay in *F&SF* is proof of my curiosity

and I deeply appreciate your puns and word games, as well as the humorous stories Mr. Dozois and your previous editors have chosen to present. I subscribe to all the pulps because I love to read science fiction, and short stories are my particular passion. I will certainly buy the *Azazel* collection you shamelessly plugged (thank heaven for your shamelessness; I probably would not have heard of the collection without it). As a matter of fact, it was your recommendation of *Science News* that started my subscription to that fine magazine, and it probably was your name on the cover (not to mention your distinguished portrait) that wormed the cash from my pocket for the premier issue of *IAsfm*. I have yet to be disappointed by an issue.

I find it laughable that anyone could believe that just because your name is on the cover, all of your stories are published without regard for suitability, editorial integrity, or marketability. It would be a sure path to Chapter 11. I would, however, be very interested in a collection called *The Best of Isaac Asimov's Rejects as Chosen by the Good Doctor,* because I value your judgment, and could imagine you laughing all the way to the bank.

One more thing, thank you very much for publishing Mr. Ellison's screenplay of *I, Robot*. It was thoroughly enjoyable, educational (I'd never read a screenplay before), a fine adaptation of a great book, and will, hopefully, make it to the screen someday. If not, at least you've done your part.

Robert E. Kelly
Piscataway, NJ

I go out of my way to suggest the publication of letters that criticize my stories, for fear that anyone might think I use my position to protect my ego. Still, I hope that no one minds if once in a while I publish a letter that has nice things to say about George and Azazel. It makes me feel less lonely.

Isaac Asimov

Dear Dr. Asimov:

Having been a reader and collector of science fiction literature for some time (at least since I was seven, some thirty years ago), I have developed an interest in the genre as more than an activity to keep the neurons snapping. It is important that magazines such as yours not only publish good SF literature, but provide informed commentary on SF and on the broad sweep of its possibilities.

There is a sense in which SF has come of age and is now charting new literary possibilities, viz, Lessing and Atwood. As well, there are significant differences between what is written in the United States, in Canada and in the U.K., as well as that written in French, German, etc. There is a tendency in U.S. publications to discount or gloss over the differences of nationality and culture (I think sometimes that Americans consider the rest of humanity as being Americans-in-waiting). Consider, if you will, the important writing of such non-Americans as Garry Kilworth, Ian Watson, Lee Montgomerie, Brian Stableford, Philippe Curval, Jean-Marc Ligny, Stanislaw Lem, Bob Shaw, Pauline Gedge, and many expatriates such as Judith Merrill,

Rachel Pollack, Spider Robinson, William Gibson and perhaps you will grant the point made.

In the issue just received, mid-December 1988, letter writer Richard Akerman drew my ire coincidentally with my pleasure at having the opportunity to read another of Norman Spinrad's informed pieces. My suggestion to you is that these important contributions to *IAsfm* are worthy of republication in a collection with a suitable bibliography for each essay. One approach I take is that after reading each essay, I invariably collect what bibliographic information I can from them and go to the SF bookstore, Bakka, in Toronto, to buy the books mentioned and enjoy an informed adventure into some aspect or other of the genre.

I would urge you to protect "On Books" as a useful forum not only for the standard book review, but for analysis. Consider this to be one subscriber who would be quite happy to see the magazine "harden" these reviews and analyses. Thanks for all the good literature.

Michael Tremblay, Ph.D.
Dundas, Ontario
Canada

I can only speak for this magazine, and I don't think that any of us here tend to discount or gloss over the differences of nationality and culture. I think that a vast variety in culture the world over adds infinitely to the interest of life on Earth. However, I would very much like to discount and gloss over those differences that lead to war—such as a tendency to take offense easily at imagined slurs.

—Isaac Asimov

NEAT STUFF

by Matthew J. Costello

I had no intention of writing about games for this column. In fact, I planned on calling William Gibson and interviewing him re; the new Aliens film, *Aliens III,* which he scripted. And if that didn't pan out, I had a list of interesting things to write about, including (but not limited to) Wagner's Ring of the Niebelungen circa 1976, the joy of reading comic books the wrong way, and Hollywood's plan for a real-life Running Man TV show. But all that will have to wait.

You see, recently I gave myself two days off, two days where, no matter what, I wasn't going to work. No letters, no articles, no chapters for my novel, no stories. Nada. I was going to relax. The first day went pretty well. I read a 1987 horror novel recommended by a number of sources, *Live Girls* by Ray Garton. But the second day was to be devoted to playing games. Catching up, for fun and pleasure, with some of the boxes of games that have accumulated on my shelves. And there were to be no computer games. It was also going to be a vacation from microchips.

The first game played was the first boardgame entry from Game Designer's Workshop's new Space: 1889 series, Sky Galleons of Mars (GDW, PO Box 1646, Bloomington, IL 61702-1646). The conceit of the game, if you will, is that Victoria's British Empire reached Mars, a Mars inhabited by flying Martians and latticed by a network of working canals. Using ether flyers and Martian liftwood, the German and British Empires struggle over sovereignty, while the Martian Canal Princes plot to get rid of the unwanted earthlings.

The game is straightforward combat, featuring rules for altitude, cannons, and boarding parties. The Victorian air combat is made all the more fun by *Sky Galleons'* plastic miniature ships, wonderfully archaic.

Then I moved on to a game I was pretty sure that I wasn't even going to play. It was *Escape from Hoth,* a new Star Wars game from West End Games (RD 3, Box 2345, Honesdale, PA 18431). I was feeling pretty burned-out on the Star Wars saga, and a lot of licensed products have turned out disappointing. Oh, well, I figured I'd just skim the rules, look at the pieces, and then move on to another game.

Except that as I went through the rules, the game became intriguing. Essentially, it was a recreation of the opening scene to *The*

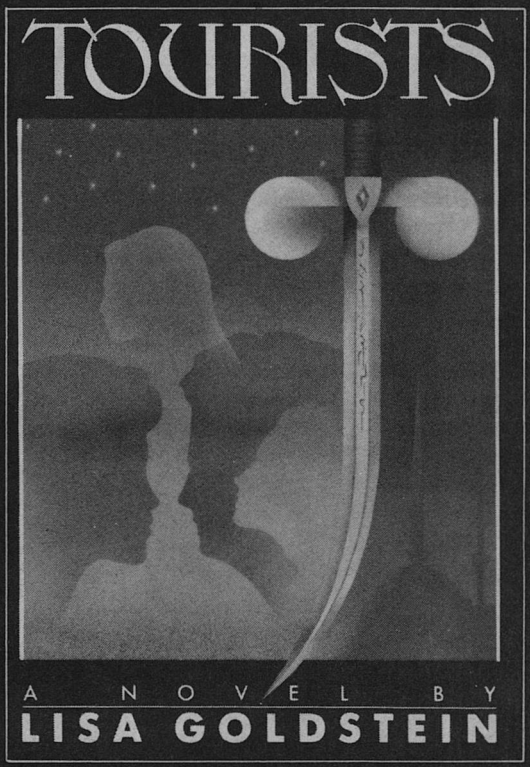
(Continued on page 183)

Strangers in the strangest land of all.

Welcome to Amaz, a land where streets have no names and the news is reported in a deck of cards...a land where the key political issue involves the ownership of an ancient magic sword...a land so foreign that the very configuration of the stars in the sky is different.

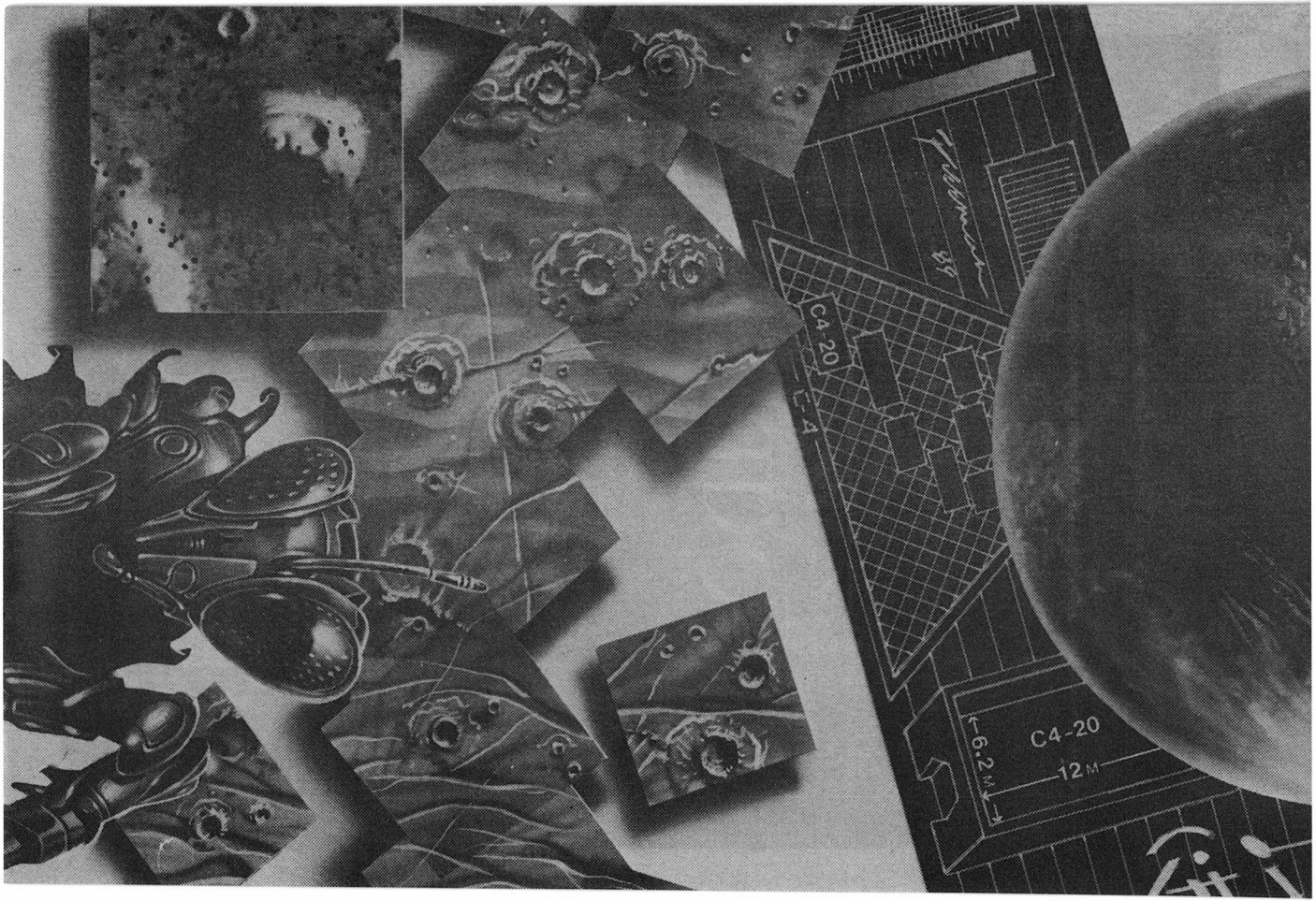
Into this country comes an American family, a family of outsiders, each of whom thinks he or she knows what reality is. And each of them gets to experience that one moment of uncertainty that tells them the world is a lot stranger than they thought. The family is a brilliant creation. The fantasy is real.

Lisa Goldstein, American Book Award-winning author of *The Red Magician, The Dream Years* and *A Mask for the General*, creates a complete culture, with its exotic language and customs, its warring sects and haunting mysteries, in this powerful novel of magical and psychological adventure.



SIMON AND SCHUSTER

Jacket Design and illustration: Kirschner Carott Design


C4-20
C4-20
12M
6.2M

art: Gary Freeman

RED PLANET BLUES

By Allen M. Steele

"Red Planet Blues," fits into the same universe Allen M. Steele has previously developed in past stories in *IAsfm* and in his novel, *Orbital Decay*, which is just out from Ace Books. Mr. Steele tells us there were two main sources of inspiration for this story: *Monuments of Mars*, Richard Hoagland's nonfiction work on the "face on Mars" controversy, and the work of two great rock-music improvisationalists: Roy Buchanan and Jerry Garcia.

I. Face Odyssy

"The most interesting aliens are the ones who can point a gun at your forehead."

—Larry Niven; public remark, 1987

Cydonia Base, Mars: July 6, 0945 MCM (Mars Central Meridian), 2029

Hal Moberly gingerly stepped on a round stone divot in front of a red door deep underneath the Martian surface, closed his eyes, and waited to die. Instead, the door grindingly slid aside, towed along coasters by pulleys at least as old as recorded history. Hearing the door open, the NASA geologist opened his eyes and took a deep breath. Through the open door, beyond the oval of light cast by his armor's lamp, lay the darkness of Room C4-20. "Thank God," he murmured, "I'm still here."

Shin-ichi Kawakami watched from Cydonia Base's mission control module, outside the City Square on the rock-strewn, wind-stripped red plain. Around him, other members of the team were hunched over their stations, concentrating on their instruments. "We copy that, Hal," the Japanese exobiologist replied. "Stay in the doorway for a few moments and let the pod sweep the room."

Next to Kawakami, Paul Verduin watched as the radar in Moberly's suit sensor pod—a sausage-shaped package mounted on the armor's right shoulder—mapped the interior of Room C4-20. The radar's feedback was inputted directly into Verduin's computer, which in turn assembled a three-dimensional image of C4-20 on his screen. The new room was 12 meters long, 6.2 meters wide, and 2.5 meters high. There were apparently no furnishings in this chamber, but the Dutch astronomer noticed that the computer had painted the room's walls as being irregular, rippled and unsmooth.

From her station behind them, Tamara Isralilova held vigil on the armor's internal monitors. Moberly's Hoplite II armor was less like a garment than it was a vehicle. A spinoff from the military armor used by NATO and Warsaw Pact units, the Hoplite suit weighed a half-ton and resembled an egg which had sprouted semirobotic arms and legs. Within its cocoon-like interior, Moberly's body was covered with biosensors. "Respiration, EKG, blood pressure, brain alpha patterns all rising," the Soviet doctor reported. "He's extremely nervous, Dr. Kawakami."

"Don't inject him with anything, Tamara," Kawakami replied. "I would rather have him nervous than somnambulant at this juncture." He glanced over Verduin's shoulder. "What's in there, Paul?"

Verduin shook his head. "It resembles a normal chamber, except that the walls seem irregular. Lumpy. And look at this." He pointed to the

spectrographic readout. "Metal, not stone. Light aluminum-steel alloy of some variety. We have not seen anything like this yet."

"Don't keep me in suspense, guys." Moberly's voice came through their headsets. *"Are there any booby-traps here?"*

Kawakami and Verduin traded glances. An unnecessary question. Each chamber of the labyrinth had been booby-trapped, and already one person had been killed. Moberly was really asking if there was anything which would annihilate him the moment he entered the new chamber. Verduin shrugged, then shook his head. "Go ahead, Hal," Kawakami said. "Take two steps into the room and stop. Also increase your white-light intensity a little bit so we can get a good picture."

As Moberly stepped through the door into Room C4-20, the TV image transmitted from the camera mounted on the armor's chest brightened. Kawakami and Verduin watched the monitor screen between their stations. The walls, toned like burnished copper, were intricately patterned, interlaced in whorls and swirls as if cut by a jigsaw. Very strange. Other chambers in the labyrinth contained wall designs, but none as complicated or extensive as these. The camera swiveled to the far wall and stopped. *"Hey!"* Moberly yelled. *"Do you see that?"*

"Yes, we see it," Verduin replied excitedly. Isralilova turned to look at the monitor. After staring at the screen for a moment, she cast a rare smile at Kawakami.

What they saw of significance in the last wall of the new chamber was nothing at all. There was no door in the far wall.

"That's it," Kawakami whispered. "The end."

Then Verduin glanced down at his console and stopped grinning. Cupping his left hand over his headset mike, he pointed at his screen. Kawakami looked and felt his elation vanish.

"Electromagnetic surge," Verduin whispered. A computer-generated red line in a window on his screen had suddenly spiked in its center. Before Kawakami could ask, Verduin answered his next question by pointing at a more regular blue line underneath the red spike. "That is his suit voltage. The red line indicates an exterior source. The surge happened the moment he stopped in the room. I cannot isolate the source, but it is definitely from within C4-20."

They heard a familiar grinding sound in their headphones, picked up by the armor's exterior mike. Everyone looked up, *"The door's closing,"* Moberly said. *"There it goes."* The TV image on the monitor screen shifted sharply as Moberly turned around, now showing the door to the corridor quickly shutting itself. Moberly lurched forward a step, but the door was sealed before he could reach it.

"All right. It knows he's in there." Kawakami's fingers found the key-

pad in his lap and punched in two digits. Arthur and Miho were on standby in the corridor outside C4-20. "Team Louie-two, do you copy?"

"We're here, Shin-ichi." Arthur Johnson's voice was stressed. *"The door just shut. What's going on in there?"*

Kawakami was about to answer when another sound overrode the comlink: not static, not the usual crackle of electromagnetic interference from the pyramid. Something formed and rhythmic, as natural and yet unexpected as a coyote howl in the midnight desert. "Listen," Isralilova said. "Do you hear that!"

"Shh!" Kawakami hissed. Music. Formless and random, even grating, but undeniably it was music, lifting from the alien caverns like the sullen riffs of a subway jazz player, as if an *avante-garde* musician were lurking somewhere inside the chamber. Weird, yet somehow appropriate . . . and nonetheless threatening.

"Are you getting this?" Hal Moberly quietly asked.

Kawakami glanced at the CD deck above his console. "We're recording it, yes, Hal," he replied. "Stand by. Wait for our next signal."

The team's senior scientist had no doubt what the sounds signified. In some way, this was the labyrinth's final test. Yet this was something entirely new. Before now, everything beneath Pyramid C-4 had related to equations and common sense. How can anyone ask a piece of music, alien or otherwise, to explain itself as an obvious statement?

Kawakami looked at Verduin. The other scientist met his gaze, glanced back at his console, then silently shook his head. Instinctively, they both knew the hard truth. Hal Moberly was not going to emerge from C4-20 alive.

(Excerpt from "The Labyrinth of Cydonia"; The New Solar System *(Version 6.0); McGraw Hill IC Tutorials; 2032.)*

Narration: "The first clues that extraterrestrial intelligence had entered the Solar System in the ancient past were largely ignored by the scientific community. When NASA's Viking I space probe rendezvoused with Mars on July 20, 1976, the spacecraft's orbiter circled the planet, conducting the most extensive photographic mapping of Mars. During Orbit 35, the Viking's camera caught the first image of the Face, in the Cydonia region in Mars's northern hemisphere, on the edge of Acidalia Planitia . . . "

(Animation of Viking I approaching and orbiting Mars fades to the first vague photograph of the Face. This, in turn, is replaced by footage of NASA's Viking team gathering around monitors at the Jet Propulsion Laboratory in Pasadena, California.)

"While the Face was immediately noticed by the Viking Imaging Team, it was dismissed as being a natural formation caused by wind erosion.

However, a few scientists and earthbound space explorers followed up on the enigmatic Frame 35A72. Calling themselves the Independent Mars Investigation Team, the dozen members asked an unpopular question. Was the Face evidence that a spacefaring interstellar civilization had once inhabited Mars?"

(The screen slowly pulls back from the Face as, frame by frame, an orbital panorama of the Cydonia region is assembled. As the image is assembled, graphic lines are overlaid on the photograph, showing the relationships between key objects. In turn, the camera then zooms in on separate details in the assemblage.)

"The informal group examined Viking photos of Cydonia over the next decade, now enhanced by a computer-generated processing system called SPIT, or Starburst Pixel Interleaving Technique. They made a number of intriguing discoveries. 11.2 kilometers west of the Face apparently lay a City, comprised of four major pyramids arranged equilaterally in a cluster measuring 4 by 8 kilometers around a central City Square. A few kilometers south of the Face, another large structure was located, labeled by the group as the "D&M" Pyramid (after Vincent DiPietro and Gregory Molenaar, the pyramid's discoverers). Like the City, it appeared to be aligned towards the Face. Alignments between the City, the D&M Pyramid, and the Face appeared to comprise two adjacent right-angles—a triangle. In addition, the group calculated that sunrise on Mars occurred during the solstices from directly to the east of the Face, so that the sun could be seen rising above the Face from the City Square . . . "

(A view of the Face fades to a montage of photos and filmclips: a meeting during the first "Case For Mars" conference in Boulder, Colorado; the cover of a report, titled "Unusual Martian Surface Features"; a hilltop radiotelescope dish; the headline of a supermarket tabloid, Weekly World News: *"THE FACE ON MARS—A NEW SHOCKER!")*

"The Independent Mars Investigation Team made their findings public during the 1980s, only to be met by skepticism, and even hostility, by the majority of the space science community. Although the question of whether extraterrestrial intelligences existed was being debated and explored, most SETI research concentrated on detecting radio signals from distant stars, such as Project META in Harvard, Massachusetts. The idea that evidence of E.T.'s existed within our own solar system was considered ludicrous by most experts. To its dismay, the group saw media exposure of the Face relegated largely to sensational tabloid headlines, lumped in with Bigfoot sightings and reports that Elvis Presley had returned in a UFO . . . "

(A film clip of a U.S.S.R. Proton rocket lifting off from a pad is followed by animations of unmanned Soviet probes coasting into orbit around Mars. This is replaced by footage of the spacecraft of the first American-Soviet

manned expedition being assembled in low orbit above Earth, then a shot of the first landers being released from the H.G. Wells *above the scarlet curve of Mars; these are followed by film of the first base camp in the Tharsis region being assembled.)*

"Advocates of the Face theory pushed for a return to Mars to investigate the mystery in Cydonia. Renewed Mars exploration was eventually begun in the last years of the twentieth century by the U.S. and the U.S.S.R., leading up to the Mars Project which landed man on the red planet on August 2, 2020. But the reasons for the missions had more to do with international politics than scientific inquiry, and the Cydonia enigma remained a low-priority assignment. Even with men on Mars, it was another four years before the controversy was finally laid to rest by the first human visit to Cydonia . . . "

Waterville, New Hampshire: August 31, 1730 EST, 2029

The Osprey VS-20 was an older aircraft, a tilt-rotor HTOL on the verge of retirement which was still used at Ft. Devens for low-profile odd jobs. Its Army markings had been removed, so it was appropriate for flying Dick Jessup up to Waterville Valley. When Jessup had asked why he simply could not drive to the concert site, the Osprey's pilot had grinned. "I don't think you want to do that, sir," Lt. Orr had replied.

Now, after a one-hour jaunt from northern Massachusetts to the resort town, Jessup could see why. Traffic was backed up for miles on the highways leading into Waterville Valley, tucked in the foothills of the White Mountains. An estimated crowd of 70,000 surrounded the huge outdoor stage of the New England Bluegrass and Jazz Festival. Orr circled the vast sprawl of people, tents, and cars before setting the Osprey down on a packed-earth landing pad within the fenced backstage area. A couple of roadies dashed out to meet Jessup as he climbed out, then backed off, confused that the Osprey's lone passenger was not a performer. One of them made a call on his wristphone and a few minutes later the stage manager stalked over, convinced that Jessup was a high-rolling gate crasher. It took a few minutes for Jessup to settle the dispute; it was not until the stage manager made a phone call to the promoter and verified that Jessup was there as an invited guest that he calmed down. Jessup was relieved; he did not want to produce his government I.D., which would have ended the dispute more quickly, but which also would have raised some uncomfortable questions.

On the other hand, the stage manager seemed irritated that he couldn't have Jessup arrested by the security guards. "Just get that bird of yours out of here," he snapped, pointing at the Osprey. "We've still got people flying in."

"Okay," Jessup replied. "Can you tell me where Ben Cassidy is?"

"He's onstage. You can talk to him when his set is over. Now get your chopper out of here."

Jessup waved to Orr and gave him the thumbs-up, and the pilot pointed at his watch and lifted two fingers. Two hours. That was sufficient time. Jessup nodded, and the Osprey lifted back up into the clear August sky. Jessup turned back to the stage manager, but he was already walking off to harangue someone else. Jessup wondered if he ever listened to the concerts he ramrodded, or if he was merely in this business because it gave him an excuse to be a jerk.

Jessup found his way to the stage and walked up the stairs to a small area between a stack of equipment boxes and a folding table covered with folded rally towels and bottles of mineral water. Roadies and various hangers-on moved back and forth around him; he felt out of place, wearing his beige business suit and tie, among the jeans and T-shirts which were the uniform for this Labor Day weekend gathering. Too much like a government official on official government business. People shied away from him as if he were an IRS agent there to audit the gate receipts. Jessup was sure that, if he were to identify himself as a NASA administrator, it would not make any difference.

He forced his attention upon the lone figure on the stage, a burly man sitting on a wooden stool with his back turned to him. Ben Cassidy was performing solo, as usual, with no backup band. He was a middle-aged man—balding, beard turning white, the creased and heavy-browed face of a longshoreman turned itinerant musician—plainly dressed in baggy dungarees and a long-sleeved shirt with the sleeves rolled up behind his elbows, hunched over the keys and digital fretboard of a Yamaha electronic guitar.

It seemed impossible to Jessup that one person could entertain the vast ocean of faces which lapped at the shoreline of the stage; certainly his music would be lost and drowned in the tide of humanity. Yet, as Cassidy played, Jessup became increasingly fascinated, found himself empathically melding with the current: the crowd, the midafternoon heat, and above all else the music which flowed from Cassidy's guitar. He was coming out of a blues number—Jessup, who had briefly been a blues fan in his college days, vaguely recognized it as Muddy Waters' "My Dog Can't Bark, My Cat Can't Scratch"—and was gliding into free-form improvisation, and as Jessup listened, he became increasingly fascinated.

At first it seemed as if Cassidy were simply dog-paddling, thrashing without direction on the same couple of chords. Then he added a keyboard solo to the bass refrain and began holding a dialogue between the two sets of chords, shifting back and forth like an actor singlehandedly conducting a conversation between two characters. When it seemed impos-

sible that Cassidy could carry this on much longer, the musician added a third refrain, a lilting lead guitar riff which joined into the mesh of notes, joining a consensus of musicial opinion. The crowd near the stage, mesmerized by this performance, shouted and applauded their approval, but Cassidy—huddled over his instrument, face almost pressed against his instrument—did not look up, nor even seem to notice that he had an audience.

Jessup, listening and watching, suddenly realized why he had been sent to recruit Cassidy. He had heard the tapes of Hal Moberly's encounter with Room C4-20. Jessup had wondered if Arthur Johnson was losing his mind when he had suggested Cassidy's name. Now, upon hearing Cassidy's guitar, Jessup understood. His improvisational style was almost disturbingly similar to the music of Room C4-20.

Jessup's right hand moved involuntarily towards the inside pocket of his suitcoat before the NASA man stopped himself. The folded message inside would wait until he met Cassidy backstage after his gig. Abruptly, Jessup hated himself. He had studied Cassidy's record, knew that the musician had been a draftee during Gulf War II. No one should be conscripted twice.

No choice, though. The final puzzle of the labyrinth had to be solved, at any or all costs.

Cassidy ended his instrumental piece and, as the crowd went wild, he stood up for a moment to take a quick, solemn bow and reflexively scoot his stool back a couple of inches. As he did, Cassidy glanced behind him and saw Jessup standing in the wings. Their eyes met and locked for an instant. Jessup caught the cool, appraising glare, the downturned mouth within the beard. Then Cassidy turned his attention back to his guitar and his audience. He pensively warmed up with a couple of notes, then edged into his next number. Jessup recognized the song immediately as "Uncle Sam Blues."

Excerpt from "Benjamin Cassidy—The Rolling Stone Interview"; Rolling Stone, *November 16, 2028.*

You started out playing with a band . . .

That's right. The Working Blues. Jaime, Les, and Amad, and a couple of session people we hired for studio work on *Flashpoint* and *Homeboys*. Good bunch of guys, great musicians.

So why did you break up the band and start being a solo performer?

Because I didn't want to pay 'em. I'm cheap that way. *(Laughs.)* Naw, that isn't it. The Working Blues was a hot ensemble and we were making money, enough to get by at least, but I just decided after a while, y'know, just to cut loose, see if I could get the blues back to . . . back to one guy and his guitar, just that. Not to make those guys sound bad, but I began

to wonder if a backup band was necessary. It's like, y'know, how John Mayall went for years without a drummer in his band because he considered a percussion to be adding just a lot of noise. After a while, I began to wonder if we were overpowering the blues with all this extra stuff, so *(draws a finger across his throat) phfft!,* I decided to get rid of the band. But I still respect and admire those guys. In fact, I'm going to be sitting in on the sessions for Jaime's next album, so this time he gets a chance to fire me from *his* band. *(Laughs.)* I bet he does it, too, just to get back.

Then there's two different stories about the breakup. Jaime and Amad have both claimed that your cocaine addiction caused the group to split apart.

Well, no, there's not two different stories. They're just two parts of the same tale. Yeah, I was hooked on the stuff, there's no denying that. It got bad enough that, when we were touring with the Cambodians, I was mainlining every time before we went onstage. First they'd hand me the syringe, then they'd give me my guitar. "Okay, Ben, go this way. Don't fall over anything now." And after the show they'd put me on a couch in the dressing room and make sure someone was checking up on me, to make sure I didn't O.D. I knew I was sick and they knew it too, so while I was in the clinic, getting clean and deciding that maybe I should try it solo, they decided that they were fed up with my bullshit. So it was a mutual parting of ways. I don't hold any grudges and I don't think they do, either.

Why did you start shooting coke in the first place?

That's a tough question. *(Pauses)* It wasn't because it was fun. I didn't do it for thrills, 'cause there's nothing I found thrilling about the stuff, and I can't say it was social pressure, because those guys are clean and even blues audiences are straight these days. I guess . . . I think I was scared. I was looking for something, some transcendent experience that made me more of a part of the music. Just playing onstage wasn't enough. But at the same time, I was scared of what I would find. Don't ask me why, or what. *(Pauses)* And maybe I'm still scared. I'm over the drugs, but I'm still afraid.

***S.S. Shinseiki,* Mars final approach: June 15, 0800 GMT (Greenwich Mean Time), 2030**

Ten months later, Ben Cassidy found himself watching a cup of coffee spill in a way that he had never seen coffee spill before in his life. He had just settled into a chair in the ship's wardroom—a chair which pulled out along a slender, jointed rail from underneath the hexagonal table and unfolded like a box-top—and the ship's commander, Minoru Omori, had placed the paper cup of coffee on the table near his elbow. Dick Jessup, who had taken a seat across the table from him, had held out a

briefing folder to him, but when Cassidy had reached to take the folder his elbow knocked over the cup.

The coffee spilled in slow motion, as if caught by time-lapse photography. It tipped over at a weird angle and the coffee sloshed out at a slightly curving trajectory, and like a blob of brown mercury the liquid seemed to follow a path of its own decision, slopping to the left. Cassidy found himself staring at it as Jessup made a grab for a paper towel from the galley counter behind him. Jessup sopped up the mess before it reached Cassidy's lap, then he looked up and noticed the dazed look on the musician's face.

"Coriolis effect," he said. "It's caused by the ship's rotation. Don't worry, you won't be here long enough to have to get used to it."

"Oh," Cassidy murmured. "That's great."

"How are you doing? Got your bearings yet?"

"Yeah. Sure. Doing fine." Of course, he was doing fine. He had just come to the realization that he was in a Japanese spaceship in orbit around Mars, about forty million miles from everything he had ever known or loved, where even a cup of coffee doesn't spill right. And how are you doing today, Dick?

Behind him, he could hear the amused snickers of the Marines, two tough guys from the 1st Space Infantry who had been revived from the zombie tanks in the medical bay shortly before him. Biostasis had been part of their training and anyone who had never before been in drug-induced suspended animation for nine months was obviously a woosie. So it was okay for them to laugh, these professional badasses leaning against the bulkhead in the subdued half-light of the wardroom. "Got them zombie shakes," he heard one of them whisper. "Too much rock 'n roll, man," his buddy replied.

Screw you both, Cassidy said silently. To hide his embarrassment, he glanced up at the wraparound bank of screens suspended above the table. One of the screens showed a computer-enhanced image of Mars as captured by a camera at the *Shinseiki*'s hub. As he watched, one of the ship's three spindly arms—a long girdered truss bearing habitation cylinders, a biconic landing craft, dish-shaped solar collectors and a saucerlike aeroshell—glided past the bloodshot eye of Mars, surrounded by blackness and tiny blue readouts.

He blinked at it. Yeah, it was Mars all right. Now, what in the name of God was he doing here?

Captain Omori carefully placed another cup of coffee on the table in front of Cassidy and unfolded his own chair at the table. Jessup cleared his throat and flipped a page on his clipboard. "Thank you all for being here," he said. "Like the rest of you, I'm still recovering from the tank . . ."

Play PAST LIVES...

If You Dare to Uncover Secrets of Your Past!

Play PAST LIVES...the game that reveals lives you could have lived before. PAST LIVES is a fun and fascinating boardgame that takes you back through the shadows of history; through the Industrial Age, back through the Age of Kings and the Dark Ages to Ancient Times. Each age has treasures, twists of fate and pitfalls unique to that time period.

Adding to the enjoyment of the game is its magnificent artistic treatment. Hundreds of game cards bear the design and art talent of David Edward Byrd, the only living U.S. artist whose work hangs in the Louvre.

Everyone begins play as "Scum of the Earth." With adept play and good deeds, players accumulate points as they ascend through the ranks of the "Commonplace & Vulgar," "Heroes & Heroines," and finally to the "Great & Saintly." At game's end, players refer to the Book of Past Lives, which details hundreds of actual lives from history. How well you've played the game determines who you could have been in a previous life. PAST LIVES...play it if you dare to know whether you were a king or a knave; a saint or a strumpet; a poet or only a peasant.

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One of the Marines snickered again. The unit commander, Colonel Carter Aldiss, who had taken the fourth seat at the table, looked up and muttered, "Shaddup, Spike."

"Yessir, Colonel."

Jessup nervously cleared his throat again. "So I'll turn over the floor to Captain Omori, who'll update you on our mission profile. Captain?"

"Thank you, Dr. Jessup." Omori was a heavy-set, round-faced man who looked as if he smiled once a year, just for kicks. "Welcome to the *Shinseiki*, gentlemen. My two crewmen, First Officer Massey and Executive Officer Cimino, extend their best wishes and also their apologies that they are not here to greet you personally, since they are otherwise involved on the bridge. Ms. Cimino wishes for me to tell you, though, that she enjoyed looking after you while you were in biostasis, and that she's looking forward to doing so again during the return leg of our voyage."

Unexpectedly, Omori grinned and laughed. Jessup responded with a polite, uncertain smile. "Maybe she enjoyed asking us to cough," one of the Marines whispered.

"Cut it out, Goober," Aldiss muttered.

"To continue . . . " Omori, formal again, pulled up a remote from a jumpsuit pocket and tapped a couple of commands into the bitpad. The overhead screens blinked and replaced the TV images from the outer hull with an animated diagram of Mars orbit. "The outermost curve represents our present trajectory. When we reach the periapsis at 1700, Landers One and Two will be launched. The landing party for Lander One needs to be at airlock 2-Betty at 1530 for suitup and boarding."

"That's us, Ben," Jessup said. Cassidy nodded.

Captain Omori went on. "At 1500, the outbound lander will be launched from Arsia Station. It shall intercept the *Shinseiki* at 1800 and will dock for the return voyage. During a normal timetable, we would execute periapsis burn for Earth encounter thirty minutes later, at 1830, but for this mission we will have a minor software glitch in the targeting computer, causing a disagreement in the primary AI interface."

A smile touched the edges of Omori's lips. "Nothing critical it will be, naturally. The software will have simply told the firing system that the course is in error, and the major system will go down, aborting the burn. An unforeseen accident. It will cause us to fire the OMS for an emergency low-orbit insertion. This will give us enough time to sort through the main AI bus and locate the problem without losing our REO window. Both Arsia and Cydonia commands will be apprised of the unfortunate circumstances for the delay." Omori's smile grew broader. "Of course."

Cassidy, confused by the explanation, heard the Marines chuckle, saw Aldiss stretch back in his chair in satisfaction and Jessup trying to hide

a smug grin. He ignored the soldiers and stared straight across the table at Omori. "Excuse me, Captain," he said softly, "but what the hell are you talking about?"

Omori, looking back at him, became taciturn once more. "An unforeseen occurrence, Mr. Cassidy. Nothing which should concern you."

"Nothing which should concern me. Right." Finally, his mind had started to clear. He had been warned that an aftereffect of biostasis was mental numbness. The frontal lobes were the last part of the brain to recover from the pharmaceuticals—clinically derived from the herbs which Haitian *houngan* had once traditionally used to sedate and enslave people as *zombies*—now used for deep-space hibernation. But it was not unlike the cerebral fuzzout of a cocaine high. In fact, you could almost enjoy the buzz . . .

Cassidy shook his head: stop that. Questions which over the last few hours had lingered unspoken in the back of his mind now galloped to the front of his attention.

He looked at Jessup. "Who are these guys?" he asked, cocking a thumb at the Marines lurking behind him. "You told me that there was going to be a science team on this ship. Where are they? What're the Marines doing here? And what's this shit about unforeseen accidents and delayed burning, uh. . . . return retroangular whatever the hell you call it . . . "

"Yeah," said the Marine whom Aldiss had called Spike, a skinny guy leaning against the hatch. "It's rectal return burn, man."

Cassidy turned around in his seat and stared at the soldier. The kid was still laughing at him. "You're in the Marines, right?" Spike, grinning hugely now, nodded his head. "Guess you must know a lot about having a burning rectum then, don't you?"

As the other soldier broke up, Spike's face melted into an angry glare. The musician ignored him, switched his attention back to the table. "What's going on here, Jessup?" he demanded.

"Well . . . " Jessup sighed and looked down at his hands. "There was a change in the mission which you were not informed about before we left Earth. Security considerations . . . "

"Screw that. You got me out here on the pretense that I was to be part of a scientific expedition. Now I get out here to find that I'm the one-man Marine Corps Band for a bunch of flyboys." Cassidy angrily shook his head. "I don't know much about how these things are planned, but I can figure that this was planned well in advance. You've been yanking me along, haven't you?"

"Ben, I . . . " Jessup shut his eyes and blew out his cheeks. "Okay, I'll admit it. You were kept in the dark about certain aspects of this mission, and now it's time to let you in on it. At least, most of it."

Cassidy started to object, but Jessup raised his hand. "Wait. Let's get

through this first. Colonel Aldiss, this is as good a time as any to brief your team and Mr. Cassidy here."

Aldiss—short, muscular, wearing a khaki jumpsuit with the gold-trimmed eagle-and-starscape patch of the 1st Space—nodded his head. "Spike, Goober, you can open your orders now."

While the soldiers peeled open the seals on the folders which they had been issued upon entering the wardroom, Aldiss continued. "Last August, while this mission was still being prepared, the Soviet Mars ship *Sergei Korolov* entered Mars orbit and dropped supplies to Cydonia Base. It was a scheduled run, but what was unexpected was that one of their cargo landers contained two AT-80 Bushmaster autotanks and one combat armor suit. Big surprises, needless to say."

Captain Angelo "Spike" D'Agostino whistled softly. "Bushmasters are nasty business, Colonel. They've been chewing up the scenery in Mozambique lately. What kind of CAS?"

"New type, so there's not much info on it. Self-contained for Mars environment . . . the Bushies were modified the same way . . . but the suit looks like a variation on the Israeli Goliath suit. Probably a little more swift on its feet, considering the lesser gravity. In any case, those are the first weapons to be mobilized on Mars, and they came complete with a Soviet military advisor, Major Maksim Oeljanov. Of course, Moscow has claimed that the armor is there in case there are any surprises from the Cooties. In any case, we're not taking any chances in case the Soviets want to force a takeover of Cydonia Base."

"Whoa, wait a minute," Cassidy interrupted. "Isn't it against some U.N. treaty about placing weapons in space?"

"The U.N.'s a long way from here, man," Spike D'Agostino murmured.

Aldiss cast a stern look at the captain, but nodded his head. "There's no proof that the Soviets have any such intentions . . . "

"Yeah, but two Bushmasters and a CAS make a pretty strong argument," D'Agostino commented. "The Russians have been getting pretty cocky lately."

"Yeah, well, maybe that's because the yahoo we just put in the White House has been getting pretty cocky himself," Cassidy interjected. "If he hadn't started that stuff about American manifest destiny in space, then . . . "

"Let's not get political about this, shall we?" Jessup said quickly. "In any case, Colonel Aldiss's RDF team is here as an ace in the hole. There was a science team assembled, but it was secretly bumped from this flight to make way for Steeple Chase . . . um, as this operation has been code-named."

"That's right, buddy." Lieutenant William "Goober" Hoffman—a tall, lean Alabama boy with a shaved head—slapped his hand with conde-

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scending comfort on Cassidy's shoulder. "Just think of us as your guardian angels."

" 'Death From Above,' " D'Agostino murmured. "Just kicking ass and writing down names."

"Terrific." Cassidy's eyes rolled up. "It's Sgt. Fury and the Howling Commandos. Jessup, are these characters going down there with us? If they are, you don't mind if I just wait up here until they're finished shooting up the place, do you?"

Aldiss shook his head. "We won't be on the lander with you, Mr. Cassidy. My team will be remaining here. All we expect you to do is keep your mouth shut about our presence once you arrive at Cydonia Base."

Cassidy squinted at the colonel. It did not make sense. If the Marines were here as a counterforce to the Soviet armor on Mars, then what purpose was served by the Rapid Deployment Force remaining on the *Shinseiki?* He opened his mouth to venture a question, but Jessup seemed to read his thoughts. Slowly standing up from his chair—apparently he, too, was getting used to the Coriolis Effect—he cleared his throat and picked up his clipboard.

"Colonel, I'm sure that you want to complete this briefing alone with your men and Captain Omori." Aldiss nodded his head and Jessup looked over at Cassidy. "Ben, if you'll come along, I'll reintroduce you to an old friend."

"Great," Cassidy stood up and watched his chair fold itself back underneath the table. "Then maybe after that you'll gimme back my guitar."

The Marines whistled and applauded. Cassidy managed to do a quick bow without falling over before he followed Jessup through a hatch into the next compartment. Jessup closed and dogged the hatchcover behind them. "They're probably the best the 1st Space has to offer," he said quietly. "You could have been a little more civil to them."

"I volunteered to be part of a scientific experiment, not a USO show . . . though 'drafted' is probably the better term."

"Maybe it's better if you thought of yourself as a volunteer, regardless of the circumstances." They were in a narrow storage compartment. Jessup pushed past him and traced his finger along the numbered cabinets until he located one in particular. "But I'll offer you some advice."

Cassidy walked over and watched as Jessup unlocked the cabinet. "What's that?"

Jessup pulled out a long bundle wrapped in opaque silver Mylar and gently handed it to Cassidy. "When we get down there, do exactly what I tell you, but don't head for the habitat. Just wait outside and follow the first person who tells you to come. There's some shit that's going to hit the fan."

Cassidy stared at Jessup for a moment, then unzipped the seal on the

bundle and looked inside at his Yamaha. "The shit's going to hit the fan," he repeated. "What do I do after that?"

"Just do your job," Jessup replied with a shrug.

"Uh-huh." Cassidy deflected his nervousness by running his fingers over the neck of his instrument. He did not want to admit it to himself, but the craving was back. Just like it always had been, those times when he was unsure of himself, of his talent. "So, to paraphrase the immortal Frank Zappa, I just shut up and play my guitar."

"That's not a bad idea," Jessup said.

II. 60 Seconds Over Cydonia

Excerpt from "Searching for the Cooties," by David L. Zurkin; Atlantic Monthly, *March 2031.*

Even as photos of the Cydonia artifacts were being spread across screens and pages back home, preparations were underway at Arsia Station for an extended expedition to the City. The *Edgar Rice Burroughs* had made little more than a flyover and a brief touchdown at the Face, and while the airship was the fastest means of transportation available on Mars, it did not have the range, cargo capacity or crew complement necessary for long-term exploration of the site. Meanwhile, scientists on Earth and at Arsia Station were clamoring for more information about the City. It was because of the haste in which the expedition was mounted that a dispute arose: who had the primary right to explore the ruins?

While Arsia Station was an international effort, different nations had contributed the components of the settlement and had aided in the discovery of the site. The *Burroughs* was registered to the United States, but her two-man crew, W.J. Boggs and Katsuhiko Shimoda, were respectively American and Japanese. The vehicles which brought the expedition to Cydonia were Russian, but the leaders of the Arsia Station science team, Shin-ichi Kawakami and Paul Verduin, were Japanese and Dutch, while the co-supervisors of the base—Arthur Johnson, Sasha Kulejan, and Miho Sasaki—were American, Soviet, and Japanese. Although the scientific equipment transported to Cydonia, hastily cannibalized from Arsia Station's labs, was largely American-made, the habitat modules had been built by the European Space Agency, while the ingenious portable waste-recycling plant was a product of the U.S.S.R., and so on.

Under more ideal circumstances, this would have been a testament to international space cooperation. Indeed, the members of the Mars settlement had long since learned to disregard the matter of who contributed what. But on Earth, their respective governments did not view matters in the same light. When Mars had been a way-station for further planetary exploration and its resources were considered nearly limitless, the

U.S. and the U.S.S.R., Japan and the Europeans were completely willing to share the wealth. But the City, the unexplored culture and technological artifacts of the aliens—now nicknamed the "Cooties"—was not part of the bargain. The governments of Earth were unwilling to casually hand away any potential finds within the City in the spirit of detente.

Unfortunately, international space law had yet to evolve to cover exploration or salvage of extraterrestrial artifacts, so there was no practicable legal recourse. To make matters more complicated, American politics had taken one of its periodic swings to the right. In 2028, the ultra-conservative George White was elected to the White House. During his first State of the Union address to Congress, in 2029, he alluded to an "American manifest destiny in space" which was soon followed by a highly dubious claim that the City belonged to the United States because it had first been spotted by an American space probe in 1976. Soviet General Secretary Andrei Nasanov, himself a hard-liner, responded with an even more ludicrous claim that, because the U.S.S.R. had accomplished the first landing of a space probe on Mars in 1971, the red planet was rightfully Soviet territory. All mention of the United Nations Space Treaty, which forbade national claims to heavenly bodies, was lost in the subsequent squabble.

If the City had been found to be merely an abandoned, empty house, the feud might have eventually collapsed in the usual sullen name-calling. But then, for better or for worse, the Labyrinth was discovered . . .

Cydonia Base, Mars: June 15, 1800 MCM, 2030

Within a few minutes of the *Shinseiki*'s personnel lander having touched down on Cydonia Base's landing grid, Richard Jessup—wearing one of the lightweight skinsuits which had replaced more bulky spacesuits on Mars—walked away from the spacecraft and headed for the half-buried cluster of cylinders which comprised the base habitat. Two of the base's co-supervisors, Miho Sasaki and Arthur Johnson, followed Jessup, having been snagged by the NASA administrator from the reception committee which had greeted the lander's arrival.

As they marched towards the habitat, Jessup paused to look at the City: four enormous, eroded stone pyramids, eerily reminiscent of the Egyptian pyramids at Giza, which towered above the flat red landscape. As he watched, one of the Soviet autotanks clanked into view from behind the foot of Pyramid C-1. The AT-80 Bushmaster was as ugly in its design as it was in its purpose; a robot which strode upright on two jointed legs, its revolving upper turret containing a 20 mm recoilless machine gun. As it walked past them, the turret swiveled towards Jessup and froze for a moment, its artificial eye briefly scanning the newcomer. The quick burst from the machine gun could have chopped him in half, but appar-

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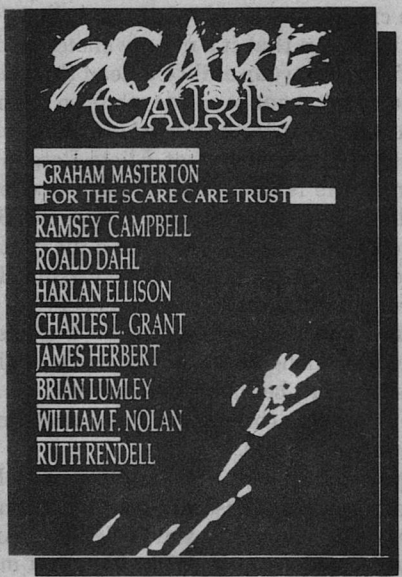

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ently the Bushmaster's AI system determined that Jessup was not an immediate threat, and the huge war-robot lumbered away.

Jessup said nothing until the three of them had cycled through the habitat's airlock and they had entered the vacant lab module. He carefully shut the hatch behind them; then, without preamble or apology, he handed to Johnson a sealed letter. Johnson opened the envelope and scanned the letter, noting the signatures of the President and the NASA Chief Administrator, then handed it to Sasaki and turned back to Jessup.

"So . . . " He paused, pursing his lips and staring at the glassware on the chemistry bench. "Is this permanent, Dick?"

"Only until the crisis is resolved." Jessup replied. "Art, you've got to believe me when I tell you that it's not my choice or decision. Everyone has complete confidence in your ability to lead this mission . . . "

"Except that they don't want someone who's so chummy with the Russians." Johnson, a squat man with frizzled grey hair, chuckled derisively and shook his head. "You know what Eliott Betano was doing before White tapped him as the NASA chief? He was a science fiction writer, churning out potboilers about space wars with the Soviet Union. This is a dream come true for him. Maybe if he's lucky he'll get a real war out of this. I bet he and White are down in the White House bomb shelter right now, doing an inventory of the canned beets."

"Art . . . " Jessup sighed and rubbed the back of his head, feeling the bump he had received during aerobraking. At least this was all he had suffered; Ben Cassidy had become violently sick on the way down. "I don't like it either, but this thing can't function as long as we've got a loaded gun pressed to our heads."

"Then what do you intend to do about it?" Sasaki folded the letter and gave it back to Johnson, then absently shook her long black hair back over her shoulders. "This says that you've relieved Arthur of command because of 'military considerations.' What does that mean?"

"I can't tell you that right now . . . "

"Of course you can tell us that right now." Art Johnson feigned breeziness. "Why, Dick, the two of us go back a long way. Junior year at Cal Tech, if I remember correctly. There's nothing you can't tell an old frat brother about, is there?"

"Okay, then, I *won't* tell you about it," Jessup replied coolly. "First I want Sasha and Oeljanov in on this, and I want to give them a chance to remove the Bushmasters and the CAS voluntarily. That's my decision, not White's or Betano's."

"What a hero," Johnson said sourly. "What do you have up there, a nuke?"

Jessup ignored him. "I would like for the two of you to be here when I confront them. If and when . . . if they refuse, I want the two of you to

quietly spread the word for everyone to get under cover. Inside the City would probably be the best place. And get Boggs to take the *Burroughs* up and out of here—way out of here, at least twenty klicks—and to make sure Cassidy's on it when he leaves."

Johnson stared at Jessup for a moment, then nodded his head. "Aye-aye, sir."

"Does this mean there's going to be a military strike here?" Sasaki asked. Jessup looked at her but said nothing. The slender woman stepped closer to him. "Who do you think you are, Jessup? Japan and the ESA are neutral parties to this mission. What gives you the right to attack without our permission?"

"Miho, your government and the Europeans have been consulted at the highest levels." Jessup, meeting her gaze, forced himself to remain calm. "You may think you're uninvolved, but you know as well as I do that those weapons can be used against anyone and everyone here. Paul, Shin-ichi, Art, yourself . . . you're all potential hostages. Your government recognizes this as well. That's why the *Shinseiki* is being used as the staging vessel."

"For *what?*" she demanded. "Is it a tactical nuclear strike?"

Jessup hesitated. It worked to his advantage to play his cards close to his chest, but if Miho Sasaki thought erroneously that a nuke strike was in play, this could work against him. Sasaki's great-grandparents had been victims of the atomic bombing of Hiroshima; distrust of American nuclear forces ran deep in her family. If she spread word that the *Shinseiki* had a warhead aboard, it would not only spread unfounded hysteria, but could also prompt Oeljanov to take hostages.

"No nukes," he said. "I won't tell you what's up there, but I will promise you, a nuclear strike isn't being planned. You've got to trust me on this, Miho."

"Miho," Johnson said. Sasaki looked at the American co-supervisor, and Johnson solemnly nodded his head. She took a deep breath and slowly nodded her head as well. Johnson looked at Jessup. "Okay, chief, what's next?"

Jessup reached over to a bulkhead, picked up a wall phone, and passed it to Johnson. "Call Sasha and Major Oeljanov and ask them to report here at once."

Johnson took the phone, tapped in a couple of numbers. "Dr. Kulejan, Major Oeljanov, please report to the lab at once." He gave the phone back to Jessup, then added, "You know, Dick, Sasha hasn't been crazy about this situation either. It's been Oeljanov's doing all along. Sasha's been caught in the middle."

Jessup nodded. "I'll try to remember that. Thanks for telling me."

A few minutes later, Sasha Kulejan and Major Maksim Oeljanov ar-

rived together at the laboratory. The module had been crowded with only three people inside, so with two more people the meeting was almost literally face to face. Kulejan had not been at the pad when the lander had arrived; the slender, bearded Russian grinned and seized Jessup's outstretched hand between both of his hands and squeezed it warmly.

"Richard!" he exclaimed. "So good to see you once again! Welcome to Mars!"

Jessup forced a smile. "It's good to see you again, too, Sasha. I wish it could be under more happy circumstances."

Kulejan's face changed from warmth to puzzlement, but before the Glavkosmos astrophysicist could say anything more, Jessup turned his attention to Oeljanov. The Red Army major—tall, with a prize-fighter's build, with thin, receding dark hair—was standing at parade rest next to the hatch. "Dr. Jessup," he said formally.

"Major Oeljanov," Jessup replied with equal formality, "I'm here as a representative of the United States government. For the time being, I have officially replaced Dr. Johnson as the American co-supervisor of Cydonia Base and other manned Mars operations."

Oeljanov gazed unwaveringly at Jessup. "Yes? Please continue."

Jessup took a deep breath. He had been rehearsing this moment even before he had left Earth, when the duty had been thrust into his hands, but he still felt his hands shivering. Making ultimatums, particularly to a Soviet military officer, was not something to which he was accustomed. "We have problems . . . "

He stopped, took a deep breath, and started again. "Major Oeljanov, we cannot tolerate the presence of autotanks or combat armor at this base. They're destabilizing to the international nature of this investigation. As a designated representative of the United States of America, I'm asking you to remove all Soviet weapons from Cydonia Base."

Oeljanov remained impassive. "Speaking as an official representative of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics . . . " There was a slightly ironic tone to his voice. " . . . we believe that the deployment of our armor units leads to a greater stabilization, on the other hand."

Behind him, Jessup heard Miho Sasaki move restlessly, but he did not look around. Sasha Kulejan looked uncomfortable, embarrassed. Jessup kept his eyes on Oeljanov's face. "I . . . we don't share that view, Major. Again, I ask you, please withdraw your combat units from Cydonia Base."

The officer skeptically raised an eyebrow. "And do what with them, Dr. Jessup? Abandon them out in the wasteland?" He shook his head. "No. That's unacceptable. We have gone to considerable trouble and expense to bring the AT-80's and the armor suit to Mars. I'm afraid that they must remain operational at Cydonia Base."

"Then you refuse?"

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Oeljanov's mouth twitched. "Officially, yes, that is what I just said, Dr. Jessup."

Jessup did not bother to repeat the ultimatum to Kulejan. Although Sasha was technically the Soviet co-leader of the base and held equal authority with himself and Sasaki, it was tacitly understood that, in matters military, his authority was superseded by Oeljanov. Indeed, repeating the demand to Kulejan could be embarrassing for his friend, whom he had known from meetings at space science conferences on Earth. Such nuances could be reported to, and misinterpreted by, Sasha's political superiors in Moscow.

"Then . . . " Jessup picked his words carefully, trying not to tip his hand. "The U.S. and its Mars allies will have to take appropriate measures."

Oeljanov started to say something. "Excuse me," Jessup said before the major could speak, and edged past the Soviet officer and stepped through the hatch. Cydonia Base was a small, temporary installation: a half-dozen modules arranged along a single narrow corridor. He had no problem finding the command module.

Shutting the hatch behind him, he immediately ordered the duty officer to radio the *Shinseiki,* using a priority frequency which the ship's command crew was monitoring. A few minutes later, Captain Omori's voice came over the comlink.

"Yes, Dr. Jessup? How did your meeting go?"

"Badly," Jessup replied. "We've reached a stalemate with the bear and he refuses to behave. Go with Steeple Chase, code green. Repeat, Steeple Chase, code green."

A short pause. *"We copy that, Cydonia Command. Steeple Chase code green, affirmative.* Shinseiki *over and out."*

Jessup signed off and settled down in a chair to watch a bank of TV monitors above the console. Fifteen minutes. Now, if only Oeljanov did not wise up before then . . .

Excerpt from the Congressional Record transcript of hearings before the United States Senate, Select Committee on Space; July 1, 2030

MR. ROSENFELT of Missouri, Committee Chairman: The committee still hasn't heard, Mr. Betano, why NASA and the White House felt it was necessary not to inform Congress that a secret military mission was sent to Mars.

ELIOTT B. BETANO, Chief Administrator, NASA: For the same reason that many people within NASA, the Pentagon, and . . . persons directly involved with the mission were not informed, Senator. We felt that Steeple Chase's covert nature, its sensitivity, precluded the public's right to know. We did not want word to leak to the Soviets what we were

planning. I was under direct orders from the President not to reveal Steeple Chase to anyone who did not have Top Secret clearance from the FBI and the State Department.

MR. ROSENFELT: I have such clearance, Mr. Betano, and I was not informed.

MR. BETANO: I was not aware of that, Senator. I'm sorry.

MR. ROSENFELT: Yes, I'll just bet you are. The chair recognizes Ms. Crouse.

MS. CROUSE of California: As I understand, the strike was carried out using a new type of spacecraft, the . . . ah, F-210 Mars STS. I think they're called the, um . . .

MR. BETANO: Hornets, ma'am. The F-210 Hornet, Mars Space-To-Surface. A very efficient, effective fighting craft, as Operation Steeple Chase has proved.

MS. CROUSE: With certain reservations, I agree. But as I understand, this fighter was specially designed and built for use on Mars. The committee has heard testimony from another witness who tells us that the Hornet is too aerodynamic to be used on the Moon and too flimsy and underpowered for effective use on Earth. The only place it can be effectively used for a combat operation was on Mars. In fact, it was specifically designed for that environment. My question, Mr. Betano, is whether the F-210 was conceived, designed, and built before a need for it existed.

MR. BETANO: Well, the . . . I mean, funding for the Hornet was approved by the Joint Armed Services Committee in FY '27 as a new start program, with the possibility in mind that the plane would be needed sometime in the near term. It was approved as a line-item in the DOD budget by both houses and was . . . could you repeat the question, please, Senator?

MR. ROSENFELT: The chair recognizes Senator Leakey.

MR. LEAKEY of Ohio: I believe what Senator Crouse is asking, sir, is whether the Hornet was designed specifically for this sort of mission.

MR. BETANO: I don't understand what you're asking me, sir.

MR. LEAKEY: It seems to have been designed as a combat craft. I have the specifications here and I see where the armament includes a 20mm machine gun and two solid-stage smart missiles. So the Hornet was designed not just for powered flight in the Martian atmosphere, but apparently for attacking enemy forces on the Martian surface. Even then, its limited range, because of its limited fuel capacity, made it capable of only short-duration missions. Once it touched down, it was effectively grounded. That's a correct assessment, isn't it?

MR. BETANO: That's correct, sir, yes, but I still don't . . .

MR. LEAKEY: What puzzles me, Mr. Betano, is why NASA and the Pentagon felt it was necessary four years ago to float a DOD line item

past Congress for a Mars STS fighter when, at least in 2026, the U.S. and the U.S.S.R. were on a completely peaceful stance with each other. The kind of mission the Hornet was intended for, the circumstances for which it was built, did not exist at the time. Both countries were engaging in peaceful exploration of Mars. The Soviets had not deployed any weapons on Mars, nor did they have a reason, in their minds, to do so at that time.

MR. BETANO: I don't understand what you're implying, Senator.

MR. LEAKEY: No sir, I think you do. Someone was spoiling for a fight.

Cydonia Base, Mars: June 15, 1830 MCM, 2030

"I hope you're not some scientist who wants to grab some rock samples 'cause I'm not putting 'em on board and we're getting the hell out of here *now*!"

W.J. Boggs, six feet of bowlegged Tennessee flyboy, did not wait for an answer as he lurched through the flight compartment's airlock hatch and flopped into the pilot's seat. The *Edgar Rice Burroughs*' co-pilot, Katsuhiko Shimoda, reached above Ben Cassidy—who was scrunched on the floor behind the seats—and secured the hatch, while Boggs stabbed the radio button with his gauntleted thumb.

"Cydonia Command, this is the *Burroughs,* requesting permission for emergency takeoff," he snapped. He did not wait for a reply. "Who gives a shit, anyway?" he muttered. "We're in a hurry here. Katsu, is that hatch secured?"

"Roger that, W.J." Shimoda calmly flipped toggles on his flight station's consoles. "Cabin pressurization cycle initiated. MPU's at 100 percent, check. Elevators, check. Envelope integrity is copasetic . . . "

"Yeah, yeah, yeah. Screw the checklist, let's just get out of here."

"Burroughs, *this is Cydonia Command, you are cleared for emergency takeoff."*

"We copy, Command," Boggs replied. He glanced over his shoulder at Cassidy. "Hang on there, pal, this is going to be rough. Okay, Katsu, ropes off!"

Shimoda flipped two toggles which severed the airship's tethers. The four hundred-foot airship bobbed in the stiff breeze which had kicked up as the sun began to set on the western horizon. Beyond the gondola windows, they could see the skinsuited ground crew running from underneath the ovoid shadow of the *Burroughs.* "Elevators trimmed for vertical ascent!" Boggs called out. "Port and starboard fans at full throttle! Hang on, here we go!"

Boggs jammed the two engine throttles forward with his right hand and the *Burroughs* bolted skyward, its twin 800-horsepower turbofans howling as they clawed for loft in the tenuous Martian atmosphere. The

pilot eyed his altimeter suspiciously, then glanced back again at Cassidy. "Can you fly?" he asked.

"What?" Cassidy asked weakly. It seemed as if the airship was standing on its tail. He had become sick during aerobraking in the *Shinseiki*'s lander; it was unfair that he had to go through this kind of ordeal again, less than an hour after reaching firm ground. "This thing?"

"No. I mean, if we have to throw you out the hatch, can you flap your arms and make it to the ground on your own? This ship isn't made to take three people."

"Uhh . . . "

"Damn," Boggs growled as he turned back to his controls. "Katsu, we've got a passenger here dumb enough to think he can flap his arms and fly. Hey, keep an eye on the radar, willya?"

Shimoda looked back at Cassidy. "Don't worry about him. He's always cranky when he has to hurry somewhere." He checked his gauges. "Cabin pressurization normal. We can remove our helmets."

Shimoda unsnapped the collar of his skinsuit and removed his helmet, then reached over to take off Boggs' helmet since the pilot had his hands occupied with the airship's yoke. Cassidy fumbled with his own helmet, finally getting the thing to detach from his skinsuit, and Shimoda helpfully reached back to push the switch on Cassidy's chest unit which turned off the internal air supply. The Japanese co-pilot pulled a headset over his ears and pulled a spare out of a locker to toss to the musician. Boggs managed, with one hand steadying the yoke against the buffeting of the wind, to pull a George Dickel baseball cap out from under his seat and secure a headset over it. The foam-padded headsets barely muffled the engine roar, but the mikes made it a little easier for them to hear each other.

"I'm sorry we had to leave your parcel behind," Shimoda apologized. "Our cargo capacity is limited, as W.J. explained, and we're forcing matters by putting you aboard. What was it, anyway?"

"My guitar."

"A *guitar?*" Boggs yelled again. "What are you? A musician?"

"Yeah, that's right. I'm a musician. That's my guitar you left at the base. What are you in such a hurry for?"

"A musician." Boggs grinned at Shimoda, who merely smiled back as he fiddled with his own controls and shook his head. "A musician. That's funny."

"It's better than getting another boring scientist," Shimoda replied.

"Angels one-two and leveling off, course thirty two north by four-zero-four east." Boggs pushed the yoke forward out of his lap and the airship's nose eased back to a more horizontal position. "Okay, we're outta the shit and we've got some safe distance. How's the envelope, Katsu?" Shi-

moda silently cocked his thumb upwards. "Fine. Fifteen miles downrange should be enough room. Let's heave-to here and watch the show. Anything on the scope yet?"

"Negative," Shimoda replied, eyeing the radar screen.

"That's *negatory,* dammit! We speak English on this ship!" He feigned a swat at the top of Shimoda's crew-cut head, which the co-pilot easily ducked. "One would think you were still hauling kangaroo meat up from Australia on Shin-Nippon, the way you talk."

"Beef," Shimoda corrected. "I was hauling beef. Ah. Radar contact. Two objects entering the atmosphere at fifty thousand feet at Mach Two, 42 degrees North by 35 degrees West . . . faint third and fourth objects dropping away from them just now, off the scope."

"That's the aeroshells breaking loose," Boggs said. "Five bucks says they've developed STS fighters since we've been gone." He glanced back at Cassidy again. "You were up there. Ain't that right?"

"I dunno, but there were a couple of Marines aboard the *Shinseiki.*"

Boggs cackled. "See, Katsu? Told you so." He looked back at Cassidy. "Musician, huh? No kidding. I'm named after a musician myself. Waylon Jennings. From Nashville, my hometown."

"I think that's wonderful." Cassidy burped and felt a little bit better for it. "Now will somebody give me a straight answer, and tell me what's going on?"

Boggs laughed. "What's happening is that Major Oeljanov and his robots are about to get smeared by a couple of the fastest, meanest boys in the U.S. Marines, and if you watch out this window you can see the whole show." He motioned to the triple-paned window next to Shimoda's seat. "They've been asking for it and now . . . "

"Two o'clock high," Shimoda said, pointing out his window. "Two vapor trails."

"There we go." Boggs leaned over to stare across Shimoda's shoulders at two thin white streaks lancing across the dark purple stratosphere. "So," he added absently, "are you the guy who's going down into the Labyrinth?"

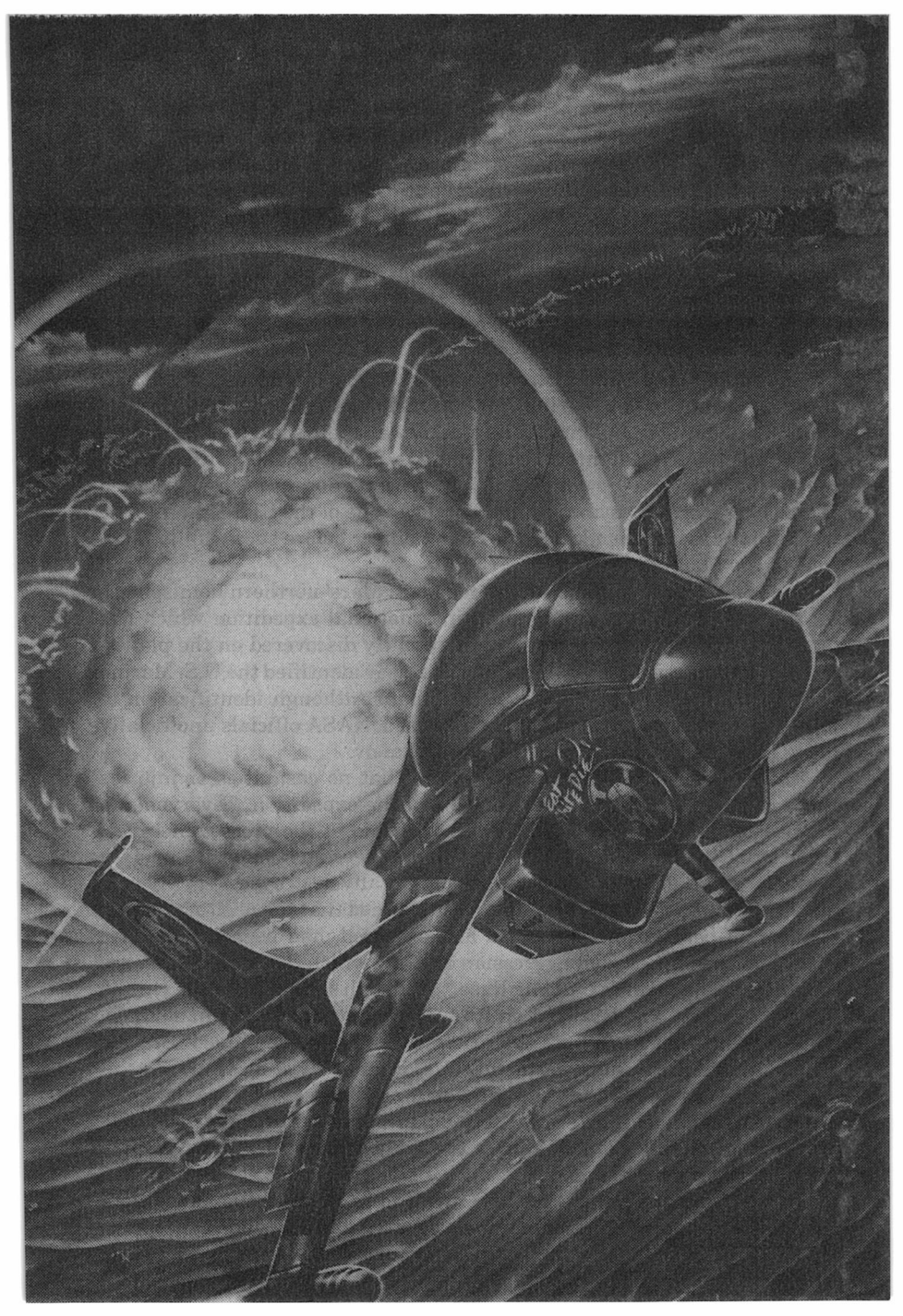
"Yeah," Cassidy said, clumsily trying to rise and balance himself on his knees, "I guess I'm the person."

"Lucky you. I hope you make out better than the last guy who was down there."

Cassidy forgot about the vapor trails for a moment, looked sideways at Boggs. "The last guy? What about him?"

"They brought him out of there in a bag." Boggs stopped and looked back at Cassidy. "You mean to say that nobody told you what happened to Hal?"

* * *



From The New York Times *(online edition); June 16, 2030, page one. (Headline: "U.S. Space Forces Attack, Destroy Soviet Units on Mars.")*

WASHINGTON, June 15—Top officials of the White House, Department of Defense and National Aeronautics and Space Administration confirmed today at a surprise press conference that a rapid deployment force of the United States Marine Corps' 1st Space Infantry attacked and "totally destroyed" mobile military units on Mars belonging to the Soviet Union. One Soviet military advisor and one Marine Corps pilot were killed in the incident, which occured today at 1:35 p.m. EST, or 6:40 p.m. MCM (Mars Central Meridian).

According to the announcement, made at the White House, the attack was carried out by two Marine Corps pilots in Space-To-Surface "Hornet" aircraft deployed from Mars orbit from the Japanese spaceship S.S. *Shinseiki.* The two STS fighters destroyed two Soviet AT-80 "Bushmaster" autotanks before a Soviet Red Army officer piloting a space-adapted Combat Armor Suit managed to shoot down one of the STS fighters. The remaining Hornet then killed the Soviet officer before successfully landing on the Martian surface.

The raid occured in the Cydonia region in Mars' northern hemisphere, at the site of the base camp of the international expedition which has been exploring extraterrestrial ruins recently discovered on the planet. Pentagon spokesman Lt. Col. Samuel O. Kasey identified the U.S. Marine who was killed as Lt. William A. Hoffman. Although identification of the Soviet military advisor was not disclosed, NASA officials unofficially have identified him as Major Maksim Oeljanov.

NASA spokesman Jerome Jeffers said that no casualties or injuries were reported among civilian members of the expedition. "Everyone up there is completely safe now," Mr. Jeffers said at the press conference. "The situation has been stabilized . . . It was over and done with in sixty seconds, and the Soviet armor units were totally destroyed."

White House spokesperson Mary Nile claimed that the military action, which had been covertly planned and executed, had been made in response to "pending Soviet aggression on Mars which threatened the lives of the scientific team at Cydonia Base." Although she said that the United States "regrets" the deaths of both Lt. Hoffman and Maj. Oeljanov, Ms. Nile claimed that the covert operation, which was code-named "Steeple Chase" by the Defense Department, was "completely successful."

"We are convinced that the mission was necessary to preserve the safety and well-being of American, Japanese, and European scientists working on Mars," Ms. Nile said at the press conference. "It was a dirty job, but it had to be done."

Several Soviet scientists are also involved in the Cydonia expedition. At press time, no official comment has been made by officials in Moscow,

although a top Soviet official from the Washington embassy has privately condemned the action as "a criminal outrage" and has promised "a swift response by the people of the Soviet Union."

Cydonia Base: June 15, 1855 MCM, 2030

Night had fallen by the time the *Burroughs* returned to the base. The crews had set up portable floodlights around the perimeter of the habitat, but it was still dark enough that the airship's touchdown, guided down by flashlights waved by two expedition members on the ground, was rough. Most of the floods were centered around the wreckage of the two Bushmasters. Oeljanov's corpse, encased within the bullet-pocked remains of his combat armor, was sprawled near the habitat where he had fallen during his final stand. The surviving Hornet had alighted on the pad near the *Shinseiki*'s landers. The other Hornet had plowed into the desert several miles away; Miho Sasaki and Spike D'Agostino had taken a tractor out to the crash site to retrieve the remains of Goober Hoffman.

Ben Cassidy found Dick Jessup near Oeljanov, watching as someone used a portable laser to slice through the CAS's ceramic shell to remove the major's body. The musician ignored the silent, almost respectful circle of people surrounding Oeljanov. He grabbed Jessup's left shoulder. "Jessup, I want some words with you," he demanded.

"Not now," the NASA administrator said softly.

"Why didn't you tell me about Moberly? Or about the first guy who went in there, the one who was killed as soon as he entered the first chamber?"

"This is not the time," Jessup insisted.

"You son of a bitch, when *was* the time?" Cassidy's voice rose belligerently. The people standing around looked away from Oeljanov's body towards them. "Before you drafted me for this goddamn mission? Or maybe you were afraid that I wouldn't go along with this if I knew that the last person you sent into C4-20 was ripped apart like a roast chicken?"

Jessup, saying nothing, pulled his arm out of Cassidy's grasp and started to walk away. Cassidy grabbed a handful of the thin fabric of his skinsuit. Arthur Johnson, who had been standing nearby, jumped forward and pried Cassidy's fingers off Jessup's suit. "Don't do that!" he snapped. "If you rip somebody's suit like that, he can die before we can get him into an airlock!"

He hauled Cassidy away from Jessup, who had stopped and turned back around. "That's no worse than what he had planned for me!" Cassidy yelled. "What were you planning to do? Throw me in there and see if the room will kill me just like it did with Moberly?"

Johnson, still restraining Cassidy, looked at Jessup. "You didn't tell

him about Hal?" he asked. "Holy Christ, Dick, is there anything *else* you've been keeping from us?"

"Great. That's just fabulous." Waylon Boggs, who had just joined the circle after checking over the *Burroughs,* walked up behind Jessup. "The way this mission is going so far, we'll have more bodies to bury around here than the Cooties left in the pyramids."

"Okay! All right!" Jessup lost his cool, stepped forward into the ring of accusation which seemed to surround him. "You want to know why you weren't told about Moberly, Ben? You got it right the first time—you wouldn't have come if I had told you. Art, you want to know why you weren't informed in advance about Steeple Chase? Because the secret would have leaked to Oeljanov and he would have taken hostages, and maybe more people would have died. You want to call me a liar, go right ahead, but maybe you're all still alive because some secrets were kept."

No one said anything for a minute; the comlink was silent except for the faint hiss of static. "I'll ask you again, this time politely," Johnson said at last. "Is there anything else you're keeping secret from us?"

"No. Nothing."

"All right, then," Johnson said quietly. He let go of Cassidy and motioned towards the habitat. "Ben, if you'll come with me, we'll get you a cup of coffee and a bite to eat, and then we'll give you the whole story about the Labyrinth and what happened to Hal Moberly. Of course, after you know everything, you may not want to go in there."

"Yeah, maybe I won't," Cassidy said. "But do I have a choice?"

Within his helmet, Johnson shook his head. "Probably not, I'm afraid."

III. Cootie Catcher

Excerpt from Mars; *(Volume 4, "The Solar System" series). Time/Life Books, New York, 2034)*

The second expedition to the City found as many new mysteries as it did new discoveries.

The extraterrestrial explorers who had visited Mars in the distant past apparently never left the planet. Indeed, the red planet had become their final resting place. The giant D&M pyramid was found to be an immense tomb, its interior catacombed with niche-like compartments containing their desiccated remains. Although a completely intact exoskeleton of a "Cootie"—as the alien race was dubbed by the explorers—was never found, enough fragments were recovered and pieced together to provide Cydonia Base exobiologist Shin-ichi Kawakami and the science team with a near-complete picture of the physiology of the insectile aliens (see Figure 3-8).

Why did the Cooties settle Mars but apparently never touch down on Earth? And why did the aliens never leave Mars, but commit themselves

to mass—perhaps live—entombment within the D&M Pyramid? While there are several theories, the leading one was first delineated by Richard Hoagland in the 1980s before the existence of the Face and the City was verified, and later tentatively confirmed by Kawakami.

According to the Hoagland theory, the Cooties had been colonists brought to Mars by a sublight-speed starship from their homeworld, located in an as yet undetermined part of the galaxy. The starship had followed a course tracked by an earlier advance probe to our solar system, but after a voyage which must have lasted hundreds, or even thousands, of years, the colonists found Earth to be critically different from what had been anticipated.

Hoagland speculated that Earth's gravity might have been too high to support such a colony, a factor which an advance probe might have overlooked or failed to report in its assay of Earth as a colony. From his examinations of the Cooties' remains, Kawakami has stated that the aliens' physiology may not have been strong enough to support their life-functions for very long under Earth gravity. Other exobiologists have since questioned the Hoagland-Kawakami theory (the question of microbiological predators has been raised, for instance) but their explanation stands as the leading theory.

Under such conditions, the Cooties might have reached the decision to settle Mars instead of Earth. Their starship might have been on a one-way trip, with return to the home system impossible for reasons of fuel and resources; with the remaining planets even more inhospitable, Mars was the best and only hope for the colony's survival.

For whatever reason, the Martian colony did not survive. The planet's climate could not support the Cooties for long, and while a starship has never been found, there is ample evidence to suggest that it was dismantled and that the Cooties did not leave our solar system again.

Within the City Square, pyramids C-1, C-2, and C-3 were found to be the vacant remains of the colony, with vast chambers and small rooms apparently once devoted to sustaining—for a brief time—the lives of the Cooties. Yet surprisingly few relics were found in the pyramids, nor were there any signs of the aliens' culture: no hieroglyphs, no examples of a written language, and most importantly, nothing which indicated from where the Cooties had come. Indeed, it seemed as if the Cooties had deliberately removed and hidden their artifacts before they entombed themselves within the D&M Pyramid.

Meanwhile, there was the mystery of the Face itself. The mile-long mesa near the City had been carved to resemble a human visage. Obviously, the Cooties had knowledge of the human race's existence on Earth and believed that the inhabitants of the third planet would one day venture to Mars. Why did the Cooties feel it was so necessary to

draw the attention of human explorers, when humans would arrive long after the demise of the Cooties, when it would be impossible to help them?

The answers to these enigmas lay within Pyramid C-4—the last to be opened by the international team of explorers, the first to take lives . . .

Cydonia Base: June 15, 2100 MCM, 2030

The base habitat had a wardroom module which served jointly as the galley, dining area, conference room and recreation area, but by the time Ben Cassidy and Arthur Johnson got there, it had been taken over by W.J. Boggs, Katsuhiko Shimoda, Spike D'Agostino, and several other crew members. D'Agostino had just returned to the base with the remains of Goober Hoffman and he was in the mood for a wake, and Boggs was only too willing to oblige. Shimoda had contributed a flask of sake and Boggs had dug a bottle of whisky out of his locker, and they were proceeding to indulge in a melancholy bender. Neither Johnson nor Cassidy cared to join in. Johnson found some cold roast beef and horseradish sauce in the refrigerator, poured a couple of cups of black coffee, and the two men retreated to Johnson's bunkhouse module, deserted now that everyone else was getting twisted in the wardroom.

"It's been a wonderful day," Johnson summed up, settling down on his bunk and dabbing a slice of beef into the white puddle on his plate. "First I get relieved of command, then I get to see two men killed." He shoved the roast beef in his mouth and chewed on it as he gazed at Cassidy, who was sitting on another bunk across from him. "What I'm ashamed to admit," he continued once he had swallowed, "is that I'm the guy who got you into this fix."

Cassidy stared back at him. "Come again?"

"My fault. When I listened to the tape of Moberly's encounter with the room, I thought it sounded like your improvisational work. In my report to NASA, I said as much in passing. I was suggesting that we develop an AI expert system which could communicate with C4-20 . . . after all, the Cooties themselves must have some sort of expert system running the Labyrinth . . . but someone must have taken me literally. I didn't think . . . "

He shook his head regretfully. "Damn, Ben, I'm sorry about this. I've been listening to your work for years. The last thing I wanted was to get you into this shit."

Cassidy nodded, absently swabbing some beef in his horseradish before realizing that he wasn't hungry in the first place. He put the paper plate on the bed. "S'okay. They probably would have drafted me anyway."

"Drafted? Geez, you're my age. You're too old for the draft. What did they get on you?"

Cassidy sipped his coffee. It was wretched and he put it down on the floor. "Taxes and drugs," he replied.

"What about 'em?"

"I didn't pay my taxes for a couple of years because I was strung out on drugs. They said I could go to jail or I could go to Mars. I think they came up with my name before they audited the books, but when they did, they found the leverage to get me here. At least, that's what I figured from what Jessup told me."

Johnson shook his head with black amusement and wiped his lips with the back of his hand. "Good old Dick. I should have let you rip his suit back there. Seldom has a more two-faced bastard walked the earth . . . or Mars, for that matter."

"Well, that's kind of the problem with my situation, isn't it?" Cassidy rested his elbows on his knees and cupped his hands together. "I mean, it's becoming pretty obvious that Jessup didn't tell me the whole story when I still had the chance to back out. So what's the real story here?"

"I don't know. What's the question?"

"What happened to this guy Moberly? I know he got killed in the room, but I don't know how or why, and I know that somebody else bought it down there, too. What's so important about exploring the place that it's worth all those lives?"

"Jessup left out a lot, didn't he?" Art Johnson sipped from his coffee, made a face, and placed his cup on the floor. "Hal Moberly . . . well, let me start you at the beginning."

When the expedition opened Pyramid C-4, Johnson told Cassidy, the first thing they found was a small room about the size of a large walk-in closet. The room was featureless, except for another stone door at the opposite end of the chamber. Mounted in the center of the door was a large, round button. The first man to enter the room was a Soviet astrophysicist, Valery Bronstein. He had the right idea, to push the button with his hand to open the door, but when he walked into the room, he stepped on a large round divot placed in the floor. The weight of his body pushed the divot down and, before he or anyone else could react, a one-ton stone block in the ceiling fell and crushed him to death.

"Oh God," Cassidy said.

Johnson nodded. "Once we hauled the block away and removed Valery's body, someone else approached the problem by extending a rod through the doorway and pushing the door-button with it. The door opened without another block dropping, and we found a corridor leading down. We followed it to Room C4-2, and that's when we found the next little test."

Room C4-2 was larger than Room C4-1. Again, it had a door set in the opposite end, but this time there was a wide slot set in the middle, with

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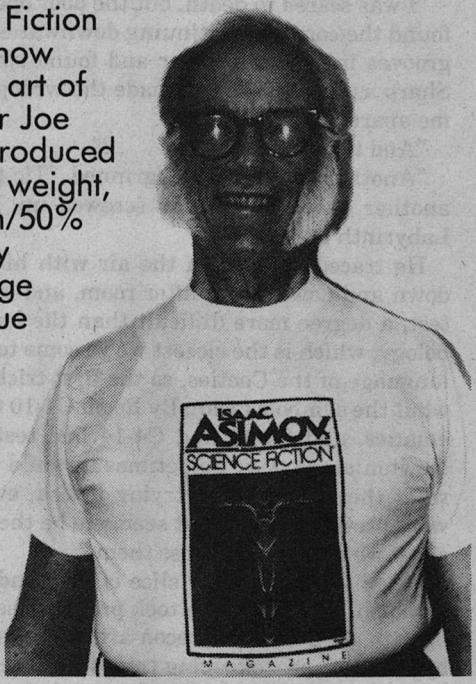

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a narrow bar sticking out of the left side. Above and below the slot were inscribed two horizontal wavy lines, running parallel to each other. As well, the walls of the chamber were lined with narrow, horizontal grooves. This time, the science team carefully entered the room and studied the slot and the diagrams at length before Johnson himself performed the task that Shin-ichi Kawakami determined was the solution to the new test: he carefully moved the narrow bar along the slot from left to right, exactly following the pattern of the wavy lines.

"I was scared to death, but the door opened," Johnson said. "Again, we found the corridor continuing downwards to Room C4-3. We checked the grooves in the walls later and found spring-loaded fléchettes in them. Sharp as razors. If I had made the wrong move, they would have ripped me apart."

"And the next room was . . . ?"

"Another test," Johnson grinned. "Tic-tac-toe, if you can believe it, and another death-trap if you screwed up. And that's the way the whole Labyrinth is designed."

He traced a spiral in the air with his forefinger. "It goes down and down and down, room after room, and each room has its own little I.Q. test, a degree more difficult than the last one. Mostly it involved symbology, which is the closest we've come to discovering any sort of written language of the Cooties, so the first trick has always been to determine what the symbols mean. By Room C4-10 the tests began to involve mathematics, and C4-13 and C4-14 had tests involving what we know as Newtonian physics. Sometimes it would take us weeks just to figure out what the Cooties were trying to ask, even if the solutions themselves were pretty simple. That seems to be the intent. The rooms want to find out if we can second-guess them."

He rolled up another slice of beef and swabbed it around in his horseradish. "Of course, we took precautions after I went in there. We managed to get a modified recon-armor suit shipped to us, like the ones used by the U.N. peacekeeping troops. It gave the first person entering a new room a certain degree of safety, and we were able to monitor what he or she was seeing and doing from the control module up here. Worked fine. We didn't lose anyone else, until Hal Moberly entered C4-20."

"Okay." Cassidy held up a finger. "I know that something ripped apart his suit. You lost contact with him right before it happened, but you heard the music just before then. Is that the truth?"

Johnson nodded again. "Yep. Sounds as if the only thing they didn't tell you about C4-20 is that Moberly was killed in there. But did they tell you that it looks like C4-20 is at the end of the Labyrinth?"

Surprised, Cassidy shook his head. "That figures," Johnson continued. "There's no other doors, but the walls look different. Metallic. Maybe

there's something behind them. If that's the case, it would fit with Kawakami's theory that the Cooties knew somebody from Earth was coming. They built the Face to draw our attention, and then they built the Labyrinth to make sure whoever explored this place was smart enough to be able to understand . . . "

He paused and shrugged his shoulders. "Well, whatever it is that's down there. There might be something underneath this whole city structure, something that will explain everything we don't know about the Cooties. Like, maybe what brought them here in the first place."

"A starship?" Cassidy asked. "You think there's a ship down there?"

Johnson shrugged. "Who knows? We never found their ship. It should have been left in orbit, but we don't know how the Cooties operated. We don't know what's down there, but there's more we don't know about the Cooties than we *do* know. In any case, there's something down there they felt the need to protect with the Labyrinth."

Cassidy fell back on the bunk and let out a low whistle. "No wonder everyone's so hot to lay claim to the site."

"Yup. International cooperation between the superpowers is fine and dandy when we're just poking through some rocks, but give them even the slim chance of finding something like a starship . . . " Johnson sighed and shook his head. "And politics screws science, yet again."

"Umm." Cassidy was pensive. "So where does that leave. . . ?"

He was interrupted by the module hatch opening. The two men looked up to see Sasha Kulejan and Tamara Isralilova climb into the bunkhouse. They stopped when they spotted Cassidy and Johnson. Their faces were downcast.

"Whoops," Johnson said. "Sorry, guys. We'll get out of the way and let you two have some privacy." He leaned down to pick up his coffee cup, motioning to Cassidy to do the same. "Rules of the house," he murmured. "Whoever wants the house to themselves has priority. And you're sitting on his bunk."

But Kulejan quickly shook his head and waved his hands. "No, no, no. It's nothing like that. We were told you were in here and we came to . . . "

His voice trailed off. Both of them looked disturbed, both angry and confused at the same time. "What's going on?" Cassidy asked.

Isralilova took a deep breath. "A communiqué from our country was just received at the control module," the young physician said, her voice shaking. "Orders from the Party Secretary himself. The Soviet Union is formally withdrawing from this expedition. We've been ordered to not cooperate in any way with this mission. We are to prepare to return to Arsia Station, to await the return of the *Korolov*."

Johnson let out his breath. "Great. That's just great." He looked back

at Cassidy. "I wonder if there's any booze left at the wake. Something *else* just died."

From The Washington Post *(online edition); June 17, 2030, page one. (Headline: "Soviets Demand Reparations, Withdraw Mars Team").*

MOSCOW, June 16—The Soviet news agency Tass announced today that General Secretary Andrei Nasanov has issued a formal letter of protest to President George White, demanding both an official apology and reparations for "the unjustifiable sneak attack" launched Friday by United States space forces against Soviet armor units on Mars.

Tass also claimed, in a terse statement issued to members of the foreign press here, that the director of Soviet space agency Glavkosmos, Aleksandr Karpov, has issued instructions to Soviet members of the international science team presently exploring the alien ruins in the Cydonia region that they shall "cease cooperation in the expedition" and prepare to leave Mars "at the soonest possible opportunity."

The U.S.S.R. Mars spacecraft, the *Sergei Korolov,* is believed by Western space experts to be preparing for an early launch from Earth orbit. The apparent intent is to pick up the Soviet members of the expedition within ten months, but it is speculated that a new Soviet science team may be replacing the original team. Spokesmen for Glavkosmos offered no comment on these rumors.

White House spokesperson Mary Nile gave no comment on the Soviet demands or actions at the daily news conference today. Administration officials privately said that President White is studying Nasanov's demands, but that White is satisfied with the withdrawal of Soviet scientists and mission support members from Mars.

"If this is what it takes to get the Russians off Mars, then we're very happy how things have turned out," said a top White House official. "We're breaking out the champagne."

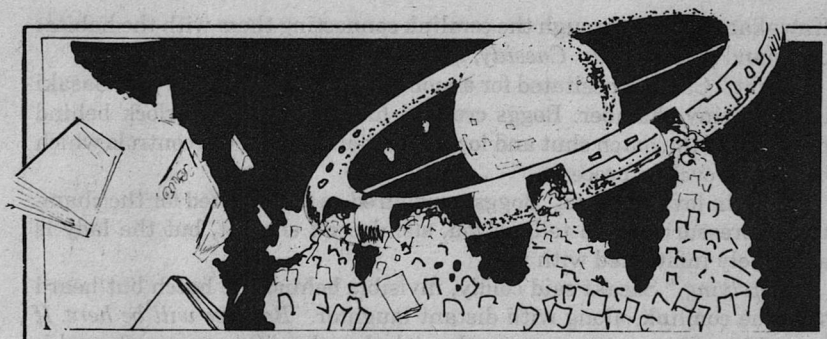
Cydonia Base: June 16, 0800 MCM, 2030

"Okay, last stop."

Waylon Boggs stopped Ben Cassidy in the low-ceilinged corridor outside Room C4-20. The original stone door had been propped open with hydraulic jacks and in front of them Miho Sasaki checked the digital register on the portable airlock which had been form-fitted into the doorway. She then pushed down the locklever on the hatch and pulled it open, stepping to one side. "Step inside please, gentlemen," she said formally.

Boggs paused. "Miho, sweetheart, can't we try that one more time, with feeling? Like 'Getcha butts in there' or something less . . . "

"Please, Waylon, we're wasting time here." They all heard Shin-ichi



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Kawakami's voice through the comlink connecting them with the habitat command module. *"Mr. Cassidy, if you will please . . . ?"*

"Right." Cassidy hesitated for a moment, then he squeezed past Sasaki into the tiny chamber. Boggs crushed himself into the airlock behind him, pulled the hatch shut and locked it, then touched the controls which began the cycling process.

"She's in love with me," Boggs murmured as they waited for the chamber to pressurize. "I'm telling you, she doesn't show it, but the lady is absolutely infatuated with me."

"Stop lying," Sasaki said coldly, invisible behind the hatch but heard over the comlink, along with distant laughter. *"Ben, we will be here. If something goes wrong, return to the airlock and we'll rescue you from this side."*

"Just remember to knock first," Boggs added, with a wink seen through the faceplate of his helmet. "It may be occupied, y'know. Okay, we're at full pressure, hoss. Might as well get yourself comfortable."

Cassidy removed his helmet and harness, then unzipped and began to peel out of his skinsuit. Going through the mental procedure of desuiting helped to distract him not only from his own fear, but from Boggs' good-old-boy joshing. He knew that Boggs was trying to defuse his nerves, but it was not helping much.

Under the skinsuit he wore drawstring cotton trousers, high-top slippers, and an old Working Blues tour sweatshirt. Boggs, who had removed his helmet but remained suited, studied his face. As Cassidy turned to the airlock, the airship pilot stopped him with his arm. "Hold it there, bud," he said. "Lemme give you something for good luck. Hold out your right hand."

Puzzled, Cassidy put out his hand. Boggs reached behind him, then pulled out his own right hand, cupped as if he were holding something in his palm, and slapped it into Cassidy's hand. The musician looked down at his hand and found it empty.

Boggs winked again, although his face remained dour. "That's an authentic Tennessee cootie-catcher. Guaranteed effective against bug-eyed monsters or your money back."

Cassidy had to grin. "You finally said something funny, W.J." he replied. He solemnly pretended to slip the cootie-catcher into his pocket.

"I'll try harder." Boggs turned, yanked down the handle on the airlock's second hatch, and pushed it open. "Okay, then, enough of this political crap. Let's go catch us some cooties."

Room C4-20, despite pressurization, was cold; he could feel the chill cut through his clothes, see it turn his breath into fog. The room hummed. The low, monotonous sound had commenced the moment the door had been propped open and the portable airlock inserted, about three hours

earlier that morning, but according to Kawakami nothing had happened except for a slight electromagnetic surge, detected by the sensor pod which had been placed on a tripod within the room. The sound—like the drone of a beehive, or, to Cassidy's ears, like the expectant static one hears from monitor speakers in a recording studio—seemed to come from everywhere at once, from the intricately patterned metal walls of the room.

Rubbing his arms with his hands to warm himself, Cassidy let his eyes wander around Room C4-20. Rows of jury-rigged tanks fed an oxygen-nitrogen mix into the chamber. Power cables snaking across the floor led from a portable RTG generator to the lights, the sensor pod, two tripod-mounted TV cameras and, finally, to the six-channel soundboard for his electronic guitar and its two monitor speakers. The guitar itself lay on a small folding table, along with his belt unit and a communications headset. Standing next to them, as if he were a posted sentry, was Sasha Kulejan.

"I believe all is in readiness," the Soviet scientist said as he picked up the headset and fitted it on Cassidy's head, carefully adjusting the mike. "Don't be alarmed if this fails and you don't hear anyone. It frequently occurs during a test. Say something now."

"Test one, two, three," Cassidy said.

"*We are receiving you well,*" Tamara Isralilova replied in his ears. "*You are looking good.*"

"Thanks." Cassidy looked back at Kulejan. "I thought I heard that your government had ordered all the Russians to not cooperate with this. What are you and she doing here?"

Kulejan stoically *tsked* as he taped dime-size adhesive medical scanners to Cassidy's chest and temples. "My government is a long way from here. Besides, Soviet science has a long history of . . . um, patriotic non-compliance. The military and the scientists, we often do not agree on every issue. With respect, of course."

"I like your attitude. I wish some of our scientists felt the same way more often." Cassidy grinned. "Good morning, Dickie. Are you listening?"

If Dick Jessup was in the command center, he deigned not to respond to the stab, but Kulejan smiled briefly as he tested the med scanners with a hand-held instrument. Cassidy fitted the control unit in the waistband of his trousers, picked up the Yamaha, pulled the embroidered strap across his left shoulder, and briefly ran the fingers of his right hand across the rows of recessed plastic switches before pushing the power switch on the control unit. There was the tinny *chuk* from the monitors of the guitar coming on-line. A moment later, almost imperceptively, the hum from the walls rose a note higher in pitch.

"Slight EM surge," Kawakami said to him. *"I think your audience is waiting for you."*

"I hear 'em." Cassidy felt a cold current run down his spine. He looked at Kulejan and Boggs. "You guys better get off the stage. I think the house is getting restless."

Kulejan patted him on his shoulder, then picked up his helmet and headed for the airlock. Boggs lingered for a moment, the anxiety which he had hidden for another expatriated Southerner now plain on his face. "Taking requests?" he asked.

"Sorry."

"That's a crummy song." His humor fell flat and he knew it. Boggs shook his head and headed for the airlock, then paused and looked around again. "Look, Tex, if it gets hairy, get your ass out of here. You don't owe these guys nothing."

Cassidy stared down at his guitar. Boggs gave him a salute before ducking into the airlock and slamming the hatch shut behind him.

He took a deep breath, let it out slowly. Somehow, in spite of his fear, it was relieving to be alone at last. Despite the anticipatory hum of the walls, it was as if he were back in his first days as an artist. The cheap garage studio in Brownsville where he had cut his first demo tape: the walls lined with old egg cartons, the old framed photo of Sonny Terry and Brownie McGee on one wall and the hilarious black-velvet painting of Elvis on the other. The raw days, before the fame, the concerts, and the cocaine. The good, hungry days. Everyone was gone and he was alone with his axe, his mind and his hands. The nervous anticipation was there, but the fear was gone. He was waiting, like a master guitarist waiting for an unfamiliar road band to put down their beers and get their act together. Waiting for the room to quiet.

This was just a different room, was all. He knew what to do.

"Come on, sucker," Cassidy breathed. "Gimme a lick I can play."

It began.

There was a inquiring trill of notes slithering up and down the scale, backed by the hum which turned into an insistent, single-minded throb. Cassidy shut his eyes and listened to the complex rhythm. At first it seemed as if the notes were random, but as he concentrated, he picked up a faint pattern. Okay, there it was. He moved his hand to the Yamaha's keyboard, inched the pitch wheel up a taste, and played the first few bars of an old number, "Turn to Stone."

It segued perfectly, but the room was apparently not satisfied. The throb rose sharply into a harsh, reverberating yowl, then lapsed into an almost rock-like three-quarter-time backbeat behind a moody chord sequence in B-flat.

"Don't worry about it," Kawakami said. *"Relax and try to talk to it."*

"Right," Cassidy murmured. "I'm doing Joe Walsh and it wants the Beatles." That remark gave him another idea. He thought for another moment, then switched to the fretboard, fuzzed the pitch, and burned out the simpler first refrain of "Why Don't We Do It In The Road?" playing the *Rump-bum-bum-bum-bum-rump-bum* backbeat on his keyboard, then letting the memory replay the sequence indefinitely as he repeated the refrain.

It was a tasty little number and for a moment it seemed as if the room was going to mime him, repeating the bars twice. Then, in the middle of the second bar, it warbled a shrill, discordant note which arced upwards into infinity before flattening out again and resuming the near-random pattern it had begun in the first place.

"This is getting a little difficult," Cassidy remarked.

"*Yes. Right.*" This time it was Paul Verduin who spoke to him. *"We don't want to distress you, Ben, but we're seeing something rather unusual down there. Will you please look at the walls and tell us what you see?"*

Cassidy looked away from his instrument at the walls, and sucked in his breath. Slowly, yet noticeably, the intricate patterns on the walls were rearranging themselves. The grooves and intricately curving lines were flowing, squirming as if they were worms jammed together in a fisherman's bait bucket. The bulges and straits moved in an organic, living fashion, as if something behind them had been revived and was struggling to get out.

"You gotta be kidding me," Cassidy breathed.

It was as if he were flashing back to one of his worst drug hallucinations: the time when he had been onstage at a club in St. Louis, his mind warped after he had just mainlined, and had glanced out into the audience to see the audience, in the twilight darkness beyond the stage lights, transformed into a hideous tangle of moray eels, gaping jaws screaming silently at him from the room.

That was the night he had torn off his guitar, rushed backstage, and had been found by his band in the dressing room curled up next to the toilet in the restroom. He stared at the walls, and the overwhelming urge was to do the same thing now. Get rid of the Yamaha, bolt for the airlock, pound on the hatch and scream for Boggs and Sasaki to get him the hell out of there.

"I have to get out of here," he whispered.

"*Don't look at it,*" Kawakami said. "*Concentrate on your music.*"

"Goddammit, I'm not kidding!" he shouted. "Get me out of here!"

"No! Forget your songs! It wants you to communicate!" Kawakami insisted.

"Communicate? What the hell am I supposed to tell it?"

"Just play! Or you'll never get out of there alive!"

Cassidy tore his eyes away from the undulating walls, focused on his guitar as he listened to the room, its coruscating chaotic music. Perhaps it only wanted him to improvise. He tried harmonics, holding his fingers down on the twelfth fret while turning the pitch up slowly. The speakers yowled with the feedback, and the room responded with high-pitched squeals and rumbles which culminated in a reverberant roar.

"Okay, you liked that," he said aloud. "Let's try this." Cassidy dove his right hand into his pocket and found the bottleneck slide he had grabbed from his kit bag before heading down to the chamber. He fitted the slide over the middle finger of his left hand, then pushed it against the fretboard as he adjusted the pitch wheel to its highest level. He ran the slide up the frets; the sound was like stainless-steel fingernails running down the world's longest blackboard, a painful screech which made his teeth ache. He ran the slide back down the frets, pausing to jiggle it on the eighth and third frets, then shot it back up the board again, at the same time touching the chord sequencer to repeat the backbeat he had programmed a couple of minutes earlier.

The room responded with another protracted reverberation, then began adding a not-so-random set of delicate, tinny notes of its own which sounded oddly like a xylophone being played by a hyperactive child. It became a distinct rhythm, and without thinking, Cassidy touched the rhythm control and the conga key, then used the keyboard to add his own percussion backdrop, joining but not miming the xylophone sound. The room wailed and crashed, but the xylophonic rhythm continued as Cassidy worked to keep up, matching then surpassing the room's playing as he sought to anticipate the room's next moves.

Cassidy lost track of time. He was beginning to enjoy himself, savoring the experience, imagining himself as Miles Davis playing free-form jazz with the Bitch's Brew band. For the hell of it, he ran a couple of bars from "Sketches of Spain." The room responded, imitating him note for note. He segued cleanly into the "Twilight Zone" theme song, and the room began to improvise on that, sending the eerie ripple of notes higher and higher until Cassidy brought it back into the opening bars from "The Star-Spangled Banner," again concentrating on the twelfth fret, which the room improvised upon in a way which sounded remarkably like Jimi Hendrix's famous Woodstock jam.

The fear and nervousness were completely gone now. He was having fun. He hadn't realized that his eyes were closed until something brushed against the back of his calves. He opened his eyes, looked down past his guitar at the floor, and saw a small Cootie standing in front of him.

It almost looked like a toy: a detailed miniature, metal model of a Cootie, a cross between a preying mantis and a termite. While the real Cooties had been about the size of a person, this one was the size of a

housecat. At first Cassidy again thought he was hallucinating, until the pseudo-Cootie scuttled away on its six multijointed legs.

Cassidy panicked and jumped back a few inches, his hands almost deserting his instrument. *"Don't stop,"* Kawakami urged softly. *"Keep playing. They've been there for a few minutes now."*

"They've been here a few minutes?" Cassidy repeated. Keeping with "The Star-Spangled Banner," he slowly raised his head and looked around.

The walls were gone, revealing bare red stone inner walls like those in every other room in the labyrinth, and around him moved dozens of the small metallic robots. They crawled quickly and deliberately around the chamber, climbing over each other, swiftly and carefully exploring the TV cameras, the RTG generator, the air tanks, the sensor pod, his soundboard and monitors, but otherwise keeping a respectful distance from himself.

Cassidy stared at them, mesmerized by their coordinated motions. Their pincer-like forelegs were briskly rubbing together, the way crickets perform their mating calls, and the music was all around him now. "They were in the walls," he whispered.

"They were *the walls,"* Kawakami explained. *"We couldn't see them because they were folded over each other. They came out while you were playing."*

"They were what killed Moberly," Cassidy said.

"They won't hurt you. You're giving them what they . . . wait. What are they doing?"

Now the robots were scuttling towards the sides of the chamber. Their sharp, tiny pincers began digging into the walls, finding the hairline cracks between the blocks, gaining leverage. Suddenly, at the far end of the chamber, two of the Cooties pulled a block loose from the wall.

There was a loud, muffled *whuff!* of air escaping from the pressurized chamber, and a windstorm broke loose in Room C4-20, whipping red dust from the walls and the floor. *"Get out of there!"* Kawakami yelled. *"Get in the airlock!"*

Grit in his eyes, his clothes tearing against his body, Cassidy turned and ran towards the airlock. The Cootie-robots did not try to stop him as he struggled into the tiny chamber. He pulled off his guitar and dropped it on the floor, then grabbed the hatch lever. Bracing his legs against the sill and putting his back into the effort, he managed to haul the hatch shut against the escaping atmosphere.

It was quiet inside the airlock. As soon as the hatch was shut, Cassidy began to shimmy into his skinsuit, trying to remember the procedure. "I'm in, I'm in, I'm in," he babbled. "I'm safe. Just get me out of here! What's going *on* out there?"

"Easy there, hoss," he heard W.J. Boggs say. *"Just get your clothes on and depressurize nice and easy-like. We'll get you out of there in no time."*

"What's going on?" Cassidy demanded.

"Nobody knows," Boggs replied, *"but it's something."* Cassidy heard him chuckle. *"Hey, that cootie-catcher worked just fine, didn't it?"*

IV. Revolution

"To let one's thoughts dwell on these Martian Saharas is gradually to enter into the spirit of the spot, and to gain comprehension of what the essence of Mars consists."

—Percival Lowell; from Mars As an Abode of Life *(1908)*

Cydonia Base: June 16, 1030 MCM, 2030

Cassidy leaned over Kawakami's shoulder to peer at the TV monitors. "So what are they doing now?"

He didn't really need to ask. On the monitor screens, they could see that the pseudo-Cooties were still disassembling the inner wall of Room C4-20. They had left all of the equipment in the room intact, including the TV cameras, the lights, and the sensor pod, but the tiny robots were busy cutting away stones and piling them near the airlock.

Next to Kawakami's workstation, Paul Verduin, Arthur Johnson, Tamara Isralilova and Sasha Kulejan were crowded around Verduin's console, studying the first data to be transmitted from the sensors. The computer was already constructing an incomplete three-dimensional model of the vast chamber at the bottom of the Labyrinth, as the pod's radar painted a vague picture of a giant room which the lights only barely penetrated.

"It's a much larger chamber than we suspected. Perhaps as much as the base of the C-4 pyramid itself. It's not empty space, either." Kawakami pointed at the screen in front of him, where vague, fluid shapes lay tantalizingly just out of reach of the floodlights. "See? We can barely make out something back there. Perhaps machinery." He glanced over his shoulder at Cassidy. "And how are you, my friend? Still screaming obscenities at me?"

"If you had been down there, you would have been screaming obscenities, too." Arthur Johnson turned to Cassidy. "Good work, pal," he said softly, holding out his hand. "How's your nerves?"

"Shot, but I'll survive." Cassidy shook his head, then looked around the control module. "Where's Dickie? I thought he might have been here with you."

Johnson's eyebrows raised as he mimicked a look of complete surprise. "Oh, you must mean Dr. Richard Jessup. I believe he got delayed in the bathroom. He went there about . . . how long ago was it, Dr. Kawakami?"

Kawakami leaned back in his chair and checked his wristwatch.

"Ummm . . . about an hour and a half ago." He smiled. "I thought I heard someone pounding, but I couldn't be sure."

Johnson shook his head mournfully. "It's terrible how the lock on that door sticks sometimes." His brief grin disappeared as he turned to look around at the others. "Gentlemen, lady, I think we've reached the moment of decision. All in favor, please signify by raising your hands."

Johnson put up his hand. Kawakami and Verduin immediately raised their hands. After a moment Kulejan and Isralilova reluctantly put up their hands as well. Johnson nodded his head. "I discussed this with Miho about two hours ago. She's still wrapping up things in the Labyrinth, but she added her affirmative vote in absentia, so I guess it's unanimous. Tamara, if you'll please go rescue the unfortunate Dr. Jessup? Sorry. I don't think I should be the first person to see him just now."

Isralilova squeezed past the men to leave the crowded module. As she did, Paul Verduin touched a couple of keys on his board, waited a few moments, then removed from slots in his console two CD's. He solemnly handed them to Arthur Johnson. "Audiovisual record is on One, sensor scan and mission history is on Two," he said. "I made backup disks about an hour ago, but this is the complete record." He thought for a moment. "The pilot, Captain D'Agostino. Is he . . . ?"

Johnson smiled. "Disarmed. He had a pistol as a side-arm, but it made a disappearance while he was sleeping off his hangover. Since his craft is out of fuel, he won't be able to take it aloft. I think Shimoda's out there now, making some more permanent changes." He chuckled and shook his head. "He and Boggs have been bitching about not having enough spare parts for the *Burroughs,* so I guess they're getting them now."

Kawakami still looked worried. "Richard might still try to get the captain to intercede."

"We'll have to take that chance," Arthur agreed. "But at least he's outnumbered. One combat-trained Marine against a half-dozen wimpy scientists. . . ?" He shrugged. "Well, if it gets too serious, we can always knock him over the head and threaten to toss him out the airlock. My bet is that he gets a ride back to the *Shinseiki.*"

Verduin was still looking at the CDs in Johnson's hands. "Don't worry, Paul. They're in good hands." Johnson slipped the two silver discs in his shirt pocket and zipped it shut, then took a deep breath. "Okay, people, shut it down. Paul and Shin-ichi, remember to erase everything from the memory. Leave nothing they can use."

"What are you. . . ?" Cassidy began.

Johnson held up a finger. "Wait. Just wait."

Around them, the scientists were busily working their keyboards. One by one, the TV and computer screens blinked out as the electronic hum of computer drives grunted and died. Within a minute, the control module

was completely silent. All the instruments were dead, the screens completely dark.

Johnson let out his breath. "I never thought it could get so quiet in here." He put his hand on Kawakami's shoulder. "Any second thoughts, *Kawakami-san*?"

The exobiologist was staring at a blank screen. After a moment, he shook his head. "It's the only way," he said. He touched his upper lip meditatively. "Wasn't there something one of your founding fathers said about everybody hanging together or hanging separately?"

When Jessup entered the control module a few moments later, the first thing he noticed was the inactivity. His eyes roved over dead consoles, then focused on the science team, who in turn were silently watching him. "If this is what I think it is," he said evenly, "you're all making a grave mistake."

Arthur Johnson shook his head. "No, we don't believe so. This is a strike, Dick. Maybe you could call it a revolution. Everybody here is in on it, and nothing gets done until our non-negotiable demands are met."

"Hmm." Jessup folded his arms across his chest. "Okay. I'll listen. What are your demands?"

"First, the United States and the Soviet Union will issue formal apologies to each other for their military actions here. Second, the Soviet Union will allow its members of the science team to continue their work here. Third, the participating nations must promise not to allow any more military personnel or equipment on Mars." Johnson held up his hands. "That's all."

"That's all." Dick Jessup sighed. "Well, I'll communicate your stipulations to the President, but you know you won't get anywhere with this. All they have to do is send another science team here. They'll continue the work and your careers will be down the tubes."

Paul Verduin coughed. "That will be difficult to do," he said quietly. "I've taken the liberty to erase the memory of the hard drives. The data has been relocated to another location where they cannot find it . . . "

"What?"

"And it will be destroyed unless all of our demands are made public and satisfied," Johnson finished. "If a new team was sent here, they would have to recreate almost two years of research from scratch. I don't think the Cooties are going to wait that long."

Jessup stared disbelievingly at Johnson. "What about the Cooties? What's going on?" Then, for the first time since entering the module, he seemed to notice Ben Cassidy. "What happened down there?"

"Room C4-20 has been solved," Kawakami said. "Mr. Cassidy here has managed to convince the Cooties that we're a sapient, creative race. That was what the Labyrinth was ultimately designed to prove. It was a

mechanism to determine whether we were not only technologically advanced, but also creatively advanced. For what purpose, we don't yet know . . . but I doubt they will be patient much longer. Already their robots are working down there."

Jessup scowled at Kawakami. "Robots? As in automechanisms?"

"Activated when C4-20 was given enough proof of our intelligence. We were looking at this entirely wrong. The Cooties already had enough evidence of our empirical knowledge. This time, they wanted assurance that we weren't just problem-solvers." Kawakami smiled. "Now they're tearing down the last walls. They're waiting for us."

Johnson said, "But we're not going to do a thing about it if the boys in the White House and the Kremlin continue to act like children. We've decided that we're not going to allow the Cooties to become part of your little cold war, and that's what the strike is about."

Jessup glared at him. "Your work can be recreated by another expedition."

Johnson shrugged. "Maybe so, but how long will that take if we destroy our work? Two, three years. I have a gut feeling that the Cooties aren't going to wait much longer."

The NASA administrator was quiet for another moment. "Forget it, Art," he said at last. "It won't work. The *Shinseiki's* still in orbit, and we've still got men aboard. Play rough if you want, but we can stage another attack whenever we wish . . . "

Cassidy had been silent throughout the conversation. Indeed, it suddenly occurred to him, he had been aloof for far too long. He cleared his throat and took a step forward, entering the circle for the first time. "He's still lying, guys."

Dick Jessup turned around and thrust a finger in his face. "You stay out of this!" he snapped. "This is none of your goddamn business!"

Cassidy looked straight at Jessup as he continued. "There's one military guy, a colonel, still on the *Shinseiki*. So far as I know, there's no more attack fighters left. They blew the whole wad when they took out the Bushmasters. Besides the command crew, all that's left up there is one rear-echelon officer. He can't do a thing."

The science team was watching Jessup again. The truth was finally coming out; his aces were all used up. "Maybe," he said, his voice quavering. "He could be right, maybe. But what happens when the Soviet ship gets here? You think there's not going to be another strike team on *their* ship?"

Johnson shrugged. "That's always a possibility. So what? What's to stop us from destroying the data when they show up? Doesn't help them a bit. Even in the worst-case scenario, they've got a bunch of dead renegades and nothing to show for it. Everything's lost for good . . . plus,

they've got to answer to the world for a massacre." He smiled again. "Nobody wins. Somehow, I don't think the Soviets are that stupid."

"Face it, Dick," Cassidy said benignly. "It's time to grow up. You can stop playing your little game of beat-the-commies now."

Jessup's temper, held in captivity for so long, finally blew. "I thought I told you to shut up, you goddamn junkie!" he shouted at Cassidy.

Cassidy stared back at Jessup. Behind Jessup, Johnson smiled softly and nodded his head. Without thinking twice, Cassidy balled up his fist and slugged Jessup with a fast, hard hook to the jaw.

The NASA administrator toppled backwards, fell over a chair, and crashed to the floor. "On second thought," Cassidy said, massaging his knuckles, "sometimes it's satisfying to be immature."

He turned and walked out of the module. Johnson looked down at Jessup, who was wiping blood from the corner of his mouth and beginning to rise from the floor. No one moved to help him get up. "I'll take back command of this base now, if you don't mind," Johnson said quietly. "The lander will be launching at 1300 hours. I trust that you and D'Agostino will be on it. This meeting is adjourned."

He left the compartment and took a deep breath, then walked down the corridor to the wardroom. Cassidy was there, gazing out the narrow window at the red terrain.

"Ben Cassidy, the two-fisted guitarist," Johnson said, walking up behind the musician. "Nice hook you got there. How's your hand?"

Cassidy shrugged, not turning around. "Bruised, but it should heal by the time I do my next gig. Probably in a federal prison."

The station co-supervisor joined him at the window. "Naw, Dick won't do anything like that. It'll mean admitting that he was beaten up by a liberal. I just wouldn't turn your back on him between now and the time you get to Earth."

He followed Cassidy's gaze out the window. "The lander to the *Shinseiki* takes off in about two hours. Think you're going to miss this place?"

"Hell, no. I can't wait to go home." Cassidy paused. "But I might miss the Cooties. They were good to jam with. Can you give me a tape of that performance?"

Johnson thought it over. "Sorry. Maybe in ten years, but not now. It's too sensitive."

"S'okay. Sometimes the best concerts never get heard but once." Cassidy hesitated. "Do you really think this strike of yours is going to work?"

"Maybe so, maybe not. But it'll put all the jerks back there on notice that we're not going to take it any more. Perhaps that's all that really counts. Don't worry about us."

Cassidy snickered. "I won't . . . well, maybe I will."

"How are you doing?"

Ben Cassidy gazed out at the barren landscape. In the far distance on the horizon, the ruined profile of the Face stared up into space. Serenity in ancient stone. Serenity in his own mind. For the first time in years, the fear and the cravings were gone.

"How am I doing?" Cassidy closed his eyes and rested his chin on his arms. After a while he smiled. "I feel a whole lot better." ●

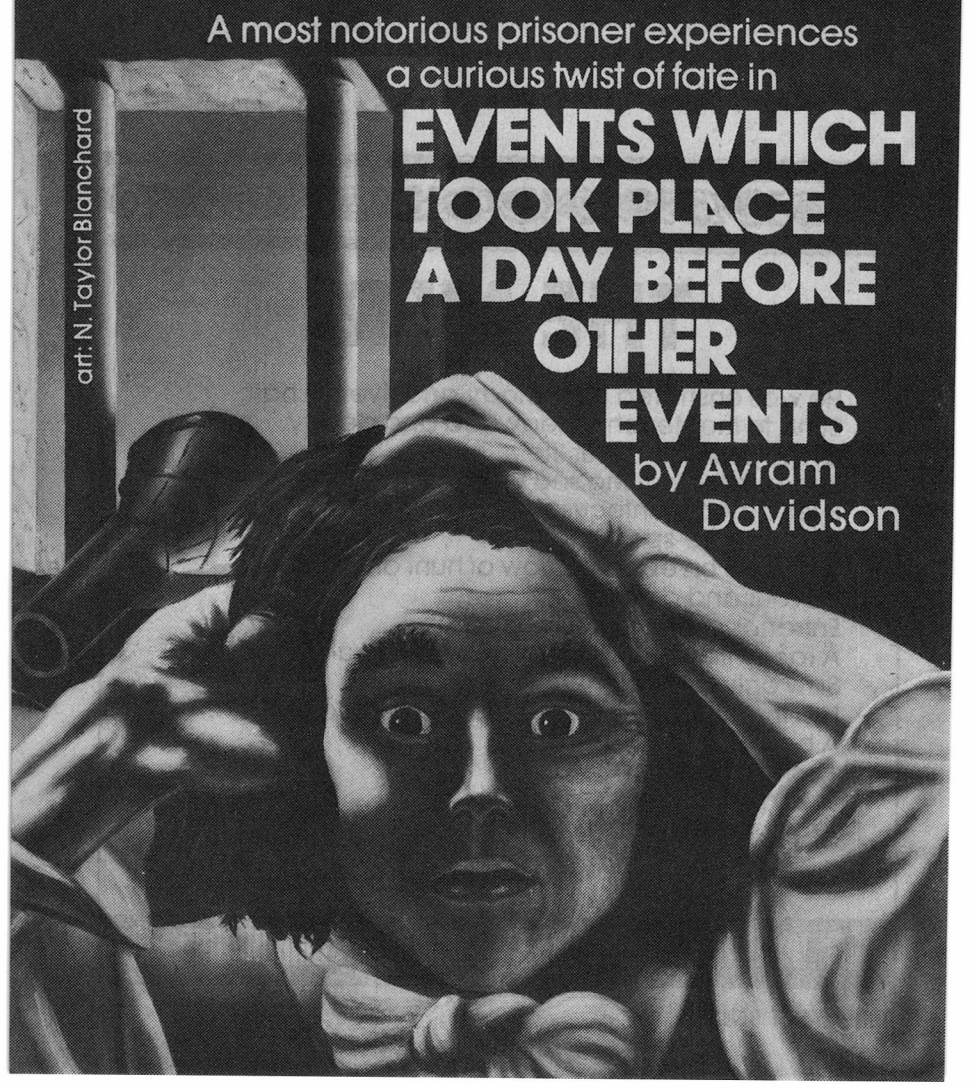
The author wishes to thank Koji Mukai (Japan), Tom Scheelings (the Netherlands), Randy Kennedy, Phil Unger, and Bob Liddil for their advice and help. This story is dedicated to the late Roy Buchanan.

THE MER

He was ensnared by melody and rivered hair,
Blind to the stench of seaweed and decay,
Of the patterns of her life
Beneath the curling sea where,
Eyes aglobe, unfocused,
With needle-sparkling teeth
She rode on ebb and flow of hunt and catch,
Devour and destroy.
Entranced, he neared her perch—
A rocky fist upthrust against a siren sea—
Saw only arms outheld with promises,
Not the blood-kissed lips that thrummed a dirge,
A barbed song, fading
As she bowed in victory,
Drew him close,
And fastened on his heart.

—Anne Devereaux Jordan

The principal prisoner in the principal prison paused in his recital of complaints to consider a particularly interesting thought which had only that moment, like the sullen roll of heat lightning, flashed across his mind. He at once broke into a laugh at the droll notion. "Oh yes, ah yes," he agreed, speech confirming thought. "Oh, certainly there must be people who would consider me insane. There are certainly people who consider me criminal: else why am I *here?!*" And he chuckled again. "Well,



well," he reproved himself slightly, "one must continue with one's work. Duty calls." Once again he raised his voice.

"If you call yourselves citizens," he cried, his mouth close to the bars of the tiny window, "then consider that citizenship has duties as well as privileges. Arise! Rise up! Erase the infamy! Strike off the fetters which a society, itself more cruel and corrupt than any mere one of its elements can possibly be, has in effect bound around my hands and feet—and also around yours!—Haven't I been saying this for years?"

Again his thoughts were interrupted.

Without having realized it, he had been standing on the one and only genuine hollow spot in his cell. At one time, a pipe, constituting part of the primitive sanitary arrangements (which had been replaced some years back by the present and almost equally primitive and certainly totally unsatisfactory arrangements—imagine! for one of his refinement and breeding—ah well—) had run to somewhere: an unknown distance away. The masons, themselves convicts brought here from a less distinguished prison for less distinguished prisoners, had satisfied themselves (and the warden) with ripping up the part of the old pipe immediately near the surface of the cell's floor, and covering the hole with a tile. From beneath this tile now came a faint but at once perceived rattling, part sound, part tremor: familiar, and only at the moment unwelcome.

"Do not go away," the prisoner shouted. "I shall return to continue explaining to you the wickedness, and indeed, the futility, of all of society's notions of punishment. . . ." He turned away, with but a faint sigh, and, *"Noblesse oblige,"* he said, grunting as he got down on his hands and knees and pried at the tile. He had begun to pick at the mortar before it had dried; *why,* he had not at first exactly known—or, rather, he had pretended to himself that he had not. But of course, actually, his mind, so infinitely superior to the minds of other men, had always considered the possibility, indeed, the likelihood, that the old pipe might also have served some other cell, lower down in the vast prison structure.

Prison structure vast and cruel, as though a type, one in fact might say an *archetype,* of the government and the society which erected it and maintained it still: still! in an age supposedly enlightened. "It is myself!" he called down the hollow space. "What is it that you want, you damned philosopher?"

Long practice alone had trained the two, incapable of speaking to each other face to face, to make out each other's voices despite the distortions caused by the odd area and space those voices had to traverse.

"My aching bones have gradually begun to ache just a little less," the echoing voice of the philosopher came rolling up through the long, narrow passageway, no larger around than a man's arm, "so it must be noon, with the sun at its strongest . . . I can see only the usual dimness, but

my bones . . . Well, as you usually are kind enough to talk to me at noon and you did not signal, I was afraid that you were ill: so I rattled to attract attention. You do not sound as always. I hope you have not been ill, then?"

"You do right to hope so," the principal and most distinguished prisoner said. "Suppose I should die? Beside the immense loss to a mankind deprived by my death of the message implicit in my teachings and my practice, the loss to yourself would be even greater. *If possible.* To whom would you speak if the cell up here were empty?"

The fretful philosopher, whose knowledge had failed to endow him with wisdom, asked, "Why didn't you signal to me at noon? What were you up to? Some other crazy scheme?"

"If my crazy schemes were only admitted to be the paradigms they are, would humanity be in its present unhappy situation? The question is rhetorical, and requires no response.—What was I doing? I was addressing the mob. The mobs, to be exact."

A sound somewhat like coughing came up the old drainway.

After a moment, the voice asked, "*What* mobs?"

"The mobs which even now surround our prison. And I have been preaching to them at the top of my voice the important principles of freedom and of liberty, which have no greater advocate than I, and that '*Do what thou wilt* shall be the whole of the law.' "

The philosopher—the fellow had a *name,* but what did it matter?—the philosopher said, "There is no mob. There are certainly no mobs. You have been shouting yourself hoarse, useless and unheard. No one will listen, for no one stops to try; no one can see your face from so far below, and no one could even hear your voice, anyway . . ."

He did not indeed say the very words, *You are mad,* but the belief in them was in the sceptical tones. "I must beg you to excuse me if I seem to differ from your own undoubtedly well-founded opinions, nevertheless: I am in a better position to judge than you are." The distinguished principal prisoner spoke only with the gentlest of sarcasm (being, basically, the most gentle of men: but one who knew his own nature: and how few know theirs?). "The fact is, however, that immense throngs are gathered around the prison to hear what I have to tell them: How it is absurd to call one line of conduct *cruelty,* and to punish it. How human beings are what they are because they *are* that way, and cannot change, and that our entire and so-called system of justice is at best an immense farce. That one's nature is formed by forces both inside and outside of ourselves and incomparably stronger than we ourselves are. And that society's 'justifiable constraint,' so-called, is an atrocity as atrocious as any atrocity so designated by the laws, be they social or criminal. And that is why I have been addressing the crowds. *And that is why they listen.*" And at

this moment, as if overwhelmed by the importance of the task, he scrambled to his feet and shuffled to the tiny, barred window.

"I recognize you all as my brothers!" he screamed. "I embrace you equally! Would that I were as free as you are and that you were all as free as I am! But how is it that you remain passive, so passive? Why do you all simply stand around, or move and moil to no purpose? You must fall to arms! Form your battalions! Stain the thresholds with the impure blood of the enemy! Liberty!" he screamed. He shouted, and he waved his free hand.

"Liberty!"

Then he fell back from the window, exhausted. And then once again, on hands and on knees, he called down the drainway, "Did you hear? Did you hear, you philosopher fellow?"

"Part of it I certainly heard," the dim and wasted voice declared. "What irony that only the voice of a criminal and lunatic solaces my solitude apart from my own thoughts, and that my only hope is that I may die in this living grave before you do. What! Do you still imagine that mobs of people have gathered, and are suffered to remain gathered, to listen to you? To hear your beliefs, which would be humorous if they were not so grotesque—the idea that *you* may do as you wish, to others, but that others may do nothing to prevent it, to *you?"*

The most distinguished prisoner smiled a small, tight little smile, almost a grimace. "You call them 'grotesque'? *I* do not call them grotesque at all. To me they seem as clear as the limpid waters of a forest pool. And I will tell you, sir—"

What he told him, having hastily inclined his head towards the thick, thick door of the cell, was, "Hsst! Be quiet! Someone is coming—"

He had barely time to scramble to his feet and shove the tile back into place before the horrid grating noise of the hinges sounded. The door creaked open. A small group of people was there. Some remained in the corridor outside, darkness of the inner prison dimlight relieved by lamps and torches. And some, headed by the warden of the prison, came swiftly into the cell. By the warden's side was the assistant warden, two guards, and a lackey. In the warden's hand was a pistol. Aimed.

"I must ask you, sir," the warden said, restraining himself with an effort which left his normally red face almost white, "to be prepared to leave here at once for another place of confinement. Do not, I beg of you, attempt to offer a resistance.—So. So that," he gestured to an artifact near the tiny window (the lackey had begun to place, with much haste, the prisoner's few belongings into a portmanteau), *"that* is the means whereby you have been making yourself and your inflammatory cries so audible to the mob?" He was about to say more, but pressed his lips, gestured towards the door of the cell.

The distinguished principal prisoner bowed his head politely. "Yes, it is. It may be described as a sort of auditory device which I have made from a wine-funnel and a piece of the piping from my most unsatisfactory sanitary arrangements.—As for 'offering a resistance,' pshaw! *Noblesse oblige.* Lead. I follow."

They led him through long and almost endless corridors and down long and almost endless stairs, down into an immense courtyard. There the vehicle waited. The assistant warden went in first, then one of the guards, the prisoner followed, the governor came next, the other guard got in last. The guards sat facing them. A gate opened, the vehicle moved out. It was a side gate, the throng was not at its thickest there, and it seemed as though it were one of those odd moments in time when—the clock perhaps at twenty minutes after the hour—everyone had fallen, for a second, silent. The crowd opened automatically to let them through.

Just then the prisoner sprang up and thrust his head out the vehicle's partially-opened windows, thrusting the heavy curtain aside. *"To arms!"* he cried. *"Arise! Rebel! Revolt! Save me! I am—"*

The guards lunged, seized, struggled with him, pulled him, still struggling, down back into his seat.

The warden cried, *"Faster! Faster!"*

The postilion spurred the horses, the carriage lurched rapidly forward. The warden had his pistol again at the distinguished prisoner's head, the assistant warden's hand sought to cover the distinguished prisoner's mouth. But the distinguished, the principal prisoner, of the principal prison, screamed, turning his furious face from side to side, evading the hand that sought to silence him. And one more time he shouted, before they muffled him silent and had passed through the still uncertain thronging mob. "I am he who has been so cruelly, so unjustly imprisoned!" he cried out. "Liberty! Equality! Fraternity! *Down with the Bastille! I am the Marquis de Sade!"* ●

HISTORICAL NOTE

It is a fact that the Marquis de Sade was, for just what reasons you might think, imprisoned in the Bastille at one time. During the revolutionary fervor, mobs did gather round this fortress and prison, and he did, by just the means described, address them: although his words may not be exactly known. The warden (or "governor") of the Bastille did remove him, and "at pistol point," to another prison. The date of this removal was July 13, 1789. The Bastille, as is well-known, "fell" the next day—not alone because of the patriotic or revolutionary fervor of the mob, but because the Swiss guards defending the place surrendered under a promise of absolute safety. They were then disarmed, and, to a man, killed.

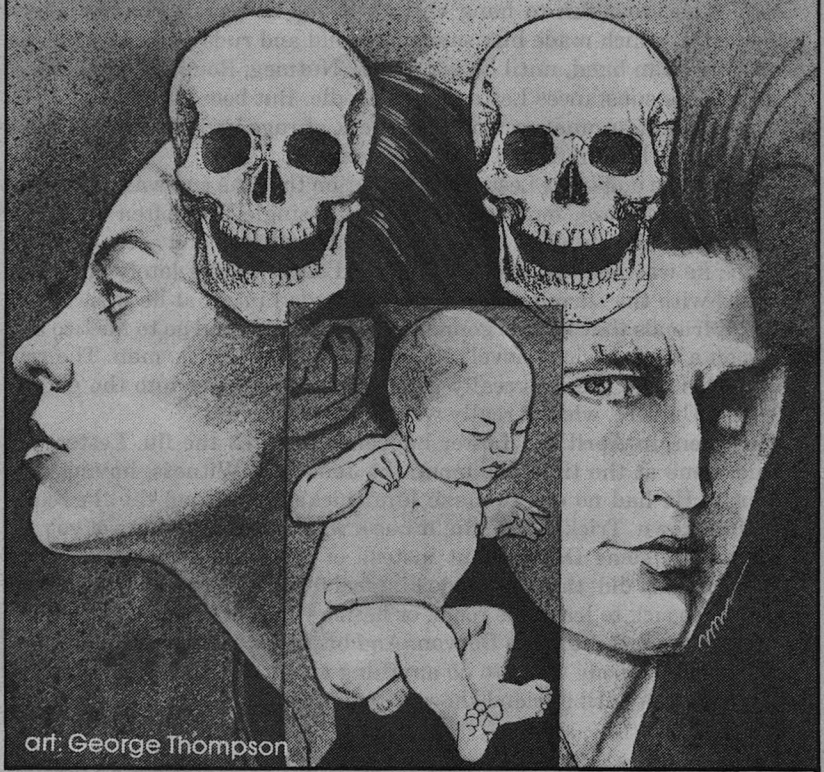
—A.D.

DORI BANGS

by Bruce Sterling

"The following story is a work of fantasy. It is not reportage, and it does not pretend to be objective, fair, balanced, accurate, or even sane. The stuff that 'actually happened' in the story was mostly invented by the two main characters, who were Artists, and therefore cram-full of distortion, legend, and chest-banging poetic license. Don't believe anything they say about anyone, including themselves! And the author himself clearly has an artistic axe to grind—so don't take his word at face value, either."

—Bruce Sterling



art: George Thompson

TRUE FACTS, mostly: Lester Bangs was born in California in 1948. He published his first article in 1969. It came in over the transom at *Rolling Stone*. It was a frenzied review of the MC5's "Kick Out the Jams."

Without much meaning to, Lester Bangs slowly changed from a Romilar-guzzling college kid into a "professional rock critic." There wasn't much precedent for this job in 1969, so Lester kinda had to make it up as he went along. Kind of *smell* his way into the role, as it were. But Lester had a fine set of cultural antennae. For instance, Lester invented the tag "punk rock." This is posterity's primary debt to the Bangs oeuvre.

Lester's not as famous now as he used to be, because he's been dead for some time, but in the 70s Lester wrote a million record reviews, for *Creem* and the *Village Voice* and *NME* and *Who Put The Bomp*. He liked to crouch over his old manual typewriter, and slam out wild Beat-influenced copy, while the Velvet Underground or Stooges were on the box. This made life a hideous trial for the neighborhood, but in Lester's opinion the neighborhood pretty much had it coming. *Epater les bourgeois,* man!

Lester was a party animal. It was a professional obligation, actually. Lester was great fun to hang with, because he usually had a jagged speed-edge, which made him smart and bold and rude and crazy. Lester was a one-man band, until he got drunk. Nutmeg, Romilar, belladonna, crank, those substances Lester could handle. But booze seemed to crack him open, and an unexpected black dreck of rage and pain would come dripping out, like oil from a broken crankcase.

Toward the end—but Lester had no notion that the end was nigh. He'd given up the booze, more or less. Even a single beer often triggered frenzies of self-contempt. Lester was thirty-three, and sick of being groovy; he was restless, and the stuff he'd been writing lately no longer meshed with the surroundings that had made him what he was. Lester told his friends that he was gonna leave New York and go to Mexico and work on a deep, serious novel, about deep serious issues, man. The real thing, this time. He was really gonna pin it down, get into the guts of Western Culture, what it really was, how it really felt.

But then, in April '82, Lester happened to catch the flu. Lester was living alone at the time, his mom, the Jehovah's Witness, having died recently. He had no one to make him chicken soup, and the flu really took him down. Tricky stuff, flu; it has a way of getting on top of you.

Lester ate some Darvon, but instead of giving him that buzzed-out float it usually did, the pills made him feel foggy and dull and desperate. He was too sick to leave his room, or hassle with doctors or ambulances, so instead he just did more Darvon. And his heart stopped.

There was nobody there to do anything about it, so he lay there for a couple of days, until a friend showed up and found him.

* * *

MORE TRUE FAX, pretty much: Dori Seda was born in 1951. She was a cartoonist, of the "underground" variety. Dori wasn't ever famous, certainly not in Lester's league, but then she didn't beat her chest and bend every ear in the effort to make herself a Living Legend, either. She had a lot of friends in San Francisco, anyway.

Dori did a "comic book" once, called *Lonely Nights*. An unusual "comic book" for those who haven't followed the "funnies" trade lately, as *Lonely Nights* was not particularly "funny," unless you really get a hoot from deeply revealing tales of frustrated personal relationships. Dori also did a lot of work for *WEIRDO* magazine, which emanated from the artistic circles of R. Crumb, he of "Keep On Truckin' " and "Fritz the Cat" fame.

R. Crumb once said: "Comics are words and pictures. You can do anything with words and pictures!" As a manifesto, it was a typically American declaration, and it was a truth that Dori held to be self-evident.

Dori wanted to be a True Artist in her own real-gone little 80s-esque medium. Comix, or "graphic narrative" if you want a snazzier cognomen for it, was a breaking thing, and she had to feel her way into it. You can see the struggle in her "comics"—always relentlessly autobiographical—Dori hanging around in the "Café La Boheme" trying to trade food-stamps for cigs; Dori living in drafty warehouses in the Shabby Hippie Section of San Francisco, sketching under the skylight and squabbling with her roommate's boyfriend; Dori trying to scrape up money to have her dog treated for mange.

Dori's comics are littered with dead cig-butts and toppled wine-bottles. She was, in a classic nutshell, Wild, Zany, and Self-Destructive. In 1988 Dori was in a car-wreck which cracked her pelvis and collarbone. She was laid up, bored, and in pain. To kill time, she drank and smoked and took painkillers.

She caught the flu. She had friends who loved her, but nobody realized how badly off she was; probably she didn't know it herself. She just went down hard, and couldn't get up alone. On February 26 her heart stopped. She was thirty-six.

So enough "true facts." Now for some comforting lies.

As it happens, even while a malignant cloud of flu virus was lying in wait for the warm hospitable lungs of Lester Bangs, the Fate, Atropos, she who weaves the things that are to be, accidentally dropped a stitch. Knit one? Purl two? What the hell does it matter, anyway? It's just human lives, right?

So Lester, instead of inhaling a cloud of invisible contagion from the exhalations of a passing junkie, is almost hit by a Yellow Cab. This mishap on his way back from the deli shocks Lester out of his dogmatic slumbers. High time, Lester concludes, to get out of this burg and down

to sunny old Mexico. He's gonna tackle his great American novel: *All My Friends are Hermits.*

So true. None of Lester's groovy friends go out much any more. Always ahead of their time, Lester's Bohemian cadre are no longer rock and roll animals. They still wear black leather jackets, they still stay up all night, they still hate Ronald Reagan with fantastic virulence; but they never leave home. They pursue an unnamed lifestyle that sociologist Faith Popcorn—(and how can you doubt anyone with a name like *Faith Popcorn*)—will describe years later as "cocooning."

Lester has eight zillion rock, blues, and jazz albums, crammed into his grubby NYC apartment. Books are piled feet deep on every available surface: Wm. Burroughs, Hunter Thompson, Celine, Kerouac, Huysmans, Foucault, and dozens of unsold copies of *Blondie,* Lester's book-length band-bio.

More albums and singles come in the mail every day. People used to send Lester records in the forlorn hope he would review them. But now it's simply a tradition. Lester has transformed himself into a countercultural info-sump. People send him vinyl just because he's *Lester Bangs,* man!

Still jittery from his thrilling brush with death, Lester looks over this lifetime of loot with a surge of Sartrean nausea. He resists the urge to raid the fridge for his last desperate can of Blatz Beer. Instead, Lester snorts some speed, and calls an airline to plan his Mexican wanderjahr. After screaming in confusion at the hopeless stupid bitch of a receptionist, he gets a ticket to San Francisco, best he can do on short notice. He packs in a frenzy and splits.

Next morning finds Lester exhausted and wired and on the wrong side of the continent. He's brought nothing with him but an Army duffel-bag with his Olympia portable, some typing paper, shirts, assorted vials of dope, and a paperback copy of *Moby Dick,* which he's always meant to get around to re-reading.

Lester takes a cab out of the airport. He tells the cabbie to drive nowhere, feeling a vague compulsive urge to soak up the local vibe. San Francisco reminds him of his *Rolling Stone* days, back before Wenner fired him for being nasty to rock-stars. Fuck Wenner, he thinks. Fuck this city that was almost Avalon for a few months in '67 and has been on greased skids to Hell ever since.

The hilly half-familiar streets creep and wriggle with memories, avatars, talismans. Decadence, man, a no-kidding *death of affect.* It all ties in for Lester, in a bilious mental stew: snuff movies, discos, the cold-blooded whine of synthesizers, Pet Rocks, S&M, mindfuck self-improvement cults, Winning Through Intimidation, every aspect of the invisible war slowly eating the soul of the world.

After an hour or so he stops the cab at random. He needs coffee, white sugar, human beings, maybe a cheese Danish. Lester glimpses himself in the cab's window as he turns to pay: a chunky jobless thirty-three-year-old in a biker jacket, speed-pale dissipated New York face, Fu Manchu mustache looking pasted on. Running to fat, running for shelter. . . . no excuses, Bangs! Lester hands the driver a big tip. Chew on that, pal—you just drove the next Oswald Spengler.

Lester staggers into the cafe. It's crowded and stinks of patchouli and clove. He sees two chainsmoking punkettes hanging out at a formica table. CBGB's types, but with California suntans. The kind of women, Lester thinks, who sit crosslegged on the floor and won't fuck you but are perfectly willing to describe in detail their highly complex postexistential *weltanschauung*. Tall and skinny and crazy-looking and bad news. Exactly his type, really. Lester sits down at their table and gives them his big rubber grin.

"Been having fun?" Lester says.

They look at him like he's crazy, which he is, but he wangles their names out: "Dori" and "Krystine." Dori's wearing fishnet stockings, cowboy boots, a strapless second-hand bodice-hugger covered with peeling pink feathers. Her long brown hair's streaked blonde. Krystine's got a black knit tank-top and a leather skirt and a skull-tattoo on her stomach.

Dori and Krystine have never heard of "Lester Bangs." They don't read much. They're *artists*. They do cartoons. Underground comix. Lester's mildly interested. Manifestations of the trash aesthetic always strongly appeal to him. It seems so American, the *good* America that is: the righteous wild America of rootless European refuse picking up discarded pop-junk and making it shine like the Koh-i-noor. To make "comic books" into *Art*—what a hopeless fucking effort, worse than rock and roll and you don't even get heavy bread for it. Lester says as much, to see what they'll do.

Krystine wanders off for a refill. Dori, who is mildly weirded-out by this tubby red-eyed stranger with his loud come-on, gives Lester her double-barreled brush-off. Which consists of opening up this Windex-clear vision into the Vent of Hell that is her daily life. Dori lights another Camel from the butt of the last, smiles at Lester with her big gappy front teeth and says brightly:

"You like *dogs*, Lester? I have this dog, and he has eczema and disgusting open sores all over his body, and he smells *really* bad . . . I can't get friends to come over because he likes to shove his nose right into their, you know, *crotch* . . . and go *Snort! Snort!*"

" 'I want to scream with wild dog joy in the smoking pit of a charnel house,' " Lester says.

Dori stares at him. "Did you make that up?"

"Yeah," Lester says. "Where were you when Elvis died?"

"You taking a survey on it?" Dori says.

"No, I just wondered," Lester says. "There was talk of having Elvis's corpse dug up, and the stomach analyzed. For dope, y'know. Can you *imagine* that? I mean, the *thrill* of sticking your hand and forearm into Elvis's rotted guts and slopping around in the stomach lining and liver and kidneys and coming up out of dead Elvis's innards triumphantly clenching some crumbs off a few Percodans and Desoxyns and 'ludes . . . and then this is the *real* kick, Dori: you pop these crumbled-up bits of pills in your *own mouth* and bolt 'em down and get high on drugs that not only has Elvis Presley, the *King,* gotten high on, not the same brand mind you but the same *pills,* all slimy with little bits of his innards, so you've actually gotten to *eat* the King of Rock and Roll!"

"*Who* did you say you were?" Dori says. "A rock journalist? I thought you were putting me on. 'Lester Bangs,' that's a fucking weird name!"

Dori and Krystine have been up all night, dancing to the heroin head-banger vibes of Darby Crash and the Germs. Lester watches through hooded eyes: this Dori is a woman over thirty, but she's got this wacky airhead routine down smooth, the Big Shiny Fun of the American Pop Bohemia. "Fuck you for believing I'm this shallow." Beneath the skin of her Attitude he can sense a bracing skeleton of pure desperation. There is hollow fear and sadness in the marrow of her bones. He's been writing about a topic just like this lately.

They talk a while, about the city mostly, about their variant scenes. Sparring, but he's interested. Dori yawns with pretended disinterest and gets up to leave. Lester notes that Dori is taller than he is. It doesn't bother him. He gets her phone number.

Lester crashes in a Holiday Inn. Next day he leaves town. He spends a week in a flophouse in Tijuana with his Great American Novel, which sucks. Despondent and terrified, he writes himself little cheering notes: "Burroughs was almost fifty when he wrote *Nova Express!* Hey boy, you only thirty-three! Burnt-out! Washed-up! Finished! A bit of flotsam! And in that flotsam your salvation! In that one grain of wood. In that one bit of that irrelevance. If you can bring yourself to describe it. . . . "

It's no good. He's fucked. He knows he is, too, he's been reading over his scrapbooks lately, those clippings of yellowing newsprint, thinking: it was all a box, man! *El Cajon!* You'd think: wow, a groovy youth-rebel Rock Writer, he can talk about *anything,* can't he? Sex, dope, violence, Mazola parties with teenage Indonesian groupies, Nancy Reagan publicly fucked by a herd of clapped-out bull walruses . . . but when you actually READ a bunch of Lester Bangs Rock Reviews in a row, the whole shebang has a delicate hermetic whiff, like so many eighteenth-century sonnets.

It is to dance in chains; it is to see the whole world through a little chromed window of Silva-Thin 'shades. . . .

Lester Bangs is nothing if not a consummate romantic. He is, after all, a man who *really no kidding believes* that Rock and Roll Could Change the World, and when he writes something which isn't an impromptu free lesson on what's wrong with Western Culture and how it can't survive without grabbing itself by the backbrain and turning itself inside-out, he feels like he's wasted a day. Now Lester, fretfully abandoning his typewriter to stalk and kill flophouse roaches, comes to realize that HE will have to turn himself inside out. Grow, or die. Grow into something but he has no idea what. He feels beaten.

So Lester gets drunk. Starts with Tecate, works his way up to tequila. He wakes up with a savage hangover. Life seems hideous and utterly meaningless. He abandons himself to senseless impulse. Or, in alternate terms, Lester allows himself to follow the numinous artistic promptings of his holy intuition. He returns to San Francisco and calls Dori Seda.

Dori, in the meantime, has learned from friends that there is indeed a rock journalist named "Lester Bangs" who's actually kind of *famous*. He once appeared on stage with the J. Geils Band "playing" his typewriter. He's kind of a big deal, which probably accounts for his being kind of an asshole. On a dare, Dori calls Lester Bangs in New York, gets his answering machine, and recognizes the voice. It was him, all right. Through some cosmic freak, she met Lester Bangs and he tried to pick her up! No dice, though. More Lonely Nights, Dori!

Then Lester calls. He's back in town again. Dori's so flustered she ends up being nicer to him on the phone than she means to be.

She goes out with him. To rock clubs. Lester never has to pay; he just mutters at people, and they let him in and find him a table. Strangers rush up to gladhand Lester and jostle round the table and pay court. Lester finds the music mostly boring, and it's no pretense; he actually *is* bored, he's heard it all. He sits there sipping club sodas and handing out these little chips of witty guru insight to these sleaze-ass Hollywood guys and bighaired coke-whores in black Spandex. Like it was his *job*.

Dori can't believe he's going to all this trouble just to jump her bones. It's not like he can't get women, or like their own relationship is all that tremendously scintillating. Lester's whole set-up is alien. But it *is* kind of interesting, and doesn't demand much. All Dori has to do is dress in her sluttiest Goodwill get-up, and be This Chick With Lester. Dori likes being invisible, and watching people when they don't know she's looking. She can see in their eyes that Lester's people wonder Who The Hell Is She? Dori finds this really funny, and makes sketches of his creepiest acquaintances on cocktail napkins. At night she puts them in her sketchbooks and writes dialogue balloons. It's all really good material.

Lester's also very funny, in a way. He's smart, not just hustler-clever but scary-crazy smart, like he's sometimes profound without knowing it or even *wanting* it. But when he thinks he's being most amusing, is when he's actually the most incredibly depressing. It bothers her that he doesn't drink around her; it's a bad sign. He knows almost nothing about art or drawing, he dresses like a jerk, he dances like a trained bear. And she's fallen in love with him and she knows he's going to break her goddamn heart.

Lester has put his novel aside for the moment. Nothing new there; he's been working on it, in hopeless spasms, for ten years. But now juggling this affair takes all he's got.

Lester is terrified that this amazing woman is going to go to pieces on him. He's seen enough of her work now to recognize that she's possessed of some kind of genuine demented genius. He can smell it; the vibe pours off her like Everglades swamp-reek. Even in her frowsy houserobe and bunny slippers, hair a mess, no makeup, half-asleep, he can see something there like Dresden china, something fragile and precious. And the world seems like a maelstrom of jungle hate, sinking into entropy or gearing up for Armageddon, and what the hell can anybody do? How can he be happy with her and not be punished for it? How long can they break the rules before the Nova Police show?

But nothing horrible happens to them. They just go on living.

Then Lester blunders into a virulent cloud of Hollywood money. He's written a stupid and utterly commercial screenplay about the laff-a-minute fictional antics of a heavy-metal band, and without warning he gets eighty thousand dollars for it.

He's never had so much money in one piece before. He has, he realizes with dawning horror, sold out.

To mark the occasion Lester buys some freebase, six grams of crystal meth, and rents a big white Cadillac. He fast-talks Dori into joining him for a supernaturally cool Kerouac adventure into the Savage Heart of America, and they get in the car laughing like hyenas and take off for parts unknown.

Four days later they're in Kansas City. Lester's lying in the back seat in a jittery Hank Williams half-doze and Dori is driving. They have nothing left to say, as they've been arguing viciously ever since Albuquerque.

Dori, white-knuckled, sinuses scorched with crank, loses it behind the wheel. Lester's slammed from the back seat and wakes up to find Dori knocked out and drizzling blood from a scalp wound. The Caddy's wrapped messily in the buckled ruins of a sidewalk mailbox.

Lester holds the resultant nightmare together for about two hours,

which is long enough to flag down help and get Dori into a Kansas City trauma room.

He sits there, watching over her, convinced he's lost it, blown it; it's over, she'll hate him forever now. My God, she could have died! As soon as she comes to, he'll have to face her. The thought of this makes something buckle inside him. He flees the hospital in headlong panic.

He ends up in a sleazy little rock dive downtown where he jumps onto a table and picks a fight with the bouncer. After he's knocked down for the third time, he gets up screaming for the manager, how he's going to *ruin that motherfucker!* and the club's owner shows up, tired and red-faced and sweating. The owner, whose own tragedy must go mostly unexpressed here, is a fat white-haired cigar-chewing third-rater who attempted, and failed, to model his life on Elvis' Colonel Parker. He hates kids, he hates rock and roll, he hates the aggravation of smart-ass doped-up hippies screaming threats and pimping off the hard work of businessmen just trying to make a living.

He has Lester hauled to his office backstage and tells him all this. Toward the end, the owner's confused, almost plaintive, because he's never seen anyone as utterly, obviously, and desperately fucked-up as Lester Bangs, but who can still be coherent about it and use phrases like "rendered to the factor of machinehood" while mopping blood from his punched nose.

And Lester, trembling and red-eyed, tells him: fuck you Jack, I could run this jerkoff place, I could do everything you do blind drunk, and make this place a fucking *legend in American culture,* you booshwah sonofabitch.

Yeah punk if you had the money, the owner says.

I've *got* the money! Let's see your papers, you evil cracker bastard! In a few minutes Lester is the owner-to-be on a handshake and an earnest-check.

Next day he brings Dori roses from the hospital shop downstairs. He sits next to the bed; they compare bruises, and Lester explains to her that he has just blown his fortune. They are now tied down and beaten in the corn-shucking heart of America. There is only one possible action left to complete this situation.

Three days later they are married in Kansas City by a justice of the peace.

Needless to say marriage does not solve any of their problems. It's a minor big deal for a while, gets mentioned in rock-mag gossip columns; they get some telegrams from friends, and Dori's mom seems pretty glad about it. They even get a nice note from Julie Burchill, the Marxist Amazon from *New Musical Express* who has quit the game to write for fashion mags, and her husband Tony Parsons the proverbial "hip young

gunslinger" who now writes weird potboiler novels about racetrack gangsters. Tony & Julie seem to be making some kind of go of it. Kinda inspirational.

For a while Dori calls herself Dori Seda-Bangs, like her good friend Aline Kominsky-Crumb, but after a while she figures what's the use? and just calls herself Dori Bangs which sounds plenty weird enough on its own.

Lester can't say he's really *happy* or anything, but he's sure *busy*. He re-names the club "Waxy's Travel Lounge," for some reason known only to himself. The club loses money quickly and consistently. After the first month Lester stops playing Lou Reed's *Metal Machine Music* before sets, and that helps attendance some, but Waxy's is still a club which books a lot of tiny weird college-circuit acts that Albert Average just doesn't get yet. Pretty soon they're broke again and living on Lester's reviews.

They'd be even worse off, except Dori does a series of promo posters for Waxy's that are so amazing that they draw people in, even after they've been burned again and again on weird-ass bands only Lester can listen to.

After a couple of years they're still together, only they have shrieking crockery-throwing fights and once, when he's been drinking, Lester wrenches her arm so badly Dori's truly afraid it's broken. It isn't, luckily, but it's sure no great kick being Mrs. Lester Bangs. Dori was always afraid of this: that what he does is *work* and what she does is *cute*. How many Great Women Artists are there anyway, and what happened to 'em? They went into patching the wounded ego and picking up the dropped socks of Mr. Wonderful, that's what. No big mystery about it.

And besides, she's thirty-six and still barely scraping a living. She pedals her beat-up bike through the awful Kansas weather and sees these yuppies cruise by with these smarmy grins: hey we don't *have* to invent our lives, our lives are *invented for us* and boy does that ever save a lot of soul-searching.

But still somehow they blunder along; they have the occasional good break. Like when Lester turns over the club on Wednesdays to some black kids for (ecch!) "disco nite" and it turns out to be the beginning of a little Kansas City rap-scratch scene, which actually makes the club some money. And "Polyrock," a band Lester hates at first but later champions to global megastardom, cuts a live album in Waxy's.

And Dori gets a contract to do one of those twenty-second animated logos for MTV, and really gets into it. It's fun, so she starts doing video animation work for (fairly) big bucks and even gets a Macintosh II from a video-hack admirer in Silicon Valley. Dori had always loathed feared and despised *computers* but this thing is *different*. This is a kind of art

that *nobody's ever done before* and has to be invented from leftovers, sweat, and thin air! It's wide open and way rad!

Lester's novel doesn't get anywhere, but he does write a book called *A Reasonable Guide to Horrible Noise* which becomes a hip coffeetable cult item with an admiring introduction by a trendy French semiotician. Among other things, this book introduces the term "chipster" which describes a kind of person who, well, didn't really *exist* before Lester described them but once he'd pointed 'em out it was *obvious to everybody.*

But they're still not *happy.* They both have a hard time taking the "marital fidelity" notion with anything like seriousness. They have a vicious fight once, over who gave who herpes, and Dori splits for six months and goes back to California. Where she looks up her old girlfriends and finds the survivors married with kids, and her old boyfriends are even seedier and more pathetic than Lester. What the hell, it's not happiness but it's something. She goes back to Lester. He's gratifyingly humble and appreciative for almost six weeks.

Waxy's does in fact become a cultural legend of sorts, but they don't pay you for that; and anyway it's hell to own a bar while attending sessions of Alcoholics Anonymous. So Lester gives in, and sells the club. He and Dori buy a house, which turns out to be far more hassle than it's worth, and then they go to Paris for a while, where they argue bitterly and squander all their remaining money.

When they come back Lester gets, of all the awful things, an academic gig. For a Kansas state college. Lester teaches Rock and Popular Culture. In the '70s there'd have been no room for such a hopeless skidrow weirdo in a, like, Serious Academic Environment, but it's the late '90s by now, and Lester has outlived the era of outlawhood. Because who are we kidding? Rock and Roll is a satellite-driven worldwide information industry which is worth billions and *billions,* and if they don't study *major industries* then what the hell are the taxpayers funding colleges for?

Self-destruction is awfully tiring. After a while, they just give it up. They've lost the energy to flame-out, and it hurts too much; besides it's less trouble just to live. They eat balanced meals, go to bed early, and attend faculty parties where Lester argues violently about the parking privileges.

Just after the turn of the century, Lester finally gets his novel published, but it seems quaint and dated now, and gets panned and quickly remaindered. It would be nice to say that Lester's book was rediscovered years later as a Klassic of Litratchur but the truth is that Lester's no novelist; what he is, is a cultural mutant, and what he has in the way of insight and energy has been eaten up. Subsumed by the Beast, man. What he thought and said made some kind of difference, but nowhere near as big a difference as he'd dreamed.

In the year 2015, Lester dies of a heart attack while shoveling snow off his lawn. Dori has him cremated, in one of those plasma flash-cremators that are all the mode in the 21st-cent. undertaking business. There's a nice respectful retrospective on Lester in the *New York Times Review of Books* but the truth is Lester's pretty much a forgotten man; a colorful footnote for cultural historians who can see the twentieth century with the unflattering advantage of hindsight.

A year after Lester's death they demolish the remnants of Waxy's Travel Lounge to make room for a giant high-rise. Dori goes out to see the ruins. As she wanders among the shockingly staid and unromantic rubble, there's another of those slips in the fabric of Fate, and Dori is approached by a Vision.

Thomas Hardy used to call it the Immanent Will and in China it might have been the Tao, but we late 20th-cent. postmoderns would probably call it something soothingly pseudoscientific like the "genetic imperative." Dori, being Dori, recognizes this glowing androgynous figure as The Child They Never Had.

"Don't worry, Mrs. Bangs," the Child tells her, "I might have died young of some ghastly disease, or grown up to shoot the President and break your heart, and anyhow you two woulda been no prize as parents." Dori can see herself and Lester in this Child, there's a definite nacreous gleam in its right eye that's Lester's, and the sharp quiet left eye is hers; but behind the eyes where there should be a living breathing human being there's *nothing,* just a kind of chill galactic twinkling.

"And don't feel guilty for outliving him either," the Child tells her, "because you're going to have what we laughingly call a natural death, which means you're going to die in the company of strangers hooked up to tubes when you're old and helpless."

"But did it *mean* anything?" Dori says.

"If you mean were you Immortal Artists leaving indelible grafitti in the concrete sidewalk of Time, no. You've never walked the earth as Gods, you were just people. But it's better to have a real life than no life." The Child shrugs. "You weren't all that happy together, but you *did* suit each other, and if you'd both married other people instead, there would have been *four* people unhappy. So here's your consolation: you helped each other."

"So?" Dori says.

"So that's enough. Just to shelter each other, and help each other up. Everything else is gravy. Someday, no matter what, you go down forever. Art can't make you immortal. Art can't Change the World. Art can't even heal your soul. All it can do is maybe ease the pain a bit or make you feel more awake. And that's enough. It only matters as much as it matters, which is zilch to an ice-cold interstellar Cosmic Principle like

yours truly. But if you try to live by my standards it will only kill you faster. By your own standards, you did pretty good, really."

"Well okay then," Dori says.

After this purportedly earth-shattering mystical encounter, her life simply went right on, day following day, just like always. Dori gave up computer-art; it was too hairy trying to keep up with the hotshot high-tech cutting edge, and kind of undignified, when you came right down to it. Better to leave that to hungry kids. She was idle for a while, feeling quiet inside, but finally she took up watercolors. For a while Dori played the Crazy Old Lady Artist and was kind of a mainstay of the Kansas regionalist art scene. Granted, Dori was no Georgia O'Keeffe, but she was working, and living, and she touched a few people's lives.

Or, at least, Dori surely would have touched those people, if she'd been there to do it. But of course she wasn't, and didn't. Dori Seda never met Lester Bangs. Two simple real-life acts of human caring, at the proper moment, might have saved them both; but when those moments came, they had no one, not even each other. And so they went down into darkness, like skaters, breaking through the hard bright shiny surface of our true-facts world.

Today I made this white paper dream to cover the holes they left. ●

FIRST ENCOUNTER

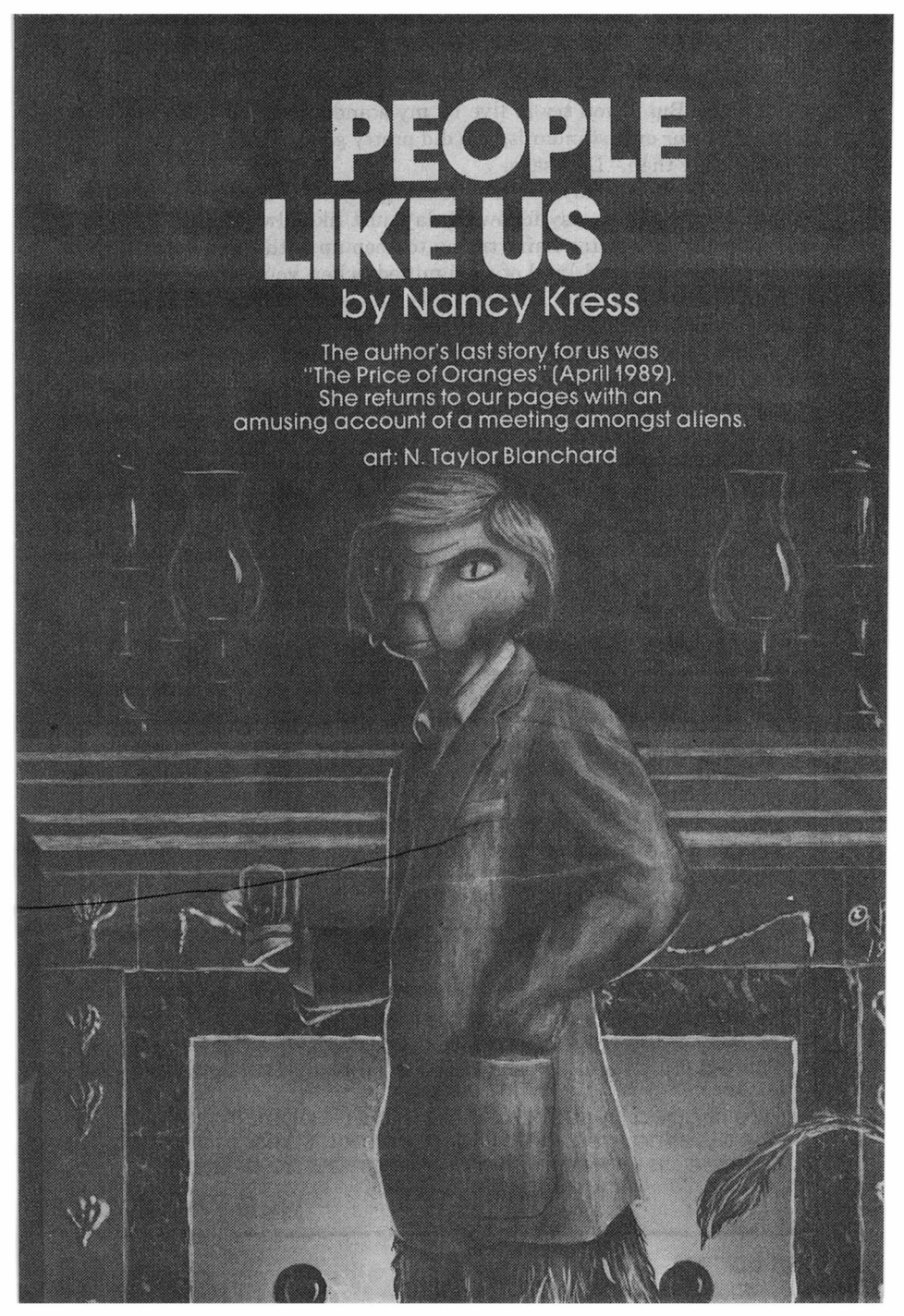
Like something painted by Feininger,
All planes and surfaces, with colors
That double back to break upon each other.

A voice with all the shades of the symphonic,
Resting between Rachmaninoff and Dvorak,
Inside an inexorable, atonal logic.

Imagine Eisenstein had done the cutting
Of sixty-three takes with Wyler shooting,
From a script which Welles wasn't through retouching.

Like ragged butterflies that flee to disappointment,
The meeting tatters into old resentments; resemblances
Surface, as we learn alien is foreign but no different.

—Ace G. Pilkington


PEOPLE
LIKE US
by Nancy Kress
The author's last story for us was
"The Price of Oranges" (April 1989).
She returns to our pages with an
amusing account of a meeting amongst aliens.
art: N. Taylor Blanchard

Parker brought the car around at seven; George was going to meet the dinner guests at the station. Sarah said incredulously, "They're coming up by *train?*"

"Buddy Calucci broke his wrist last week and can't drive," George said, "and his wife has some kind of phobia about it. And the alien of course can't drive either."

Of course. Of course *not.* Couldn't drive, couldn't wear pants, probably couldn't eat anything Sarah had had Cook prepare for dinner either. All the alien could do was put her poor old George's firm out of business with its strange advanced fuel products, whatever they were. Sarah stood before the fireplace and regarded her husband as he picked up his coat from a leather chair.

"If it's supposed to be such a discreet meeting that you can't have it in the city, why are they taking the *train?* Why didn't your Mr. Calucci order a car and driver?"

"I don't think it would occur to him."

"This is going to be horrible, George. It really is. I'd just as soon have Parker and Cook and Cook's criminal brother-in-law. The one in Attica."

George shrugged into his coat, crossed the room, and put his hands on Sarah's shoulders. "I know, darling; it's too bad. But necessary. And if they come by train, they can't stay late. The last train back is the 10:42. That's something, at least."

"At least," Sarah said. But she made herself smile at George; it wasn't his fault, after all, and whining like this was really terribly unattractive. These . . . people were coming, and that was that. Just the same, with George's florid face inches from her own, she suddenly remembered something Louise Henderson had said to her just that week at the gallery. *You know, darling, George is getting awfully fat. He should go back to tennis instead of golf. If he's not careful, he'll start to look like that man that runs the hardware store.* Sarah had laughed; Louise had a wicked eye. But Sarah had been stung, too: George *did* look a little like the man in the hardware store. The same shape to the brow, the same chin. Friends had joked about it before.

After George had left for the station, Denise brought in a tray of canapes and fresh ice. Sarah made herself a Scotch and water, drank half of it, poked at the fire, finally settled on a chair. The living room looked well by firelight, she thought. She loved this house, even if it had seemed a little empty since Emily had gone off to Rosemary Hall four years ago. Brass and mahogany gleamed in the firelight; wainscotting and molding took on subtle curves; the colors of the old Orientals glowed. In the bookcases leather bindings and Chinese vases jumbled comfortably against each other, both slightly dusty. Emily's violin leaned against one corner. Had Emily, home for the weekend, practiced today? Probably

not; too busy with the horses. Sarah smiled, finished her Scotch, and considered moving a pile of old *Smithsonians* and *Forbes* off the wing chair beside the violin. She decided against it.

She heard the car, and they were here. Sarah rose to meet her guests. "Hello."

"My wife Sarah," George said. "Darling, Mr. Calucci, Mrs. Calucci, Mr. C'Lanth."

"Call me Buddy," Calucci boomed at the same moment that his wife said, "Pleased to meet you, I'm sure. I'm Mabel." Buddy Calucci seized Sarah's hand and pumped it. He wore a coat with hugely padded shoulders and a bright yellow tie, carefully knotted, printed with daisies. Mabel Calucci wore heart-shaped glasses and a red satin dress cut so low that Sarah blinked. She avoided altogether looking at the alien. Not just yet.

"Nice place you got here," Calucci boomed. "Looks real homey." His eyes, Sarah saw, missed nothing, scrutinizing the portraits as if appraising them.

"My, yes," Mabel Calucci said. Her mouth pursed slightly at the magazines tossed on the wing chair.

Sarah said, "Would you like a drink?" and started towards the sideboard. Calucci's words stopped her.

"No, no, Mabel and I never touch the stuff. Christian Temperance. But you folks go right ahead—feel free."

"You don't drink?"

"Lips that touch liquor shall never touch mine," Mabel said roguishly. "This must be your dog—let him right into the living room, do you?" Her eyes moved to the spot by the fireplace where Brandy usually lay; Labrador hair clung to the Oriental.

"We got a dog, too," Calucci said. "Doberman. Meanest guard dog you ever saw. Not that we need it now with the new security system on the country home. Del EverGuard. Seven thousand for the fencing alone."

"How interesting," Sarah murmured. George threw her a warning glance. She poured herself another Scotch and water, then one for George.

The alien said, "I'd like one, too, please."

Sarah turned in surprise. She had assumed that an alien wouldn't drink alcohol. Not that she actually knew much about the aliens, really—she hadn't kept up. The television set, a small black and white, had broken a few months ago, and with Emily only home occasional weekends Sarah hadn't yet gotten around to getting it repaired. She didn't watch TV.

"Scotch and water is fine," the alien said. He had a deep, slightly hoarse voice. Sarah made herself look at him. Standing with his back to the fire, balancing with what looked like careless ease on both legs

and the curving, muscular tail, he wasn't quite as bad as Sarah had expected. The aliens she had seen on the now-dead TV had worn odd-looking, shiny clothes on the top halves of their bodies, nothing below. But this one wore a soft white shirt, no tie, and a tweed jacket cut long enough to cover all but his hairy legs. His head hair, too, didn't look as strange as on the TV aliens; she supposed that a barber must have cut it. It fell thickly from a side part to just over the tops of his ears. Sarah handed him the drink.

"Didn't know you folks imbibed," Calucci said to the alien. He sat on the sofa, pulling up his pant legs at the knees: preserving the crease. "Didn't see *that* on TV."

"We just got a new set," Mabel Calucci said. "Sony. Hundred-inch screen, remotes, stereo, everything."

"Have to have you all to our big Super Bowl party in January," Calucci said. "C'Lanth, your folks like football?"

"No," C'Lanth said. Calucci waited, but the alien said no more, sipping his drink and smiling faintly. Sarah smothered a grin.

"Probably not your native pastime," Calucci said. "Stands to reason. What sports do you guys like? Earth sports, I mean. When in Rome, I always say."

"I like tennis."

"Tennis?" George said, looking surprised.

C'Lanth smiled. "Yes. I'm afraid I've become something of a fanatic. But I'm also afraid I have an unfair advantage—something about the joints of our thumbs. Do you play?"

"Not as much as I used to," George said ruefully.

"Mrs. Atkinson?"

"Yes," Sarah said, wondering where C'Lanth had learned such good English. But didn't she remember something in the papers about the aliens being natural mimics as well as shrewd businessmen? And about their avidly studying just everything? "I play, but not very seriously, I'm afraid. I prefer sailing."

"Buddy and I bowled in a league," Mabel Calucci said. Her plump rouged face clouded over. "In St. Pete I mean. Before we moved to New York. Now—I don't know." She suddenly looked wistful.

"Are there bowling alleys in this cute little country town of yours, George?" Calucci asked.

"I'm afraid I wouldn't know."

There was a slight pause. Then Calucci and the alien spoke simultaneously: "Well, now, let's get down to business!" and "I met a friend of yours, Mrs. Atkinson, at an art gallery board meeting Tuesday. Louise Henderson."

George said to Calucci, "Oh, I rather think later might be better, Buddy."

Sarah said to C'Lanth, "You were at the gallery board meeting?"

"Not as a member, of course. Kyle Van Dorr was just showing me around. A tourist." He smiled; Sarah would have sworn it was a self-deprecating smile.

"When *do* we get down to business then?" Calucci said. His big body shifted restlessly. When he lowered his head like that, Sarah thought, it was the exact shape of a garden trowel. "We have to act fast on this one, George, if we're going to have any kind of alliance here. Before *your* pals—" he nodded at C'Lanth "—have their little rule-making meeting on mergers."

"We believe in competition," C'Lanth said mildly. He finished his drink and held out the glass, mouthing "Please?" George made him another Scotch and water. In front of the fireplace Brandy stretched, turned in a circle, and farted. Mabel Calucci looked delicately away, mouth pursed; C'Lanth smiled. Sarah found herself smiling back. What kind of nitwit acted so affected as to be offended by a dog? Denise came to the door and announced dinner.

Sarah ate little. She watched. C'Lanth also ate sparingly, but he tried everything. Mabel Calucci, in the presence of food, turned garrulous; each course seemed to swell her verbally, words coming out at the same rate that calories went in. She talked about her little grandson—"Cute as a button, and smart as a whip! He can already tell a Caddy from a Buick"; about the redecoration of her kitchen in apple-blossom pink; about a woman on a game show who had won $100,000, had a heart attack, and had to sell the prizes to pay her medical bills; about the street they used to live on in St. Pete when Buddy and her were first married, where people were so friendly they didn't even knock on each others' doors before visiting. Not like here, where you couldn't even see the houses from the street. Not that that was true in New York, of course, where they had their new penthouse, with the cutest terrace you ever saw twelve stories up and just filled with fresh flowers. Buddy Calucci let his wife talk, his eyes appraising the room's furniture, pictures, wallpaper, silver. George, good host that he always was, listened to Mabel Calucci, nodding and smiling.

The five of them had just returned to the living room when Emily came in with her boyfriend, the Walker boy, both of them in jeans and sweaters, laughing. Emily's dark hair had escaped its barrette and fallen around her face, thick and shining. She showed no reaction to finding an alien in her parents' living room beyond a friendly smile. Sarah felt her heart swell. Her daughter was beautiful, and smart, and mannerly. She was

very lucky in Emily. Some of her friends' daughters had turned just impossible, but Emily was wonderful. George made the introductions.

"Enjoying Princeton, Taylor?"

"It's wicked, sir. Especially calculus." Taylor Walker smiled, an attractive easy flash of teeth. "No head for figures, I'm afraid. Professor Boyden is just out of control."

"Hughes Boyden?" C'Lanth asked.

"Yes, sir," Taylor said. "Do you know him?"

"Slightly. I did a lot of reading at Princeton when I first came here. Some of the professors were very helpful. In fact, I was up to Princeton this year for Bicker and Sign-ins."

Taylor and Emily grinned at each other: some private joke. Emily said, "Totally paralytic. I didn't get to bed until seven A.M."

Mabel Calucci looked at her. Her voice went slightly shrill. "I was always glad that my daughter Tammy had the chance to attend Bob Jones University. The moral standards there are very high."

Fury rose in Sarah. The sheer smug *stupidity* . . . Emily, who was Dean's List and honor committee . . . this horrible stupid woman. . . .

But all she said was, "Can I get anyone a drink? Taylor? Emily?"

"No, thanks, we're off," Taylor said. "We'll be at the club, Mrs. Atkinson. Nice to have met you, Mr. C'Lanth."

"Pleased, I'm sure," Mabel Calucci said coldly. Taylor and Emily left.

"I liked the young people Hughes Boyden introduced me to at Princeton," C'Lanth said, almost musingly. "There was about them a sort of . . . playful ease."

Calucci said brusquely, "Not supposed to be easy, is it? Toney school like that. Probably has real high admission standards. Now, George, I really think we got to get down to business. I'm sure the ladies will excuse us."

Sarah didn't glance at Mabel Calucci. Nonetheless, she knew that the woman was staring at Brandy, now curled in the wing chair on top of the *Forbes* and *Smithsonian*s, half of which had tumbled to the floor. She knew that Mabel Calucci was surreptitiously tugging at her red satin neckline, which had slipped even lower. She even knew that in a moment Mabel Calucci would say something conciliatory, bright and sweet and cheerful, from lips still pursed like lemons. "I'll come and listen," Sarah said.

George looked relieved. Calucci looked annoyed. C'Lanth smiled. "Glad to have you," the alien said.

When George came back from the short drive to the station, Sarah was already in bed. She sat up against the pillows and watched George un-

dress. George said nothing until he had flung his coat on a chair, loosened his tie, kicked off his shoes. Finally it burst out.

"That C'Lanth is a cutthroat."

"Oh, I don't know, I thought he was rather amusing."

"Amusing?"

"I thought of seeing if he'd come down the weekend of the third, when we have the Talcotts and the Hendersons."

George turned slowly towards her.

"You know how John Talcott is always complaining that no one he meets can ever give him a really good tennis game. And Louise so enjoys talking to people who actually know something about art. Really, George, don't look at me like that—it's not such a bizarre idea."

"Sarah—he's an *alien*. And you heard how the business talk went, the part of it you stayed for anyway—where the devil did you go? Mabel Calucci complained in the car that you never came back to the living room. C'Lanth is going to ruin me if we don't get this deal moving."

"Well, wouldn't a chance to get to know him better help that?" Sarah said reasonably. George went on staring at her; after a moment she looked away. He was a dear, but he got so worked up. Unnecessarily, really. After all, they had her money, which was much more than the firm brought in. And when George wrinkled his face like that, he *did* look like the hardware store man.

"It would be more useful to get to know Buddy Calucci better," George said heavily. "He's the one holding the real clout here. Although C'Lanth might—"

"Oh, really, darling, do come to bed. It's late, and I don't want to argue. You haven't signed any papers yet, after all. Anything could happen."

George didn't answer. He finished undressing, climbed into bed, turned out the light. Sarah waited. When a few minutes had passed, she said softly, "You might be a little nicer to me, George. I *did* just spend an evening for you with those two dreadful people."

"I know," George said. She felt him reach for her in the darkness, and she put her head on his shoulder.

"I'm sorry I didn't go back to the living room, darling. Truly I am. But her *smugness*. And that inane chatter. And those little frizzy dyed curls. And him—that eager hard-eyed grin."

"I know," George said again.

"I did try."

"Yes, you did."

"And you'll think about having C'Lanth down on the third?"

"Might be a good idea," George said sleepily.

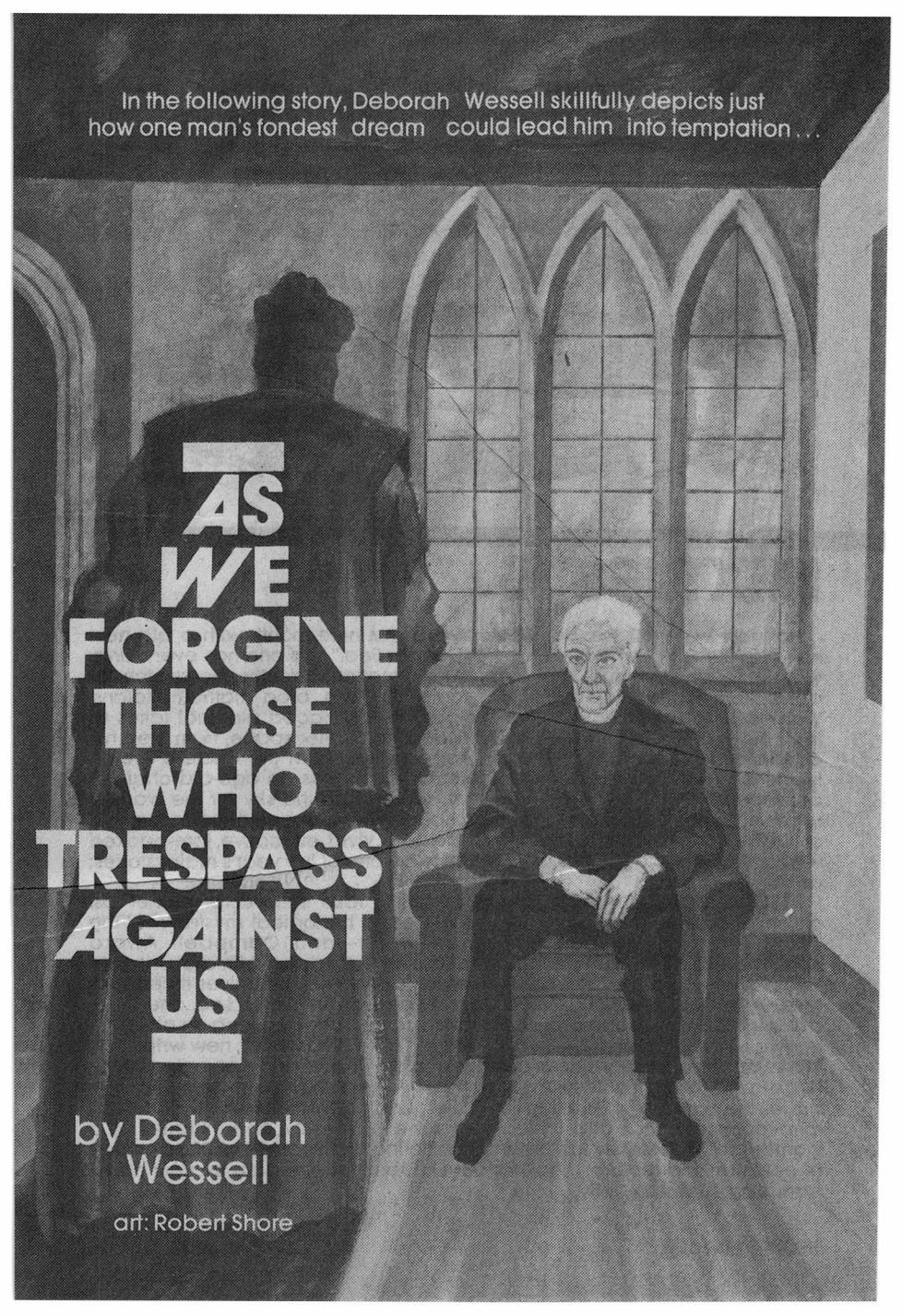
Sarah snuggled in closer against his shoulder. She was glad George thought she had tried, glad he wasn't angry. Because of course the truth

was that she *had* been rude to those terrible Caluccis, rude with a sort of reverse-English rudeness of not having been polite enough, not having picked up the cues, not having tried at all to enter into their territory. But, really, with some people you just couldn't, and it was no good pretending. Everybody knew that, really. With some people, do what you might, the gap was just too wide. ●

NEXT ISSUE

Hot new writer **Alexander Jablokov** returns next month with a big new novella, our October cover story, "A Deeper Sea." This one has *everything:* war, intrigue, adventure, betrayal, transformation, atrocity, the search for absolution, World War Three, Messianic dolphins, orca mathematicians, Whales in Space—and a taut, hard-edged, fast-paced plot that takes us from the sea-battle for the Aleutian Islands to Jupiter space, from the chill ocean off Uglegorsk to the warm Aegean Sea, from the ancient Cretan island of Thera to the depths of the solar system, as an age-old chain of consequences is unraveled, one that could open the sky for the warring races of Earth . . . or help trigger the final conflict that could mean the end of life itself. This is Jablokov's best work to date, vivid, evocative, jam-packed with outrageous new ideas, and is sure to be one of the year's major stories; don't miss it.

ALSO IN OCTOBER: **Janet Kagan** returns to take us to a far planet lost among the stars, and to unravel a fast-paced biological mystery, in "The Return of the Kangaroo Rex"; new writer—and Campbell Award nominee—**Kristine Kathryn Rusch** makes her *IAsfm* debut with a passionate tale of a biological experiment gone awry, and the young lives it changes forever, in "Fast Cars"; World Fantasy Award-winner **Tanith Lee**, one of today's most popular and prolific fantasists, returns after too long an absence to give us an intriguing and erotic look at "Zelle's Thursday"; new writer **M.F. McHugh** takes us aloft for a deadly contest of skill and nerve, in "Kites"; Hugo- and World Fantasy Award-winner **Avram Davidson** wryly demonstrates the dangers of "Waiting For Willie"; and new writer **Kathe Koja** returns to perform a brutal and intricate pavane of identity and intrigue, as a woman gets hopelessly lost among conflicting "Points of View." Plus an array of columns and features. Look for our October issue on sale on your newsstands on August 22, 1989.


In the following story, Deborah Wessell skillfully depicts just how one man's fondest dream could lead him into temptation . . .
AS WE FORGIVE THOSE WHO TRESPASS AGAINST US
by Deborah Wessell
art: Robert Shore

By the time of his fiftieth birthday, Father Malone had ceased to pray for his heart's desire. As a young man, he had longed for the eloquence and charisma that would inspire the boys of his parish to follow him into the priesthood. Now, as the stolid but hard-working pastor of Holy Rosary Church, he had too many worthier things to pray for, and he was often too busy for prayer at all.

But at ten o'clock on that particular morning, even a hint of eloquence would have served Father Malone well. Every June he made a heartfelt, halting speech to Holy Rosary's confirmation class, and this one was even less successful than usual. Bishop Davison was coming down from Boston the next day to administer the sacrament, and Father Malone made it clear that he expected the teenagers to be on their best behavior as they were accepted as adult members into the Church. Then he spent fifteen minutes or so exhorting the class to examine their goals in life, and compare those goals to the Christian ideal. Meanwhile the class examined their desktops, and each other's gaudy clothing, and especially the clock on the wall behind him.

"So you see, boys and girls," Father Malone concluded, suddenly tired of the sound of his own voice, "you should gather your, ah, your inspiration, from your parents and your teachers, and most of all from the teachings of our Lord Jesus, and not from these rock stars and movie stars who—"

A boy sniggered, apparently at another boy who was miming a guitar player, and the girls sitting nearby began to giggle. Sister Anne, standing guard at the back of the classroom, glared and took a step towards them, but the priest shook his head. He finished his speech in a monotone and retreated, hardly hearing the sister's courteous thanks.

In the rectory common room that evening, Father Malone chose the prickly tweed armchair, the one he wouldn't fall asleep in, and sat down for a rare moment of reflection to consider the week's work still undone. Administrative work, most of it, fragments of time and effort involving budgets, blueprints, committee reports, endless phone calls, all part of the larger plans and systems that kept a modern parish of two thousand souls in business.

Father Malone was an excellent administrator. He only wished he were a better priest. He gazed out the open window; from his chair he could see just the tops of the maples edging the playfield across the street, and a peacefully empty stretch of silvery twilight sky. Not a better priest, precisely, but warmer, more articulate, the sort of pastor who commanded affection and loyalty as well as respect. Old Father Simmons had won all his own loyalty when he was a boy, had in fact inspired him to open his heart to be called to the Church. These days, a life of service and sacrifice was the last thing that teenage boys would consider. Or would

they, if Father Simmons were still around? Would one eloquent man make such a difference . . . ?

"It's an interesting question, Father," said the bishop who seemed to appear out of nowhere, a sharp silhouette against the bright doorway of the hall.

Father Malone gasped and drew back in his chair, then stood up and fumbled to turn on a lamp.

"I'm terribly sorry," he said, forcing a smile that made him feel even more of a fool. The bishop was a stranger to him; had he forgotten an appointment? "I must have been, I seem to have, ah, dozed off after all. I didn't see you come in?"

"Of course not." The stranger's smile was disarming, his handshake cool but firm. "May I sit down?"

"Yes, forgive me, please do." The confirmation ceremony, of course, that was it. Bishop Davison was an old man, he must have fallen ill?

"You're wondering," said the bishop, "whether I'm here to stand in for Bishop Davison. You're puzzled by my early arrival, and somewhat annoyed that your housekeeper, Mrs. Reardon, let me catch you napping. And you're combing your memory, trying to recall if we've met."

The priest flushed. "I'm afraid I—"

"Don't be afraid." The bishop held up a hand, and Father Malone fell silent. A soft weight seemed to press him back in his chair. The bishop was a handsome man, silver-haired and dignified, with something bright and fixed about his eyes.

"Don't be afraid," he repeated. "I'm simply here to discuss the problems of the Church with you, and propose a few solutions. And a solution to your own problem as well."

"Mine?"

"Yes, yours. Your inability to communicate with young people. Your, shall we say, lack of eloquence in the pulpit. You make people uncomfortable, Father. You don't reach them."

Father Malone blinked rapidly and shook his head. He couldn't seem to gather his thoughts.

"And yet you quite sincerely want to reach them, don't you?" the bishop went on. His voice was soothing, impossible to disregard. "You want, more than anything else, to rise above your administrative tasks and be a beacon to your parish. You want to inspire young men to follow you into the priesthood. Isn't that it, Father? Isn't that your heart's desire?"

The priest tried to rise, but the soft weight grew heavier.

"I assure you it's a worthy goal," said the bishop in a brisker tone. "The shortage of priests in this country is appalling. In 1967—pardon me if I lecture a bit—in 1967 there were sixty thousand priests in the United States. Today, only forty-five thousand, to minister to a far larger

population of the faithful! Do you know the median age of American priests today? Do you?"

Father Malone couldn't bring himself to be rude. "Well, ah, my own age, I suppose, fifty?"

"Fifty-nine years old. Fifty-nine!" The bishop tapped the arm of his chair with each word. "Perilously close to retirement age, my friend. And what happens when they all retire? Who will be coming up behind them in the ranks to do the Lord's work?"

The priest shook his head in silence. It was a question he had asked himself, with some bitterness, as the years went by and the boys in the classes ignored his words. Or laughed at them.

"They do laugh at you," said the bishop softly, sympathetically. "But not at your faith, Father. At your manner, your bearing. People, especially young people, make such superficial judgments these days. You seem cold and insincere to them. To all your parishioners, in fact."

Father Malone looked away, ashamed to hear the truth. Whoever this man was, however strange this confrontation, he knew the truth.

"I know a great deal, Father. I know that your life is about to change."

Father Malone looked up in alarm. "My assignment here, it's not, ah, I'm not being asked—"

"No, no, nothing of the sort. I'm simply offering you an opportunity." The bishop reached into a pocket and brought out a smooth silver box. "Again, forgive me. We used to do this sort of thing with visions, and voices from the air, but these days it upsets people. Technology is so much more comfortable."

He pointed the box at the television set in the corner of the room. A scene appeared on the screen, impossibly clear in every detail, almost alive. Father Malone stared at the small bright image of himself seated at the head table at a formal function of some sort. Himself, but with hair completely gray, a slight palsied quiver to the hands, face webbed with wrinkles. Himself as an old man. "It's your retirement party. You're over seventy. Look carefully at your dinner companions."

There were a dozen of them, priests and seminarians, ranging from young manhood to middle age. They were beaming at Father Malone—at his image on the screen—smiling and joking among themselves, but always focused on him. There was admiration in their eyes, and love.

"Your 'disciples,' Father Malone. A little joke that you all share. Will share, I should say. They're all men who were called to the priesthood because of you. And there are more! The youngest, I believe, is ten years old at this time in the future. Think of the vast collective good they will accomplish, thanks to you."

He motioned again with the silver box, and the screen dimmed. As it did, the priest struggled to his feet against that thick soft weight.

"Who are you?" he demanded, shocked at the fear in his own voice. "What is all this?"

The bishop stayed seated.

"I'm the devil," he said, and smiled reassuringly. "Or rather, one extension of one devil. It's far more complicated than you people realize. I selected this particular persona so that you would be swayed by my appearance and give me a fair hearing. It worked rather well, don't you think?"

"I'm dreaming. I'm asleep."

"Of course you are. But I can assure you that you're not going to wake up until we finish our conversation. Aren't you curious about my offer?"

The bishop—it was difficult to think of him by any other name—folded his cold hands and waited. Father Malone paced about the room, trying to regain his wits. He strode to the hallway door, then turned back.

"I suppose you're going to tell me what it is," he found himself saying. "Go ahead."

"All we want," said the bishop slowly, "all we want, is a soul. Just one."

"Mine. You want me to sell my soul."

"No, as a matter of fact, *not* yours. Someone else's."

He moved the silver box again. This time the images were darker, figures moving down a street at night. One of them, a teenage boy, stopped and seemed to look out at Father Malone.

"Anthony da Silva," the bishop said. "Tony. Recognize him?"

It was a typical face for a New England fishing town: young, dark, Portuguese background. But this face had a lively arrogance that seemed somehow familiar. "I might," said the priest. "Is he in my parish?"

"Nominally. He last attended mass at the age of twelve. He's seventeen now. He broke the window of your car with a baseball some months ago, and you scolded him about it in front of his friends. You wondered at the time if he did it on purpose."

"Now I remember." Even now Father Malone could recall, not so much the boy's face, but his taunts. *Sorry, "Father." What a shame, "Father."*

"You were quite right, he did do it on purpose," said the bishop. "But he's done far worse, and he'll do worse yet. You'll see that very soon. Your part of the bargain won't be difficult to keep."

As the picture faded again, the boy's sneering eyes seemed to follow Father Malone across the room. I'm going to wake up now, he thought. This is an idiotic nightmare and I will wake up.

"I won't do it!" he said, louder than he meant to. But it didn't matter; how could he wake Mrs. Reardon if he was dreaming? "Of course I won't do it. I couldn't, anyway. I can't control another man's soul."

"But people like Tony don't control their own souls, you see. They don't

believe they have any. You might say they've given you power of attorney. You could do your utmost to damn Tony's soul, and he'd only laugh at you for a fool. He's done it before."

"But why the da Silva boy? And why not let him damn himself?"

The bishop cocked his head to one side, wise and amused. "Suffice it to say that it would suit us, and inconvenience you very little. Just help him along as he makes his own road down. A word here, turning a blind eye there. That's all. And you receive so much in return. New soldiers for the Church, loyal disciples for you. Your heart's desire, brought about by your own efforts."

"No."

"Just think about it."

"No!"

"You're going to wake up now. I've enjoyed our conversation, Father. I'll be back. . . ."

"Good heavens, Father! What are you doing with the TV on in the middle of the night?" The departing bishop had instantaneously become the broad figure of Mrs. Reardon, swathed in pink terrycloth. She silenced the television's hissing static and looked at him with her usual amiable disapproval. Nothing he did suited Mrs. Reardon. "There's nothing on this late. You fell asleep in your chair again, didn't you?"

"Yes, I suppose so. I'll turn out the lights. Mrs. Reardon?"

She turned back from the hallway.

"Did we have a visitor tonight?"

"No, nobody." She frowned, then shrugged. "That was funny. Not one phone call, either. Nice to have some peace and quiet, wasn't it?"

Father Malone had no peace for the remainder of that night. Every word of his conversation with the bishop—the *devil*, he corrected himself—echoed and re-echoed in his mind, along with a hundred questions. Why would the powers of evil choose him, the ordinary pastor of an ordinary church, to tempt with this bizarre bargain? Was it some weakness he had shown in his faith? Was it such a sin, his secret daydream to inspire the young people of his parish?

As Father Malone sat up to disentangle his sheets yet again, the image on the television screen seemed to hover in the air above him, growing larger and more life-like. He could imagine, with all the clarity of desire, how it would feel to bask in the admiration of the men at that table, the satisfaction of having brought new priests to the Church through the strength of his own eloquence. And the influence he would have, the good he would accomplish! It would stretch decades beyond the end of his own life, as these priests continued with their careers and cherished

his memory. The image of Anthony da Silva seemed faint and small in comparison.

In the end he made a decision. Not about the devil's bargain, of course. It was unthinkable to sacrifice a soul, any soul, no matter how glorious the temptation. He wouldn't consider it, not for a moment. His decision was to consult Father Joseph Barnett, his spiritual advisor, who met with him once a month to hear his confession and discuss the state of his soul. Father Malone didn't like his assigned advisor, and never had; Barnett was a short, impatient terrier of an old man with a barking laugh. He considered talking to Bishop Davison instead. But no, he wouldn't arrive until noon, just an hour before the confirmation ceremonies, and Father Malone had to consult someone immediately. And yet he stayed in bed. To call Father Barnett now, wake him from his peaceful, self-satisfied sleep, and try to explain what had happened . . . Father Malone knew he would sound tongue-tied and foolish, like a child with a nightmare, and Barnett would laugh. No. In the morning, when he could marshall his thoughts, he would call.

In the morning, of course, with the June light pouring through the maple trees and a hundred details to attend to for the confirmation mass, he did nothing of the sort. Call Father Barnett because he'd had a bad dream? Expose to ridicule his most secret ambitions? Of course not. Father Malone made a vow to start getting more sleep, proper sleep in his own bed, and went on with his day.

After a hurried breakfast, the first order of business was to unlock the church before the ladies of the Holy Name Society arrived with the flower arrangements. With its white siding and modest steeple, Holy Rosary was an undistinguished church, but Father Malone was proud of its sound condition and trim appearance, the result of his efforts as a financial manager. He unlocked the main doors and propped them open to the sunshine, then went inside.

He noticed the smell first, before his eyes adjusted to the dark. A foul smell, and then the sight of desecration. The church, his church, had been vandalized. Father Malone took in the small ugly details first, and then the larger, unforgivable outrage. There were hymnals torn and scattered across the center aisle, and a wrought iron stand of votive candles had been knocked to the floor in a welter of splintered glass. The tall brass candlesticks in the Chapel of Our Lady were tipped over, and the statue of the Blessed Virgin lay broken on its face behind the little altar. Father Malone approached the chapel warily, very close to tears. Then, as he bent down to rescue Mary, a slash of color caught his eye. On the wall behind him, spray-painted in huge, dripping red letters, was a string of filthy drawings and meaningless symbols, and the words FUCK YOU MALONE.

"Father? Oh, *Father!*" Mrs. Reardon stood rigid in the main entrance, as if afraid to come in. She looked at Father Malone, and seemed to find something to fear in his face as well. "Father, Bishop Davison is here."

In the end they made do, and the confirmation Mass was held, only three hours late, in a church with an empty Lady Chapel and a reek of new white paint in the air. Bishop Davison was assured that this sort of thing had never happened before at Holy Rosary, and that Father Malone was generally beloved of his young parishioners. An isolated occurrence, everyone agreed, terribly unfortunate, but not unheard of in these difficult times. The police said much the same thing.

"It might have been a kid with a personal grudge against you, Father," said the large, calm lieutenant who came to the rectory that afternoon. He glanced at the patrolman's report in his hand. "I see they used your name specifically. But then your name is on the signboard out in front of the church. They forced the side door pretty easily, maybe looking for something to steal, a donation box, and when they didn't find much they went crazy. Kids do. Unless you have any idea who might have done it, someone you know?"

"No," said Father Malone, shutting his eyes to the image of that lively arrogant face on the television. "No, no ideas."

But the suspicion grew in him all week, and with it a cold anger. He asked the church secretary, casually, to check on the da Silva family. Father dead, mother a member of the Holy Name Society, daughter enrolled in catechism class. The son Anthony had never been confirmed. After a series of run-ins with the law, he was no longer living at home, no address, no way to reach him. Who was this arrogant boy, to be damaging Father Malone's property, haunting his dreams, and now—Father Malone was sure of it—now to be desecrating the church and embarrassing its pastor? Another one of these young people who wanted instant rewards without a single sacrifice. There was no way to reach any of them.

At Mass the following Sunday, Father Malone fumbled a moment with his sermon notes. Then he set them aside and spoke from the heart. The congregation had more than its share of old people, mostly widows, but there were families as well, with children of every age. The priest searched the faces of the teenagers especially, and spoke as if to each one of them alone.

"You all know what happened here at Holy Rosary last Sunday. Someone broke in, and they had some fun. They thought it was fun to tear up the hymnals we sing from, and fun to smash the image of the Blessed Virgin Mary, and fun to scrawl filthy words on the walls of God's house. They wanted a laugh, and they got one."

There was silence in the church. Father Malone could hear his own heartbeat sweeping him along.

"Well, boys and girls, I think the last laugh is on them. I think the laugh is on anyone who has to stoop to such barbaric behavior to find some satisfaction in their empty lives. Because I know who *really* found some satisfaction last Sunday. It was our own parish volunteers, who cleaned up the mess and repainted the walls. It's all of our parishioners, who work hard to make Holy Rosary a community that serves God and helps its people. And it's all of you young people, who can have the satisfaction of rejecting this kind of despicable behavior, and joining your parents and your friends in the work of the Church. It's you who will have the last laugh, because it's you who will live full lives in God's love, and join him in life everlasting. . . ."

Father Malone spoke for twenty-five minutes, and no one moved. At the conclusion of Mass, when he appeared at the church door to shake the hands of the few older parishioners who sometimes wanted a word with him, he found instead a small crowd of people who looked at him in a way he'd never seen before. His hand was shaken many times over.

"That's telling them, Father."

"You took the words right out of my mouth, Father. I was glad Bruce here was home from college to hear you."

"Is there anything else we can do for you, Father? Have you started a collection for a new statue of Mary?"

And finally, a young voice, from a small red-faced boy.

"Father, can I talk to you sometime? About being an altar boy? Mom said I could ask you."

"Of course you can, my son." Father Malone wanted to embrace the child and weep, but simply patted him on the shoulder with a trembling hand. "Of course you can talk to me."

By the time of his fifty-first birthday, Father Malone had as much work to do as ever, but he did it with a lighter heart. The Chapel of Our Lady had long since been restored, Holy Rosary had three new altar boys, and long patient hours of practice, hours stolen late at night or well before dawn, had improved his sermons so much that even Mrs. Reardon was impressed. The warmer acceptance of his sermons helped the priest to let down his guard in conversation with his parishioners, and they began to respond with trust and affection. Father Malone even began to appreciate Father Barnett's sense of humor. There was no more vandalism.

There was a small disturbance, however, the night of Father Malone's birthday. He was sitting up late in his office, going over his speech for the confirmation class. He must remember not to call them "boys and

girls," they didn't seem to like that at their age. He glanced up at the shelf above his roll-top desk. There were birthday cards from Mrs. Reardon, away on vacation, one from his sister, a few from friends. There was also a large garish card with a silly pun inside, signed by all the altar boys. Some of them had awkwardly penciled in notes as well. He was reading them over yet again when he heard a shout from outside, and running footsteps.

"Hey, Father!"

The priest hurried down the hall to the common room, which had a view of the street. A man was standing slumped against the rectory entrance with a beer bottle in one hand. He lifted it and pounded the flat of the bottle against the door, beer slopping along the arm of his leather jacket.

"Hey, Father, I want to talk to you!" Then the figure stepped unsteadily away from the door and glared up at the rectory windows, muttering. "Anybody home?"

Anthony da Silva, his arrogant features slack and distorted. Father Malone drew back from the window and stumbled against the tweed armchair. He sat down, his knees buckling, and remembered that bizarre dream from the year before. He had tried not to dwell on such nonsense, so the details had blurred, but he recalled being told in the dream that the da Silva boy had done terrible things, and would do worse. The rest of the dream was too absurd to think about.

"I said; anybody home?"

Couldn't the neighbors hear? Father Malone knew he should go downstairs, but the thought gave him vertigo. Clearly the boy was drunk, or on drugs, he might very well have a gun in his jacket. It would be foolhardy to let him inside the rectory. And why should he? Why take the risk for Anthony da Silva, with his sneer and his spray paint and his filthy words?

"Father? Hey, Father?" Now the voice was forlorn, like a lost child's. "I really gotta talk to you."

Father Malone stared at his hands. Perhaps the boy was sorry about the vandalism? But what good was an apology now? He remembered the look on Bishop Davison's face that morning when he first saw the damage. He remembered the disgusting drawings on the wall of his church, and flushed in shame. For a worthless boy like that to publicly humiliate his own parish priest . . . it was unforgivable. Absolutely unforgivable.

The pounding began again, then ceased. There was a long moment of silence.

"FUCK YOU, MALONE!"

That did it. Father Malone stood up and strode back to his office to call the police. But he heard footsteps again, and a car's engine roar and

fade. He put down the phone, and reached absently for his notes for tomorrow's class. But it was impossible to concentrate. Better to try again in the morning. Once in bed, his usual twenty minutes with a murder mystery stretched to an hour, until finally the scene at the front door fell into perspective. A small disturbance, that was all. He would call the boy's mother in the morning. The book fell forward against his chest.

The bishop appeared in the doorway.

Father Malone tried to rise from the bed, but the same soft weight, horribly familiar, pushed him back against his pillows. He stared at the black silhouette.

"I came to thank you." The bishop stepped into the light, his eyes glittering. "For your cooperation. We have the boy now. I think we're going to enjoy him quite a lot."

"I didn't, I never agreed—"

"Of course you did." The bishop chuckled, a warm, benevolent sound. "Did you think it would be a matter of parchment documents and signing in blood? Not at all. Just a moment or two of withholding the comfort of the Church."

"But I never spoke to him!"

"Exactly. He came to you tonight to ask forgiveness. He wanted to confess, and you never spoke to him. That was all we needed."

"Confess?" said Father Malone. He was cold, bitterly cold all over.

"Yes. Nothing so trivial as vandalism, however. It seems he got drunk earlier this evening and beat his girlfriend rather badly. He thought he'd killed her, although in fact he was mistaken. She'll live."

"And Tony?"

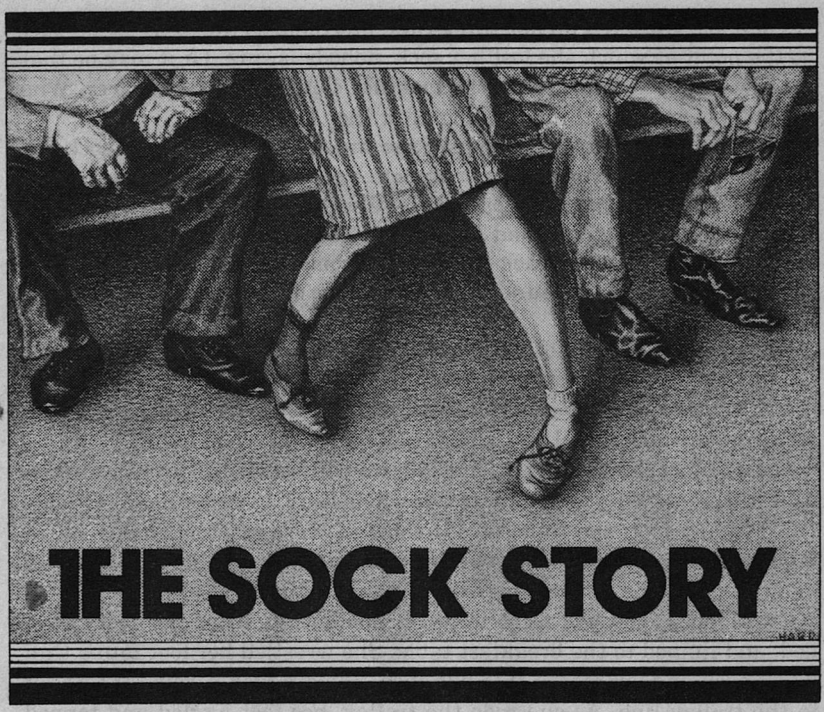
"Oh, is it 'Tony' now? How touching." The bishop's eyes were burning. "Your Tony, had you forgiven him, would have been quite a problem for us, once he reached middle age. A political martyr, his name revered around the world. Quite a remarkable career altogether. Except that he killed himself in a detention cell an hour ago."

"No . . . *No!*"

"Yes." The bishop waved a hand, and the bedside lamp went dark. "I'll be leaving now. You're still asleep, you see. And by the time you wake up, with the sensible morning light, I'm sure you will decide not to mention Tony's visit to anyone."

The priest fought against the weight, and failed. The voice grew fainter in the darkness, but he could still see those eyes, burning.

"Good night, Father Malone. No doubt you will convince yourself that this too was only a dream. And perhaps, by the time you're seventy, you'll convince yourself that Tony forgives you. After all, you're a *very* eloquent man." ●



THE SOCK STORY

by Eileen Gunn

art: Laurie Harden

As one might have suspected, "The Sock Story" resulted from a misunderstanding between the author and a washing machine. Ms. Gunn is pleased to relate, however, that it's all been straightened out, and she and the machine are on speaking terms once again.

This is the story of a woman who lost her sock at the laundromat and discovered it contained part of her soul. This is the way the story is always told. It was told to me this way and I will tell it to you this way. There is no other way to tell this story.

It begins in the laundromat, of course. She was doing her laundry, this woman. She washed her socks, she washed her shirt, and she washed her blue jeans. She even washed her underwear.

Then she gathered up her things and put them in the dryer. This may be the point at which she lost her sock, nobody is sure. Or it may be that she lost her sock later, when she took her clothes out of the dryer. Who can tell about these things so long after they happen?

At any rate, when she got home, she was missing one of her socks. It was just an ordinary grey rag-wool sock. You probably have a pair yourself. Everyone I know has a pair of these socks. Some have two pair.

This woman, she only had one pair. So she was annoyed at missing the sock, and she went back to the laundromat in search of it. But the sock was nowhere to be found. Who would take just one sock, she thought, and she went home.

That very day, she noticed something peculiar about her left foot. It dragged, it stuck out wrong. It tripped the woman up when she walked, and it seemed to have a mind of its own. It's sulking at the loss of its sock, she thought. I will pay it no mind, and it will soon forget.

But the foot did not forget. Instead, its will seemed to grow stronger, as if it were seeking to dominate her whole body. I cannot have my body ruled by my foot, she thought. I'll show it who's master. So she sat at home all weekend and looked out the window. Although her foot twitched and throbbed, she refused to give in. It was not a fun weekend.

On Monday, she had to go to work. She got up, lifted her foot out of bed, and limped to the breakfast table. She wrestled her foot into a thin white sock and jammed it into her shoe. She dragged it down the street to the trolley line. As she rode the trolley, her foot jiggled and tapped its way out into the aisle, jutted straight out ahead of her, stomped up and down with rage. Other passengers gave her sharp looks and told her to keep her feet to herself.

At work, she avoided other people as much as she could. She kept her foot under her desk, but it continued to jerk up and down, sometimes striking the inside of the metal desk with a thwanging sound. The woman at the next desk became impatient and took to slamming her stapler around very noisily.

The next day, she called in sock. I mean sick, she called in sick. Her foot was becoming more agitated. She decided to let the fool thing have its way. It walked out the door and down the street, taking her past the laundromat, past the grocery store, past the gas station and up to the vacant lot.

On the north side of the vacant lot was a garage, and in the garage lived a man named Henry. Henry had been living there for years. He collected bottles and cans and returned them for their deposits. He didn't bother anyone much, and nobody bothered much with him.

Oh no, thought the woman. I can't take a sock away from Henry. He

needs it more than I do.

But sure enough, her foot walked her right up to Henry's garage. It wanted to go inside, but she walked it right on by. She pretended to look in the window of the hardware store on the other side of the vacant lot. It contained brooms and dusty tools. Her foot pawed the ground to go back.

As she stood there struggling, Henry came out of the garage. He smelled like a lube job, and he was wearing her sock on his left hand like a mitten, his thumb stuck through the hole in the heel.

He said something to her, but the woman wasn't listening. Her foot was trying very hard to leap up into Henry's hand, and the woman was resisting with all her might. As you can see, she was not the sort of person who casually thrust her feet into other people's hands.

Henry brushed by her then, and she never did catch what he was saying. Perhaps he was just muttering, who knows? He muttered a lot, Henry.

Certainly he was muttering later when she caught up with him and gave him a pair of gloves. He took them and muttered his thanks, and then he asked her if she could spare him a dollar for trolley fare. The woman, her left foot chattering against the pavement, said she'd give him two if he'd give her the grey sock. He grabbed the bills, flung the sock in her direction, and hobbled off quickly, his left hand clutching pathetically at the air.

The woman is very careful of her socks now, and always counts them before she leaves the laundromat, but she is a woman who lives with the knowledge that her body can be ruled by her foot, and how she can be happy knowing that I'm damned if I can figure out.

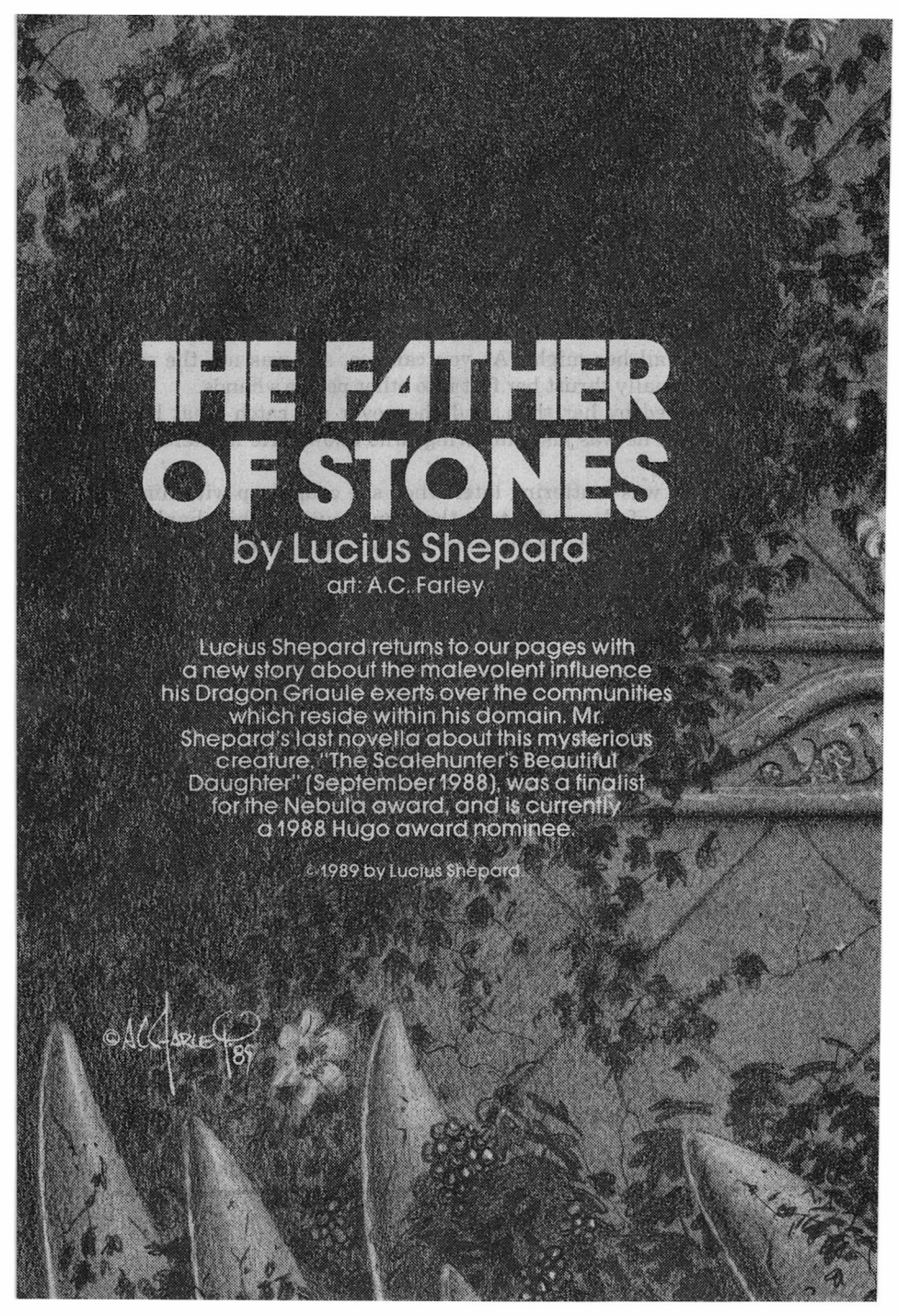
That's all there is to this story, and there's no use in complaining if you don't like it, because this is the way it's got to be told. ●

For Elizabeth Moore

ENTROPY: A CINQUAIN

Protons
Decay. If this
Cannot be stopped, it's all
One downhill slide—and it cannot
Be stopped.

—Martha Soukup



THE FATHER OF STONES

by Lucius Shepard

art: A.C. Farley

Lucius Shepard returns to our pages with a new story about the malevolent influence his Dragon Griaule exerts over the communities which reside within his domain. Mr. Shepard's last novella about this mysterious creature, "The Scalehunter's Beautiful Daughter" (September 1988), was a finalist for the Nebula award, and is currently a 1988 Hugo award nominee.

How The Father of Stones came into the possession of the gemcutter William Lemos continues to be a subject for debate among the citizens of Port Chantay. That Lemos purchased the stone from the importer Henry Sichi is not in question, nor is it in doubt that Sichi had traded several bolts of raw silk for the stone to a tailor in Teocinte, and although the tailor has not admitted it, witnesses have clearly established that he took the stone by force from his niece, who had seen it glinting amid a clump of ferns growing beneath the lip of the dragon Griaule. But how the stone came to be in that spot at that exact moment, therein lies the cause of the debate. Some hold that the stone is a natural artifact of Griaule, a slow production of his flesh, perhaps a kind of tumor, and that it served to embody his wishes, to move Lemos—who lived beyond the natural range of his domination—to do the dragon's bidding in the affair of the priest Mardo Zemaille and the Temple of the Dragon. Others will say that, Yes, Griaule is indeed a marvel, a creature the size of a mountain, immobilized millennia before in a magical duel, who controls the population of the Carbonales Valley through the subtle exercise of his will and is capable of manipulating the most discrete of effects, the most complex of events; but to think that his tumors or kidney stones have the aspect of fabulous gems . . . well, that is stretching things a bit. Lemos, they claim, is merely attempting to use the fact of Griaule's mastery to justify his crime, and doubtless The Father of Stones is a relic of the dragon's hoard, probably dropped beneath the lip by one of the pitiful half-wits who inhabit his innards. Of course that's how it got there, their opponents will say; do you believe Griaule incapable of such a simple machination as that of directing one of his minions to leave a stone in a certain place at a certain time? And as for the origin of the stone, here we have a vast, mysterious, and nearly immortal intelligence, one whose body supports forests and villages and parasites large enough to destroy a city—given all that, is the possibility that he might have fabricated The Father of Stones in some dark tuck of his interior really so far removed?

These arguments aside, the facts are as follows. One misty night in February some years ago, a young boy burst into the headquarters of the constabulary in Port Chantay, bursting with the news that Mardo Zemaille, the priest of the Temple of the Dragon, had been murdered, and that his assassin, William Lemos, was awaiting the pleasure of the constabulary at the temple gates. When the constables arrived at the temple, which was located a few hundred yards from the landward end of Ayler Point, they found Lemos, a pale sandy-haired man of forty-three with a pleasant yet unremarkable face and gray eyes and a distracted professorial air, pacing back and forth in front of the temple; after placing him in restraints, the constables proceeded onto the grounds, which were

uncharacteristically deserted. In a corner building of the compound they discovered Zemaille lying crumpled beside an altar of black marble, his skull fractured, the fatal blow having been struck with a fist-sized gem of an inferior milky water, one side left rough, affording an excellent grip for someone wishing to hurl it, and the other side cut into a pattern of sharply edged facets. They also discovered Mirielle, Lemos's daughter, stretched naked on the altar, drugged into a state of torpor. Port Chantay, while a fairly large city, was not so large that the constabulary had been unaware of the conflict between Lemos and Zemaille. Lemos' wife Patricia, drowned in the waters off Ayler's Point three years before (she had, it was rumored, been visiting her lover, a wealthy gentleman with a home at the seaward end of the point), had willed her portion of the gem-cutting business to Mirielle, and Mirielle, who had been deeply involved with the dragon cult and with Zemaille himself, had donated the half-share to the temple. Zemaille was accustomed to using rare gems in certain of his rituals, and he soon began to drain the resources of the shop; the imminent failure of the gemcutter's business, along with his daughter's rejection, her wantonness and sluttish obeisance to the priest, had driven him to the depths of despair and thence, it seemed, to murder. And so, with a confession in hand, one backed by clear motive and a wealth of physical evidence, the constables felt confident that justice would be swift and sure. But they had not reckoned on the nature of Lemos's defense. Nor, it appeared from his initial reaction, had Lemos's advocate, Adam Korrogly.

"You must be mad," he told Lemos after the gemcutter had related his version of the events. "Or else you're damned clever."

"It's the truth," Lemos said glumly. He was slumped in a chair in a windowless interrogation room lit by a glass bowl depended from the ceiling that held clumps of luminous moss; he gazed at his hands, which were spread upon a wooden table, as if unable to accept that they had betrayed him.

Korrogly, a tall, thin intense man with receding black hair and features that looked to have been whittled into sharpness out of smooth white wood, walked to the door and, facing it, said, "I see where you're trying to lead me."

"I'm not trying to lead you anywhere," Lemos said. "I don't care what you think, it's the truth."

"You should care very much what I think," said Korrogly, turning to him. "In the first place, I don't have to accept your case; in the second, my performance will be greatly abetted if I believe you."

Lemos lifted his head and engaged Korrogly's eyes with a look of such abject hopelessness that for an instant the advocate imagined it had

struck him with a physical force. "Proceed as you will," Lemos said. "The quality of your performance matters little to me."

Korrogly walked to the table and leaned forward, resting his hands so that the splayed tips of his fingers were nearly touching Lemos's fingers. Lemos did not move his hands away, did not appear to notice the closeness of Korrogly's hands, and this indicated that he was truly overborne by all that had happened, and not putting on an act. Either that, Korrogly thought, or the man's got the nervous system of a snail.

"You're asking me to attempt a defense that's never been used before," he said. "Now that I think of it, I'm amazed no one's ever tried it. Griaule's influence—over the Carbonales Valley, anyway—is not in doubt. But to claim you were enacting his will, that some essence embodied in the gem inspired you to serve as his agent, to use that as a defense in a criminal case . . . I don't know."

Lemos appeared not to have heard; after a moment he said, "Mirielle . . . is she all right?"

Irritated, Korrogly said, "Yes, yes, she's fine. Were you listening to what I just said?"

Lemos stared at him uncomprehendingly.

"Your story," Korrogly said, "appears to demand a defense that has never been used. Never. Do you know what will attend that?"

"No," said Lemos, and lowered his eyes.

"Judges are not delighted by the prospect of setting precedent, and whoever presides over your trial is going to be particularly loath to establish this sort of precedent. Because if it is established, God knows how many villains will seek to use it to avoid punishment."

Lemos was silent for a few seconds and then said, "I don't understand. What do you wish me to say?"

Studying his face, Korrogly had a feeling of uneasiness: Lemos's despair seemed too uniform, too all-encompassing. He had acted for a number of clients who had been in the grip of terrible despair, but even the most despondent of these had on occasion suddenly realized their plight and exhibited fright or desperation or some variant emotion. He had the idea that Lemos was an intelligent man, one capable of such a subtle deceit as this might be.

"It's not necessary that you say anything," he told Lemos. "I simply want you to understand the course you've set me. If I were to plead for mercy from the court, ask them to recognize the passions involved, to take into account the unscrupulous nature of the deceased, I'm confident that your sentence would be light. Zemaille was not well loved, and there are many who consider what you've done an act of conscience."

"Not I," said Lemos in such an agonized tone that Korrogly was persuaded for the moment to complete belief.

"However," he went on, "should I pursue the defense that your story suggests, you may wind up facing a much harsher sentence, perhaps even the ultimate. That you choose to defend in this manner might imply to the judge that the crime was premeditated. Thus he would allow no mediating circumstance in his instructions to the jury. He would dismiss all possibility of it being a crime of passion."

Lemos gave a dispirited laugh.

"That amuses you?" Korrogly asked.

"I find it simplistic that passion and premeditation are deemed to be mutually exclusive."

Korrogly moved away from the table, folded his arms and regarded the luminous globe overhead. "Of course that's not always the case. Not all crimes of passion are considered acts of the moment. There is leeway left for obsession, for irresistible compulsion. But what I'm telling you is that the judge in his desire to avoid setting precedent might block these avenues of mercy in his instructions to the jury."

Once again Lemos appeared to have slipped into a reverie.

"Have you decided?" Korrogly insisted. "I can't decide for you, I can only recommend."

"You seem to be recommending that I lie," said Lemos.

"How do you arrive at that?"

"You tell me the truth is a risk, that the secure course is best."

"I'm merely counseling you as to the potential pitfalls."

"There's a fine line, is there not, between recommendation and counsel."

"Between guilt and innocence also," said Korrogly, thinking he might get a rise out of Lemos with this; but the gemcutter only stared at the table, brushed back his sandy forelock from his eyes.

"Very well." Korrogly picked up his satchel from the floor. "I'll assume you want me to go forward with the case as you've presented it."

"Mirielle," said Lemos. "Will you ask her to come and visit me?"

"I will."

"Today . . . will you ask her today?"

"I plan to see her this afternoon, and I'll ask her. But according to the constables, she may not respond favorably to anything I ask on your behalf. She is apparently quite bereft."

Lemos muttered something, and when Korrogly asked him to repeat it, he said, "Nothing."

"Is there anything else I can do for you?"

Lemos shook his head.

"I'll be back tomorrow," said Korrogly; he started to tell Lemos to be of good cheer, but partly in recognition of the profundity of Lemos's

despair, partly due to his continuing sense of uneasiness, he thought better of it.

The gemcutter's shop was in the Almintra quarter of Port Chantay, a section of the city bordering the ocean, touched yet not overwhelmed by decay and poverty. Dozens of shops were situated on the bottom floors of old peeling frame houses with witchy-looking peaked roofs and gables, and between them Korrogly could see the houses of the wealthy ranging Ayler's Point: airy mansions with wide verandahs and gilt roofs nestled among stands of thistle palms. The sea beyond the point was a smooth jade-colored expanse broken by creamy surf, seeming to carry out the theme of elegance stated by the mansions; on the other hand, the breakers that heaped foam upon the beaches of the Almintra quarter were fouled with seaweed and offal and driftwood. It must be, he thought, dismaying to the residents of the quarter, which had not so long ago been considered exclusive, to have this view of success and beauty, and then to turn back to their own lives and watch the rats scurrying in piles of vegetable litter, the ghost crabs scuttling in the sandy streets, the beggars, the increasing dilapidation of their homes. He wondered if this could have played a part in the murder; he could discern no opportunity for profit in the crime, but there was so much still hidden, and he did not want to blind himself to the existence of such a motive. He did not believe Lemos, yet he could not fully discredit the gemcutter's story. That was the story's virtue; its elusiveness, the way it played upon the superstitious nature of the citizenry, how it employed the vast subtlety of Griaule to spread confusion through the mind of whomever sought to judge it. The jury was going to have one hell of a time. And, he thought, so was he. He could not deny the challenge presented him; a case of this sort came along but rarely, and its materials, so aptly suited to the game of the law, to the sleights-of-hand that had turned the law into a game, afforded him the opportunity of making a reputation in one fell swoop. His inability to disbelieve Lemos's story might be a product of his hope that the gemcutter was telling the truth, that precedent was indeed involved, for he was beginning to realize that he needed something spectacular, something unique and unsettling, to reawaken his old hopes and enthusiasms, to restore his sense of self-worth. For the nine years since his graduation from the inns of court he had devoted himself to his practice, achieving a small success, all that could be expected of someone who was the son of poor farmers; he had watched less skilled advocates achieve greater success, and he had come to understand what he should have understood from the beginning: that the Law was subordinate to the unwritten laws of social status and blood relation. He was at the age of thirty-three an idealist whose ideals were foundering, yet whose fascination with the

game remained undimmed, and this had left him open to a dangerous cynicism—dangerous in that it had produced in him a volatile mixture of old virtues and new half-understood compulsions. Lately the bubblings up of that mixture had tended to make him erratic, prone to wild swings of mood and sudden abandonments of hope and principle. He was, he thought, in much the same condition as the Almintra quarter: a working-class neighborhood funded by solid values that had once looked forward to an upwardly mobile future, but that now aspired to be a slum.

The gemcutter's rooms were on the second floor of one of the frame houses, located directly above his shop, and it was there that Korrogly interviewed the daughter, Mirielle. She was a slim young woman in her early twenties with long black hair and hazel eyes and a heart-shaped face whose prettiness had been hardened by the stamp of dissipation; she wore a black dress with a lace collar, but her pose was hardly in keeping with the demureness of her garment or with her apparent grief. Her cheeks were puffy from weeping, her eyes reddened, and yet she lay asprawl on a sofa, smoking a crooked green cigar, her legs propped on the back and the arm, affording Korrogly a glimpse of the shadowy division between her thighs: it appeared that grief had offered her the chance to experience a new form of dissolution, and she had seized upon it wholeheartedly.

We're proud of our little treasure, are we not, he thought, we like to give it lots of ventilation.

But Mirielle Lemos, for all her dissipation, was an extremely attractive woman, and despite her sarcasm, Korrogly—a lonely man—felt drawn to her.

The air was thick with stale cooking odors, and the central room was a typical bachelor's disarray of soiled dishes and tumbled piles of clothing and scattered books, all strewn across furniture that had seen better days: the sprung sofa, a couple of easy chairs shiny with dirt and grease, a threadbare brown carpet with a faded blue pattern, a small scarred table that bore several framed sketches, one depicting a woman who greatly resembled Mirielle and was holding a baby in her arms—thin winter sunlight cast a glaze of reflection over the glass, imbuing the sketch with a mystical vagueness. On the wall were several paintings, and the largest of these was a representation of Griaule half-buried beneath centuries of grass and trees, only a portion of a wing and his entire massive head, as high as a hill itself, left visible; this painting, Korrogly noticed, was signed W. Lemos. He pushed aside some dirty clothing and perched on the edge of an easy chair facing Mirielle.

"So you're my father's advocate," she said after exhaling a stream of gray smoke. "You don't look competent."

"Be assured that I am," said Korrogly, who had been prepared for her

hostility. "If you were hoping for some white-haired old man with ink on his fingers and crumpled legal notes peeping from waistcoat pockets, I'm. . . ."

"No," she said, "I was hoping for someone exactly like you. Somebody with a minimum of experience and skill."

"I take it, then, that you're anticipating a hard judgment for your father. That you're embittered by his act."

"Embittered?" She laughed. "I despised him before he killed Mardo. Now I hate him."

"And yet he saved your life?"

"Is that what he told you?" Another laugh. "That's scarcely the case."

"You were drugged," he said. "Lying naked on an altar. A knife was found on Zemaille's body."

"I've spent other nights lying on that altar in exactly the same state," she said, "and never once have I experienced other than pleasure." The knowing quality of her smile made clear the nature of that pleasure. "As for the knife, Mardo always went armed. He was in constant danger from fools like my father."

"What do you remember of the murder?"

"I remember hearing my father's voice. I thought I was dreaming. Then I heard a crack, a splintering sound. I looked up and saw Mardo fall with blood all over his face." She tensed, looked up to the ceiling, apparently made uncomfortable by the memory; but then, as though also inflamed by it, she ran a hand along her belly and thigh. Korrogly averted his eyes, feeling an accumulation of heat in his own belly.

"Your father claims there were nine witnesses, nine hooded figures, all of whom fled the chamber. None of them have come forward. Do you know why this might be?"

"Why should they come forward? To experience more persecution from people who have no idea of what Mardo was attempting?"

"And what was that?"

She exhaled another stream of smoke and said nothing.

"You'll be asked this question in court."

"I will not betray our secrets," she said. "I don't care what happens to me."

"Neither does your father . . . or so he says. He's very depressed, and he wants to see you."

She made a noise of contempt. "I'll see him on the gallows."

"You know," Korrogly said, "despite what your father has done, he really does believe he was acting to save you."

"You don't know what he believes," she said, sitting up, fixing him with a dead stare, her voice full of venom. "You don't understand him at all. He pretends to be a humble craftsman, an artisan, a good honest

soul. But in his heart he considers himself a superior being. Life, he used to say, has thrown obstacle after obstacle into his path, keeping him from achieving his proper station. He feels he's been penalized with bad luck for his intelligence. He's a schemer, a plotter. And his bad luck stems from the fact that he's not so intelligent as he thinks. He bungles everything."

The first part of what she had said was in such accord with Korrogly's impression of Lemos that he was taken aback; hearing his feelings issue from Mirielle's mouth acted both to reinforce his impression and—because she was so obviously her father's antagonist—to invalidate it.

"That may be," he said, covering his confusion by shuffling through papers, "but I doubt it."

"Oh, you'll find out," she said. "If there's one thing you'll end up knowing about my father, it's his capacity for deceit." She settled back on the sofa, her skirt riding up onto her thigh. "He's been wanting to kill Mardo ever since I got involved with him." A smile hitched up the corners of her mouth. "He was jealous."

"Jealous?" said Korrogly.

"Yes . . . as a lover is jealous. He delights in touching me."

Korrogly did not reject the notion of incestuous desire out of hand, but after going through the mental file he had begun on Lemos, he refused to believe Mirielle's accusation; she had been so committed to Zemaille and his way of life that he could not, he realized, believe anything she told him. She was ruined, abandoned to the point of dissolution; the stink pervading the rooms, he thought, was scarcely distinguishable from the reek of her own spoilage.

"Why do you despise your father?" he asked.

"His pomposity," she said, "and his stodginess. His stale conception of what happiness should be, his inability to embrace life, his dull presence, his. . . ."

"All that sounds quite adolescent," he said. "Like the reaction of a stubborn child who's been denied her favorite treat."

She shrugged. "Perhaps. He rejected my suitors, he prevented me from becoming an actress . . . and I could have been a good one. Everybody said so. But how I am, how I was, doesn't have any bearing on the truth of what I've said. And it's not relevant to what my father did."

"Relevant . . . possibly not. But it speaks to the fact that you're not in the least interested in helping him."

"I've made no secret of that."

"No, you haven't. But the history of your emotions will be helpful in pointing up that you're a vindictive bitch and that your idea of the truth is whatever will hurt your father. It has no relation to what really happened."

He had been trying to make her angry, wanting to get an idea of her boiling point, knowledge that would come in handy during the trial; but her smile only broadened. She crossed her legs and traced a florid shape in the air with the tip of her cigar. She was very cool, he thought, very cool. But in court that would work against her; it would cast Lemos in a more benign light, show him to be the patient, caring parent in contrast to her viperous ingrate. Of course that would be more significant to a defense based on compulsion, on wrong-headed passion; but Korrogly believed he could color his actual defense with this other and so win the jury's sympathy.

"Well," he said, coming to his feet. "I may have some more questions later, but I don't see any use in continuing this now."

"You think you've got me, don't you?"

"Got you? I don't know what you mean."

"You think you've got me figured out."

"As a matter of fact, I do."

"And how you would portray me in court?"

"I'm sure you must have an idea."

"Oh, but I'd like to hear it."

"All right. If necessary I'll paint a picture of a spoiled, self-indulgent creature who has no real feelings for anyone. Even her grief for her lover seems to be no more than a kind of adornment, an accessory to be worn with a black dress. And in her degeneracy, a condition prompted by drugs and the black arts, by the depraved rituals of the dragon cult, the only emotions she is capable of mustering are those she thinks will serve her ends. Greed, perhaps. And vengefulness."

She let out a lazy chuckle.

"That strikes you as inaccurate?"

"Not at all, advocate. What amuses me is that knowing this, you think you can use it to your advantage." She turned on her side, supporting her head with one hand, her skirt twisting beneath her, exposing even more pale firm flesh. "I'll look forward to our next meeting. Perhaps by then your understanding of the situation will have grown more complex, and you'll have more . . . more interesting questions to ask."

"May I ask one further question now?"

"Yes, of course." She rolled onto her back, cutting her eyes toward him.

"This display of yours, the dress up to your waist and all that, is it intended to arouse me?"

She nodded. "Mmm-hmm. Is it working?"

"Why?" he said. "What possible benefit do you think that'll gain you? Do you think I'll defend your father with less enthusiasm?"

"I don't know . . . will you?"

"Not at all."

"Then it'll be for nothing," she said. "But that's all right, too."

He couldn't tear his eyes away from her legs.

"Really, it's all right," she said. "I need a lover now. And I like you. You're funny, but I like you anyway."

He stared at her, his anger alternating with desire. Knowing that he could have her alarmed him. He could go to her now, this moment, and it would affect nothing, it would have no resonance with the trial, it would merely be an indulgence. Yet he understood that it was this increasing openness to indulgence that signaled his impending moral shipwreck. To reject her would not be an act of prudishness, but one of salvation.

"It'll be good with us," she said. "I have a feeling for these things."

His eye followed the line of her thigh to the white seashell curve of her hip; her fingers were long, slender, and he imagined how they might touch him.

"I have to be going," he said.

"Yes, I think you'd better." Her voice was charged with gleeful spite. "That was a near thing, wasn't it? You might have actually enjoyed yourself."

During the next week Korrogly interviewed many witnesses, among them Henry Sichi, who reported that when Lemos purchased the gemstone, he had been so entranced by it, so absorbed that Sichi had found it necessary to give him a nudge in order to alert him sufficiently to complete the deal. He spoke to various members of Lemos's guild, all of whom were willing to testify to the mildness and honesty of his character; they described him as a man obsessed with his work, obsessed to the point of absentmindedness, drawing a vastly different picture of the man than had Mirielle. Korrogly had known quite a few men who had presented an exemplary public face and a wholly contradictory one in private; yet there was no doubt that the guildsmen's testimony would outweigh Mirielle's . . . in fact, whatever Mirielle said in evidence would, no matter how hostile, benefit Lemos's case because of its vile context. He sought out experts on Griaule's history and talked to people who'd had personal experience of Griaule's influence. The only witness whose testimony ran contrary to the defense was that of an old man, a drunkard who was in the habit of sleeping it off in the dunes south of Ayler Point and on several occasions had seen Lemos hurling stones at a sign post, hurling them over and over again as if practicing for the fatal toss; the old man's alcoholism would diminish the impact of the testimony, but it was nevertheless of consequence.

When Korrogly related it to Lemos, the gemcutter said. "I often walk out past the point of an afternoon, and sometimes I throw stones to relax.

It was my only talent as a child, and I suppose I seek refuge in it when the world becomes too much to bear."

Like every other bit of evidence, this too, Korrogly saw, was open to interpretation; it was conceivable, for instance, that Griaule's choice of Lemos as an agent had been in part made because of this aptitude for throwing stones, that he had been moved by the dragon to practice in preparation for the violent act. He looked across the table at his client. Jail, it appeared, was turning Lemos gray. His skin, the tenor of his emotions, everything about him was going gray, and Korrogly felt infected by that grayness, felt that the gray was the color of the case, of all its indistinct structures and indefinite truths, and that it was spreading through him and wearing him away. He asked again if he could do anything for Lemos, and again Lemos's answer was that he wished to see Mirielle.

On a Sunday in late March, Korrogly interviewed an elderly and wealthy woman who had until shortly before the murder been an active member of the Temple of the Dragon. The woman was known only as Kirin, and her past was a shadow; she seemed not to have existed prior to her emergence within the strictures of the temple, and since leaving it, she had lived a secretive life, known to the public only through the letters that she occasionally wrote to the newspaper attacking the cult. He was met at the door by a thick-waisted drab, apparently the woman's servant, who led him into a room that seemed to have been less decorated than to have sprung from a green and leafy enchantment. It was roofed by a faceted skylight, divided by carved wooden screens, all twined with vines and epiphytes; plants of every variety choked the avenues among the screens, their foliage so luxuriant that sprays of leaves hid the pots in which they were rooted. The sun illuminated a profusion of greens—pale Pomona, nile, emerald, viridian, and chartreuse; intricate shadows dappled the hardwood floors. The fronds of sword ferns twitched in the breeze like the feelers of enormous insects.

After wandering through this jungly environment for nearly half an hour, growing more and more impatient, Korrogly was hailed by a fluting female voice, which asked him to call out so that she might find him among the leaves. Moments later, a tall white-haired woman in a floor-length gown of gray watered silk came up beside him; her face was the color of old ivory, deeply wrinkled and stamped with what struck Korrogly as a stern and suspicious character, and her hands moved ceaselessly, plucking at the nearby leaves as if they were the telling beads of some meditative religion. Despite her age, she radiated energy, and Korrogly thought that if he were to close his eyes, he would have the impression he was in the presence of a vital young woman. She directed him to a bench in a corner of the room and sat next to him, gazing out into

the lushness of her sanctum, continuing to pluck and pick at stem and leaf.

"I distrust advocates, Mister Korrogly," she said. "You should know that from the outset."

"So do I, ma'am," he said, hoping to elicit a laugh, some softening of her attitude, but she only pursed her lips.

"Had you represented any other client, I would not have agreed to see you. But the man who has rid the world of Mardo Zemaille deserves any help I can give . . . though I'm not at all certain how I can help."

"I was hoping you might provide me with some background on Zemaille, particularly as regards his relationship with Mirielle Lemos."

"Ah," she said. "That."

"Mirielle herself has not been forthcoming, and the other members of the cult have gone to ground."

"They're afraid."

"Of what?"

She gave an amused hiss. "Of everything, Mister Korrogly. Mardo has addicted them to fear. And of course now that he's gone, now that he's abandoned them to the fear he instilled in them, they've fled. The temple will never thrive again." She tore a strip of green off a frond. "That was Mardo's one truth, that in the proper environment, fear can be a form of sustenance. It's a truth that underlies many religions. Mirielle understands it as well."

"Tell me about her."

The old woman fingered a spray of bamboo leaves. "She's not a bad girl . . . or at least she didn't use to be. It was Mardo who corrupted her. He corrupted everyone, he broke them and then poured his black juice into their cracks. When I first met her—that was five years ago—I took her for a typical convert. She was an agitated, moody girl when she came to the temple. All dance and no standstill, as the saying goes. I assumed Mardo would have her—he had all the pretty ones—and that then he would let her fall from grace, become an ordinary devotee. But I underestimated Mirielle. She had something, some quality, that fascinated Mardo. I originally thought that he might have met his match sexually, for I knew from some of the other members that she was—" she seemed to be searching for the right word "—rapacious. And perhaps that did have something to do with it. But of greater relevance, I believe, was that she was driven in much the same way as he. And thus she is equally untrustworthy."

"How do you mean 'driven'?"

The old woman looked down at the floor. "It's difficult to explain Mardo to anyone who never knew him, and it's entirely unnecessary to explain him to anyone who did. When you examine what he said closely, it was

all doctrinal persiflage, mumbo jumbo, a welter of half-baked ideas stirred together with high-flown empty language. But despite that, you always had the idea that he knew something, or that he was onto something, some course that would carry him to great achievement. I'm not speaking of charisma . . . not that Mardo was short in that department. What I'm trying to get at something more substantial. There was about him an air that he was being moved by forces within him that not even he fully comprehended."

"And you're saying Mirielle had this air as well."

"Yes, yes, she was driven by something. Again, I don't know if she understood its nature. But she was driven much like Mardo. He recognized this in her, and that's why he trusted her so."

"And yet it appears that he was going to kill her."

She sighed. "The reason I left the temple . . . no, let me tell you first the reasons I joined it. I fancied myself a seeker, but even at the height of my self-deception, I realized that I was merely bored. Bored and old . . . too old to find better entertainment. The temple was for me a violent dark romance whose characters were constantly changing, and I was completely taken with it. And there was always the sense that Griaule was near. That chill scaley presence . . . that awful cold power." She gave a dramatic shudder. "At any rate, two years ago I began to have a sense that things were getting serious, that the great work Mardo had talked of for so long was finally getting under way. It frightened me. And being frightened awakened me to the deceits and evils of the temple."

"Do you know what it was . . . the great work?"

She hesitated. "No."

He studied her, thinking that she was holding back something. "I have no one else to turn to in this," he said. "The cult members have gone to ground."

"They may have gone to ground, but some of them are watching even now. If I revealed secrets, they would kill me."

"I could summon you."

"You could," she said, "but I would say no more than I have. And there is also the fact that I would not make a very reliable witness. The prosecutor would ask questions about my past, and those I would not answer."

"I assume the great work had something to do with Griaule."

She shrugged. "Everything did."

"Can't you even give me a clue? Something."

"I'll tell you this much. You have to understand the nature of the cult. They did not so much worship Griaule as they elevated their fear of him to the status of worship. Mardo saw himself in a particular relationship to Griaule; he felt he was the spiritual descendent of that first wizard who long ago did battle with the dragon . . . a sort of ritual adversary,

both celebrant and enemy. That kind of duality appealed to Mardo; he considered it the height of subtlety."

Korrogly continued to press her, but she would say no more and finally he gave it up. "Did Mirielle know about the work?"

"I doubt it. Mardo's trust of her extended to the material world, but this was something else, something magical. Something serious. And that troubled me. I didn't want things to be serious, I began to be afraid. People vanished, conversations became whispered, the darkness inside the temple seemed to be spreading everywhere. Finally I couldn't bear it. I started to notice things. Perhaps I'd always noticed them, but had preferred not to see them. At any rate, I realized then how dangerous a thing had been my boredom, how low I had let it drag me. I understood that for all his drive and intensity, Mardo Zemaille was an evil man . . . evil in the blackest of definitions. He sought to master wizardly arts that have died away for lack of adherents corrupt enough to dig in the nightsoil where the roots of such power are buried."

"What things did you notice?"

"Rituals of torture . . . sacrifices."

"Human sacrifice?"

"Perhaps . . . I can't be sure. But I believe at the least that Mardo was capable of it."

"Then you think that he was going to sacrifice Mirielle."

"It's hard to credit. He doted on her. But, yes, it's possible that he would feel he had to sacrifice the thing he most cared about in order to complete the great work. She may not have known it, but I think he may have had that in mind."

Korrogly watched leaf shadows trembling on the sunlit floor; he felt tired, out of his element. What, he thought, am I doing here, talking to an old lady about evil, trying to prove that a dragon has committed murder, what am I doing?

"You mentioned trust between the two of them."

"Yes, Mardo made it plain to everyone that in the event anything happened to him, she was to lead the temple. There was something. . . ."

"What?" Korrogly asked.

"I was going to say I always suspected that there was a secret history between them, and that was another reason for Mardo's trust. It was something I felt was true . . . but it was only a feeling. Nothing admissible, nothing you could use. Anyway, I suppose he drew up documents that would grant her some kind of legal succession. He was a stickler for that sort of detail." She tilted her head to the side as if trying to make out some indefinite quality in his face. "You looked surprised. I've never known an advocate whose expressions were so readable."

Failure, he thought, even my face is failing me now.

"I had no idea the bond between them had been ratified in any way," he said.

"Perhaps it hasn't. I can't be sure. But if I'm correct and it has, you'll have no end of trouble unearthing the documents. Mardo would have never gone to an advocate. If they exist they're probably hidden in the temple somewhere."

"I see."

"What are you thinking?"

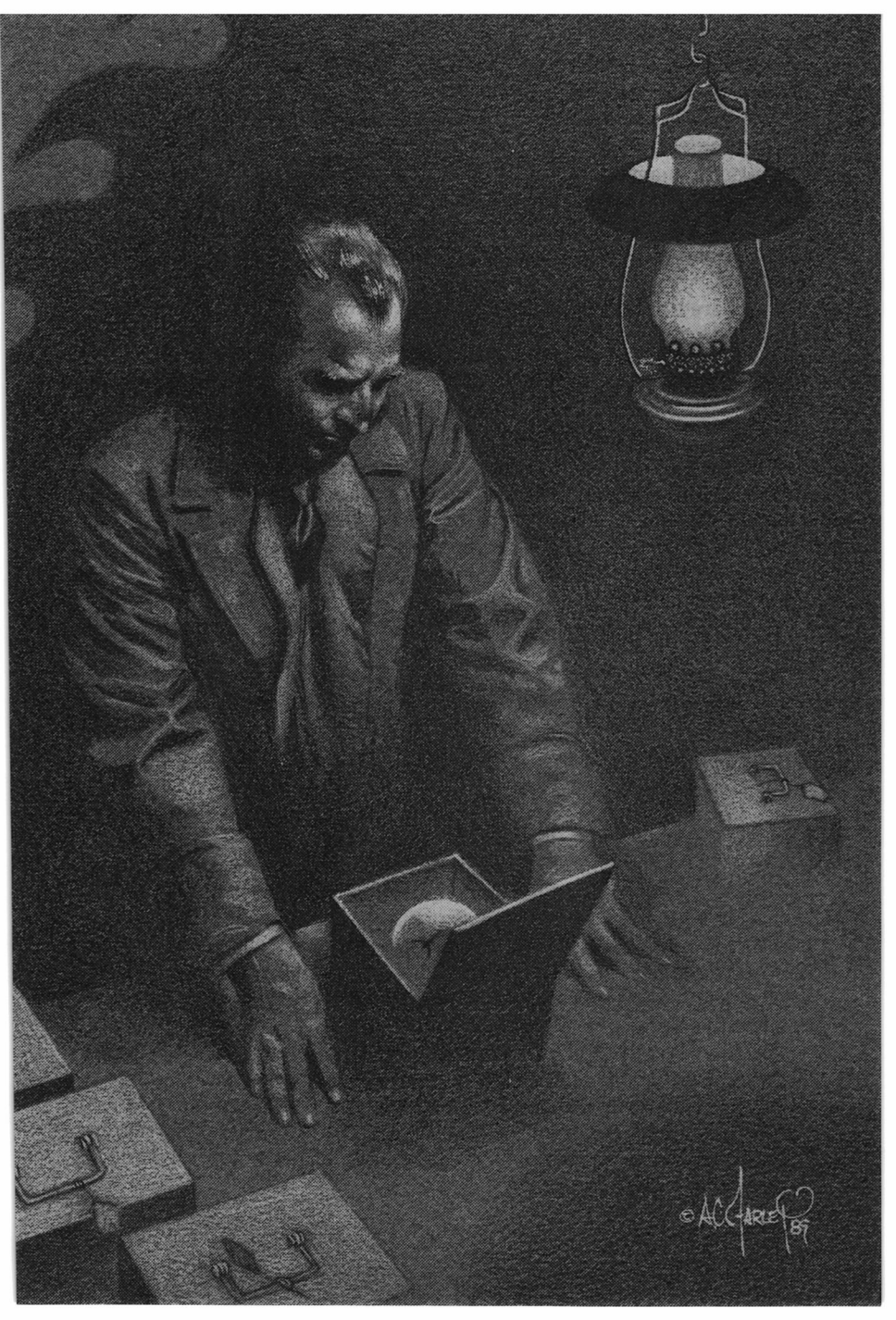
He made a noise of baffled amusement. "I thought this would be such a simple case, but everywhere I turn I come upon some new complexity."

"It *is* a simple case," she said, her wrinkled face tightening with a grim expression. "Take my word, no matter how villainous a creature you believe William Lemos to be, his act has made him an innocent."

One night shortly before the opening of the trial, Korrogly visited the constabulary headquarters to have another look at the murder weapon—the Father of Stones, as Lemos had named it. Standing alone by a table in the evidence room, looking down at the stone, which rested in the center of a nest of tissue paper within a tin box, he was as confounded by it as he had been by every other element of the case. At one moment it seemed to enclose profane fractions of encysted light, its surface clouded and occult, a milky bulge with the reek of a thousand-year-old egg trapped inside; the next, it would appear lovely, subtle, embodying the delicate essence of some numinous philosophy. And at its heart was a dark flaw that resembled a man with upflung arms. Like Griaule himself, it was a thing of infinite shadings, of a thousand possible interpretations, and Korrogly could easily believe that its point of origin was a cavity in the dragon's body. He was, however, still unable to believe Lemos's story; it, too, was flawed, and this flaw would be enough to lead the gemcutter to the gallows. There was just no good reason, at least none he, Korrogly, could discern, why Griaule would have wanted Lemos to kill Zemaille. Not even Lemos could come up with a good reason; he simply continued to insist that it was so, and mere insistence would not save him. Yet it was that same flaw, the lack of patness to the story, that kept forcing Korrogly to relent in his judgment, to be tempted to belief. What a case, he thought, when he was back in the inns of court he'd dreamed of having a case like this, and now he had it, and all it was doing was making him weary, making him wonder if he had wasted his life, if every question, even the most fundamental, was as elusive as this one, and he just hadn't noticed before.

He picked up the Father of Stones and juggled it; it was unusually heavy. Like dragon scale, like ancient thought.

Damn, he thought, damn this whole business, I should give it up and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start a religion, there must be sufficient fools out there for some of them to consider me wise and wonderful.

"Thinking about murdering someone?" said a dry voice behind him. "Your client, perhaps?"

It was the magistrate, Ian Mervale, a reedy, aristocratic-looking man in a stylishly-cut black suit; his dark hair, combed back from a noble forehead, was salted with gray, and the vagueness of his eyes, which were watery blue, set in sleepy folds, belied a quick and aggressive mentality.

"I'm more likely to go after you," said Korrogly wryly.

"Me?" Mervale affected shocked dismay. "I'm by far the least of your worries. If not your client, I'd consider an attack upon our venerable Judge Wymer. It appears he's not at all sympathetic to your defense tactics."

"I can't blame him for that," Korrogly muttered.

Mervale studied him for a moment, then shook his head and chuckled. "It's always the same every time I run up against you. I know you're being honest, you're not trying to underplay your hand. But even though I know it, as soon as the trial begins I become positively convinced that you're being duplicitous, that you've got some devastating trick up your sleeve."

"You don't trust yourself," Korrogly said. "How can you trust anyone else?"

"I suppose you're right. My greatest strength is my greatest weakness." He started to turn toward the door, hesitated and then said, "Care for a drink?"

Korrogly juggled the Father of Stones one last time; it seemed to have grown heavier yet. "I suppose a drink might help," he said.

The Blind Lady, a pub in Chancrey's Lane, was as usual crowded with law clerks and young advocators, whose body heat fogged the mirrors on the walls, whose errant darts lodged in white plaster or blackened beam, and whose uproarious babble made quiet conversation impossible. Korrogly and Mervale worked their way through the press, holding their glasses high to avoid spillage, and at last found an unoccupied table at the rear of the pub. As they seated themselves, a group of clerks standing nearby began to sing a bawdy song. Mervale winced, then lifted his glass in a toast to Korrogly.

The singers moved off toward the front of the pub; Mervale leaned back, regarding Korrogly with fond condescension, an attitude more of social habit than one relating to their adversary positions. Mervale was the son of a moneyed shipbuilder, and there was always an edge of class struggle to their conversations, an edge they blunted by pretending to have a fund of mutual respect.

"So what do you think?" Mervale asked. "Is Lemos lying . . . demented? What?"

"Demented, no. Lying. . . ?" Korrogly sipped his rum. "Every time I think I have the answer to that, I see another side to things. I wouldn't want to hazard a guess at this stage. What do you think?"

"Of course he's lying! The man had every motive in the world to kill Zemaille. His daughter, his business. My God! He could have done nothing else but kill him. But I have to admit his story's ingenious. Brilliant."

"Is it? I might have gotten him off with a couple of years if he'd pled some version of diminished capacity."

"Yes, but that's what makes it so brilliant, the fact that everyone knows that's so. They'll say to themselves, God, the man must be innocent or else he wouldn't stick to such a far-fetched tale."

"I'd hardly call it far-fetched."

"Oh, very well! Let's call it inspired then, shall we?"

Growing annoyed, Korrogly thought, you pompous piece of shit, I'm going to beat you this time.

He smiled. "As you wish."

"Ah," said Mervale, "I sense that a litigator has suddenly taken possession of your body."

Korrogly drank. "I'm not in the mood tonight, Mervale. What are you after that you think I'm willing to give away?"

Displeasure registered on Mervale's face.

"What's wrong?" Korrogly asked. "Am I spoiling your fun?"

"I don't know what's got into you," said Mervale. "Maybe you've been working too hard."

"These little ritual fishing expeditions are beginning to bore me, that's all. They always come to the same thing. Nothing. They're just your way of reminding me of my station. You drag me in here and butter me up with the old school smile and talk about parties to which I haven't been invited. I expect you believe this gives you a psychological advantage, but I think the false sense of superiority it lends you actually weakens your delivery. And you need all the strength you can muster. You're simply not that proficient a magistrate."

Mervale got stiffly to his feet, cast a scornful look down at Korrogly. "You're a joke, you know that?" he said. "A tiresome drudge without a life, with only the law for a bed partner." He tossed some coins onto the table. "Buy yourself a couple of drinks. Perhaps drunk you'll be able to entertain yourself."

Korrogly watched him move through the crowd, accepting the good wishes of the law clerks who closed around him. Now why, he thought, why did I bother doing that?

He waited until Mervale was out of sight before leaving, and then,

instead of going directly home, he walked west along Biscaya Boulevard, heading nowhere in particular, moving aimlessly through the accumulating mist, his thoughts in a despondent muddle; the dank salt air seemed redolent of his own heaviness, of the damp dark moil inside his head. Only peripherally did he notice that he had entered the Almintra quarter, and it was not until he found himself standing in front of the gemcutter's shop that he suspected he had tried to hide from himself the fact that he had intended to come this way. Or perhaps, he thought, I was moved to come here by some vast and ineluctable agency whose essence spoke to me from the Father of Stones. Though that thought had been formed in derision, it caused the hairs on the back of his neck to prickle, and he wondered, what if Lemos's story is true, could I also be vulnerable to Griaule's directives? The silence of the dead street unnerved him; the peaks of the rooftops looked like black simple mountains rising from plateaus of mist, and the few streetlamps left unbroken shone through the haze like evil luminous flowers. The shop windows were obsidian, reflective, hiding their secrets. It was still fairly early, but all the good artisans and shopkeepers were abed . . . all except the occupant of the rooms above Lemos's shop. Her light still burned. He gazed up at it, thinking now that Mervale's insulting and accurate depiction of his life might have motivated him to visit Mirielle, thereby to disprove it. He decided to leave, to return home, but remained standing in front of the shop, held in place, it seemed, by the glow of the lamp and the sodden crash of the surf from the darkness beyond. A dog began to bark nearby; from somewhere farther away came the call of voices singing, violins and horns, a melancholy tune that he felt was sounding the configuration of his own loneliness.

This is folly, he said to himself, she'll probably kick you down the stairs, she was only playing with you the last time, and why the hell would you want it anyway . . . just to be away from your thoughts for a while, no matter how temporary the cure?

That's right, that's exactly right.

"Hell!" he said to the dark, to the whole unlistening world, "hell, why not?"

The woman who opened the door, though physically the same woman who had sprawled brazenly on the sofa during their first meeting, was in all other ways quite different. Distracted; twitchy; pale to the point of seeming bloodless, her black hair loose and in disarray; clad in a white robe of some heavy coarse cloth. The dissolute hardness had emptied from her face, and she seemed to have thrown off a handful of years, to be a troubled young girl. She stared for a second as if failing to recognize him and then said, "Oh . . . you."

He was about to apologize for having come so late, to beat a retreat,

put off by her manner; but before he could frame the words, she stepped back from the door and invited him in.

"I'm glad you're here," she said, following him into the living room, which had undergone a cleaning. "I haven't been able to sleep."

She dropped onto the sofa, fumbled about on the end table, picked up a cigar, then set it down; she looked up at him expectantly.

"Well, have a seat."

He did as instructed, taking his perch again on the easy chair. "I was hoping you wouldn't mind answering a few more questions."

"Questions . . . you want . . . oh, all right. Questions." She gave a fey laugh and picked nervously at the fringe on the arm of the sofa. "Ask away."

"I've heard," he said, "that Mardo had in mind for you to take over the leadership of the temple in case of his death. Is that correct?"

She nodded, kept nodding, too forcefully for mere affirmation, as if trying to clear some painful entanglement from her head.

"Yes indeed," she said. "That's what he had in mind."

"Were there papers drawn up to this effect?"

"No . . . yes, maybe . . . I don't know. He talked about doing it, but I never saw them." She rocked back and forth on the edge of the sofa, her hands plucking at ridges of its old embroidered pattern. "It doesn't matter now."

"Why . . . why doesn't it matter?"

"There is no temple."

"What do you mean?"

"There is no temple! Simple as that. No more adherents, no more ceremonies. Just empty buildings."

"What happened?"

"I don't want to talk about it."

"But. . . ."

She jumped to her feet, paced toward the back of the room; then she spun about to face him, brushing her hair back from her cheek. "I don't want to talk about it! I don't want to talk at all . . . not about . . . not about anything important." She put a hand to her brow as if testing for a fever. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry."

"What's the matter?" he asked.

"Oh, nothing," she said. "My life's a shambles, my lover's dead, and my father goes on trial for his murder tomorrow morning. Everything's fine."

"I don't know why your father's plight should disturb you. I thought you hated him."

"He's still my father. I have feelings that hate won't dissolve. Reflex feelings, you understand. But they have their pull." She came back to

the sofa and sat down; once again she began picking at the embroidered pattern. "Look, I can't help you. I don't know anything that can help you with the trial. Not a thing. If I did I think I'd tell you . . . that's how I feel now, anyway. But there's nothing, nothing at all."

He sensed that the crack in her callous veneer ran deeper than she cared to admit, and, too, he thought that her anxiety might be due to the fact that she *did* know something helpful and was holding it back; but he decided not to push the matter.

"Very well," he said. "What would you like to talk about?"

She glanced around the room, as if searching for something that would support a conversation.

He noticed that her eye lingered on the framed sketch of the woman and baby. "Is that your mother?" he asked, pointing to it.

That appeared to unsettle her.

"Yes," she murmured, looking quickly away from the sketch.

"She's very much like you. Her name was Patricia, wasn't it?"

Mirielle nodded.

"It's a terrible thing," he said, "for a woman so lovely to be taken before her time. What happened? How did she drown?"

"Don't you know how to talk without interrogating people?" she asked angrily.

"I'm sorry," he said, wondering at the vehemence of her reaction. "I just. . . ."

"My mother's dead," she said. "Let that be enough for you."

"I was only making conversation. You choose the subject, all right?"

"All right," she said after a moment. "Let's talk about you."

"There's not much to tell."

"There never is with people, but that's all right. I won't be bored, I promise."

He began, reluctantly at first, to talk about his life, his childhood, the tiny farm in the hills above the city, with its banana grove, its corral and three cows—Rose, Alvina, and Esmeralda—and as he spoke, that old innocent life seemed to be resurrected, to be breathing just beyond the apartment walls. He told her how he used to sit on a hilltop and look down at the city and dream of owning one of the fine houses.

"And now you do," she said.

"No I don't. There's a law against it. The fine houses belong to those with status, with history on their side. There are laws against people like me, laws that keep us in our place."

"Of course," she said. "I know that."

He told her about his first interest in the law, how it had seemed in its logical construction and order to be a lever with which one could move any obstruction, but how he had discovered that there were so many

levers and obstructions, when you moved one, another would drop down to crush you, and the trick was to keep in constant motion, to be moving things constantly and dancing out of the way.

"Did you always want to be an advocate?"

He laughed. "No, my first ambition was to be the man who slew the dragon Griaule, to claim the reward offered in Teocinte, to buy my mother silver bowls and my father a new guitar."

Her expression, happy a moment before, had gone slack and distraught; he asked if she were all right.

"Don't even say his name," she said. "You don't know, you don't know. . . ."

"What don't I know?"

"Griaule . . . God! I used to feel him in the temple. Perhaps you think that's just my imagination, but I swear it's true. We all concentrated on him, we sang to him, we believed in him, we conjured him in our thoughts, and soon we could *feel* him. Cold and vast. Inhuman. This great scaley chill that owned a world."

Korrogly was struck by the similarity of phrasing with which the old woman Kirin and now Mirielle had referred to their apprehension of Griaule, and thought to make mention of it; but Mirielle continued speaking, and he let the matter drop.

"I can still feel his touch in my mind. Heavy and steeped in blackness. Each one of his thoughts a century in forming, a tonnage of hatred, of sheer enmity. He'd brush against me, and I'd be cold for hours. That's why. . . ."

"What?"

"Nothing." She was trembling violently, hugging herself.

He crossed to the sofa, sat beside her, and, after hesitating for a few seconds, draped an arm about her shoulder. Her hair had the smell of fresh oranges.

"What is it?" he asked.

"I can feel him still, I'll always feel him." She glanced up at Korrogly and then blurted out, "Come to bed with me. I know you don't like me, but it's warmth I want, not affection. Please, I won't. . . ."

"I do like you," he said.

"No, you can't, you . . . no."

"I do," he said, believing it as he spoke. "Tonight I like you, tonight you're someone it's possible to care about."

"You don't understand, you can't see how he's changed me."

"Griaule, you mean?"

"Please," she said, her arms going around his waist. "No more questions . . . not now. Please, just keep me warm."

* * *

As Korrogly began his opening statement, half his mind was back in the gemcutter's rooms with Mirielle, still embraced by her white arms, nourished by the rosy points of her breasts and her long supple legs, finding that beneath her veneer of depravity there existed a woman of virtue and sweetness, replaying in memory the joys of mastery and submission. None of this posed a distraction, but acted rather to inspire him, to urge him on to a more impassioned appeal than that he had originally contrived. Strolling alongside the jury box, stuffed with twelve pasty-faced models of good citizenship culled from an assortment of less worthy souls, he felt like a sea captain striding the deck of his ship, and the courtroom, it struck him, was essentially a cross between church and vessel, the ship of state sailing toward the coast of justice, with white walls for sails and boxy divisions of black wood holding a cargo of witnesses and jurors and the curious, and lording over all, the judge's bench, an immense teak block carved into the semblance of dragon scales, where sat the oracular figurehead of this magical ship: the Honorable Ernest Wymer, white-haired and florid, an alcoholic old beast with a cruel mouth and tufted brows and a shiny red beak, hunched in the folds of his black-winged gown, ready to pounce upon any legal mouse that should happen to stray into his field of vision. Korrogly was not afraid of Wymer; he, not the judge, was in command this day. He knew the jury's mind, knew that they wanted to believe Griaule was the guilty party, that this suited the mystical yearning of their hearts, and with all his wiles, he set about consolidating that yearning into intent. There was urgency in his voice, yet it was neither too strident nor too subdued, perfect, a blend of power and fluency; he felt that this harmony of intent and skill stemmed from his night with Mirielle. He was not in love with her, or perhaps he was . . . but love was not the salient matter. What most inspired him was to have found something unspoiled in her, in himself, and whether that was love or merely a place left untouched by the world, it was sufficient to renew his old enthusiasms.

"We are all aware," he said toward the conclusion of his statement, "that Griaule's power exists. The question remains, is he capable of reaching out from the Carbonales to touch us here in Port Chantay. That is a question we should not need ask. Look there." He pointed to the judge's bench and its carved scales. "And there." He pointed to crude representations of the dragon carved twining the lintel posts at the back of the hall. "His image is everywhere in Port Chantay, and this is emblematic of his propinquity, of the tendrils of his will that have infiltrated our lives. Perhaps he cannot move us with the facility that he does those who dwell in Teocinte, but we are not so far beyond the range of his thoughts that he does not know us. He knows us well. He sees us, he holds us in his mind, and if he requires something of us, do you really

believe he is incapable of affecting our lives in a more pronounced fashion? Griaule is, if anything, *capable*. He is an immortal, unfathomable creature who is as pervasive in our lives as the idea of God. And as with God, we do not have the wisdom to establish the limits of his capacities." Korrogly paused, letting his gaze dwell on each of their rapt faces in turn, seeing therein a measure of anxiety, understanding how to play upon it; the slants of winter sunlight made them all look wan and sickly, like terminal patients hopeful of a cure. "Griaule is here, ladies and gentlemen of the jury. He is watching this proceeding. Perhaps he is even involved in it. Search inside yourselves. Can you feel secure that his eye is not upon you? And this—" he picked up the Father of Stones from the magistrate's table "—can you be sure that this is not his eye? The magistrate will tell you that it is only a stone, but I tell you that it is much more." He held it up to their faces as he passed along the jury box and was pleased to see them shrink from it. "This is Griaule's instrument, the embodiment of his will, the vehicle by which his will has been effected here in Port Chantay, miles and miles beyond the range of his usual sphere of influence. If you doubt this, if you doubt that he could have formed it and injected it with the complex values of his wish and need, then I urge you to touch it. It brims with his cold vigor. And just as you now perceive it, so it is perceiving you."

The magistrates case was elementary. A constable testified to the authenticity of Lemos's confession; several witnesses were called to testify to the fact that they had seen him working at cutting the Father of Stones; the old drunkard related his story of Lemos throwing stones on the beach; others claimed to have seen him breaking into the temple. Korrogly limited his cross-examination to establishing the point that none of the witnesses had known the gemcutter's mind. No more was needed. The defense would rise or fall on its own merits.

Late in the day, Mirielle was called to the stand. Her testimony, while not as embittered as Korrogly had assumed it would be, was nonetheless of great benefit to Lemos; it was obvious that she was of two minds about her father, that she despised him, and that this attitude warred with the guilt that arose from testifying against him—that she should be in the least guilty implied that Lemos must have been a good parent, that her spite was doubtless a product of Zemaille's corrupting influence. It was also evident that she was not being entirely forthcoming. She denied knowledge of Zemaille's great work, and there was—Korrogly was certain—something else that she was keeping from the light. In his cross-examination he touched upon it, establishing the area of vagueness, one having to do with her reasons for entering the temple.

"I'm not quite clear on this," he said to her. "Surely you didn't enter into such a dark society on a whim?"

"It was years ago," she said. "Perhaps it was a whim, perhaps I simply wanted to escape my father."

"Yes," he said, "your father, who simply wanted to spare you the violent excesses of the temple. Truly, that was overly severe of him."

Mervale leaped to his feet. "If the defense wishes to frame his lectoral remarks in a question, I suggest he do it."

"I agree," said Judge Wymer, with a cautionary nod to Korrogly.

"Your pardon." Korrogly inclined his head in a respectful bow. "The temple," he went on musingly, "what attracted you to it? Was it Zemaille?"

"I don't know . . . yes, I think so."

"A physical attraction?"

"It was more complex than that."

"How so?"

Her face worked, she worried her lower lip. "I don't know how to answer that."

"Why not? It's a simple question."

"Nothing is simple!" she said, her voice growing shrill. "You couldn't possibly understand!"

Korrogly wondered if she might be restraining herself from speaking of her father's alleged abuse—he was not afraid of the topic, yet he did not want to break her down into tears and that seemed a likelihood. He would not have minded rage; but he did not wish to make her in any way an object of sympathy. He could, he knew, always recall her.

Questioning her, even though her adversary, he felt that a strange connection had been forged between them, as if they were partners in a plot, and it was difficult to maintain a professional distance; she looked beautiful in her lacy black dress, and standing beside the witness box, inhaling her scent of heat and oranges, he began to believe that his feelings for her did run deep, that something powerful had been dredged up from beneath the years of disappointment and failure.

The close of Mirielle's testimony was also the close of the magistrate's case, and Judge Wymer called for a recess until the morning. Lemos, as he had throughout the proceeding, sat without displaying any emotion—a gray statement of despair—and nothing Korrogly could say had a cheering effect upon him. He had been given a haircut in jail, his sandy forelock trimmed away, his ears left totally exposed, and this, along with his loss of weight and increased pallor, made him look as if he had been the victim of a prolonged and dehumanizing abuse.

"It's going well," Korrogly told him as they sat at the defense table afterward. "Before today I wasn't sure how the jury would react to our tactics, I was concerned that we didn't have sufficient detail. But now I don't know if we'll need it. They want to believe you."

Lemos grunted, traced an imperfection in the wood of the table with his forefinger.

"Still, it would help a great deal if we could present a reason that would explain why Griaule wanted Zemaille dead," Korrogly went on.

"Mirielle," Lemos said, "she didn't seem to be as distant from me today as before. I wonder, could you ask her again to visit me?"

Korrogly felt a rippling of guilt. "Yes, I'll ask her tonight."

"Tonight?" Lemos looked askance at him.

"Yes," said Korrogly, hurrying to cover the slip, "I'll make a special trip to see her. I want you to see her, I'm in favor of anything that'll wake you up. You're on trial for your life, man!"

"I know that."

"You don't much act like you do. I'll ask Mirielle to see you, but my advice is to forget about her for the time being, concentrate on the trial. Once you're free, then you can repair the relationship."

Lemos blinked, gazed out the window at the reddening western sky. "All right," he said listlessly.

Frustrated, Korrogly began packing up his papers.

"I know," Lemos said.

"What?" Korrogly asked, preoccupied.

"I know about you and Mirielle. I've always been able to tell who she was bedding. She looks at them differently."

"Don't be ridiculous! I. . . ."

"I know!" said Lemos, suddenly energized, turning a bright stare on him. "I'm not a fool!"

Korrogly, taken aback, began to wonder if Mirielle's veiled accusations of parental lust might have had substance. "Even if I were. . . ."

"I don't want you to see her like that!" Lemos gripped the edge of the table. "I want you to stop!"

"We'll talk more after you've calmed down."

"I won't have it! Ever since she's been old enough, men like you have taken advantage of her. This time. . . ."

Korrogly slammed down his satchel. "Now listen to me! Do you want to die? Because if you do, alienating your advocate's a fine first step. I promise you, if you don't stop this right now, I'll start treating your case with the same lack of concern you've shown toward it. You don't seem to care very much about living . . . or maybe that's just an act. If it is an act, I caution you to be temperate with me."

Lemos sank back into his chair, looking defeated, and Korrogly felt he had at last penetrated the man's mask. The gemcutter *did* care about his fate; his pose of unconcern was a fake, his entire story a lie. Which made Korrogly an accomplice. He could back out of the case, he thought, claiming to have stumbled upon new information; but given Judge Wy-

mer's hostility toward the defense, it might be that charges would be brought against him in any event. And he could not be sure of the matter; there was nothing sure in this case. He had become so confused by the conflicting flows of evidence that he was unable to trust his own judgments. Lemos' perverse desire for his daughter—if that, too, was not a fraud—might have enlivened him sufficiently to react to his peril.

After the guard had led Lemos back to his cell, Korrogly walked slowly through the twilight across town toward the Almintra quarter, ignoring the bustle of the evening traffic; his mind was in a turmoil, the greater part of his agitation caused not by the snarls of the case, but by the fact that he had threatened to turn against a client. It was the final tattering of his ideals, the ultimate violation of his contract with the law. How could he have done it, he thought. Was it Mirielle, her influence? No, he could not blame her—blame attached only to himself. The sole course open to him was to defend the gemcutter from this point forward to the best of his abilities, his guilt or innocence notwithstanding. And he would have to break it off with Mirielle; he could not in good faith continue to upset Lemos. It had been a long time since he had felt so at ease with a woman. But he would do it nevertheless, he told himself; he would not allow this case to become a drain down which the last of his conscience flowed.

When he reached the gemcutter's rooms, however, his resolve went glimmering. Mirielle was even more ardent than she had been the previous night; it was not until much later that Korrogly thought of Lemos again, and then it was only in passing, produced by a flicker of remorse. Mirielle was lying on her side, one leg flung across his hip, still joined to him; her breasts were small and white, glowing in the misted light from the streetlamps with the milky purity of the Father of Stones; beneath the skin, faint blue veins forked upward to vanish in the hollow of her throat. He traced their path with his tongue, making her breath come fast; he cupped her buttocks with his hands, holding her against him while his hips moved with sinuous insistence. Her nails pricked his back, the rhythm of her own movements quickened, and then she let out the last best part of her feeling in a hoarse cry.

"God!" she said. "God, you feel so good!" And without thinking of what he was saying, he told her that he loved her.

A shadow seemed to cross her face. "Don't say that."

"What's wrong?"

"Just don't say it."

"I'm afraid it's true," he said. "I don't have much choice."

"You don't know me, you don't know the things I've done."

"With Zemaille?"

"I had sex with other people, with whomever Mardo wanted me to. I

did things. . . ." She closed her eyes. "It wasn't so much what *I* did, it's that I stood by while Mardo. . . ." She broke off, buried her face in the join of his neck and shoulder. "God, I don't want to tell you any of this."

"It doesn't matter, anyway."

"It does," she said. "You can't go through what I have and come out a whole person. You may think you love me, but. . . ."

"How do you feel about me?"

"Don't expect me to say I love you."

"I'm not expecting anything more than the truth."

"Oh!" She laughed. "Is that all? If I knew the truth, things would be much easier."

"I don't understand what you mean."

"Look." She took his face in both hands. "Don't make me say anything. It's good between us, it helps. Sometimes I want to say things to you, but I'm not ready. I hope I will be someday, but if you force me to say anything now . . . I'm perverse that way. I'll just try to deny it to myself. That's what I've been taught to do with things that make me happy."

"That says enough."

"Does it? I hope so."

He kissed her mouth, touched her breasts, feeling the nipples stiffen between his spread fingers.

"There's something I'd like you to do for me, though. I want you to visit your father."

She turned away from him. "I can't."

"Because he . . . abused you?"

"What do you think?"

"I think there's some evidence you were abused by him."

"Abused," she said, enunciating the word precisely as if judging its flavor; then, after a moment, she added, "I can't talk about it, I've never been able to talk about it. I just can't bring myself to . . . to say what happened."

"Well?" he said. "Will you see him?"

"It wouldn't do any good, it wouldn't make him any happier. And that's what you're after, isn't it."

"That's one way of putting it."

"A visit would just upset him, believe me."

"I suppose I'll have to," he said. "I can't force you. I just wish I could get him more involved."

"You still think he's innocent, don't you?"

"I'm not sure . . . perhaps. I don't think you're sure, either."

She looked as if she were going to respond, but her mouth thinned and she remained silent for a long moment. Finally she said, "I'm sure."

He started to say something, and she put a finger to his lips.

"Don't talk about it any more, please."

He lay on his back, watching frail shadows of the mist coiling across the white ceiling, thinking about Lemos; he could accept nothing, believe nothing. That the gemcutter had molested his daughter seemed both apparent and unlikely, as was the case with his guilt and innocence. He did not doubt that Mirielle believed her father had abused her; but while he loved her, he was not sure of her stability, and thus her beliefs were in question. And in question also were her motives in being with him. He found it difficult to accept that she was anything but sincere in her responses; her reluctance to voice a commitment seemed clear evidence of the inner turmoil he was causing her. Still, he could not wholly reject the notion that she was using him . . . though for what reason he had no idea. He was walking across quicksand, in shadows, with inarticulate voices calling to him from every direction.

"You're worrying about something," she said. "Don't . . . it'll be all right."

"Between us?"

"Is that what you're worrying about?"

"Among other things."

"I can't promise you that you'll like what will happen," she said. "But I will try with you."

He started to ask her why she was going to try, what she had found that would make her want something with him; but he reminded himself of her caution against pushing her.

"You're still worrying," she said.

"I can't stop."

"Yes, you can." Her hand slid down across his chest, his belly, kindling a slow warmth. "That much I can promise."

Against Korrogly's objections, the case for the magistrate was reopened the following morning and Mirielle recalled to the stand. Mervale offered into evidence a sheaf of legal documents, which proved to have been signed by Mardo Zemaille and witnessed by Mirielle, and constituted a last will and testament, deeding the temple and its grounds to Mirielle in the event of the priest's death. Mervale had unearthed the papers from the city archives and produced ample evidence to substantiate that the signatures were authentic and that the papers were legal.

"How much would you say the properties mentioned in the will are worth?" Mervale asked Mirielle, who was wearing a high-collared dress of blue velvet.

"I have no idea."

"Would it be inaccurate to say that they're worth quite a large sum of money? A sizeable fortune?"

"The witness has already answered the question," said Korrogly.

"Indeed she has," said Judge Wymer, with a stern look at Mervale, who shrugged, stepped to the magistrate table and offered into evidence the tax assessor's report on the properties.

"Did your father know of this will?" Mervale asked after the exhibits had been marked.

Mirielle murmured, "Yes."

Korrogly glanced at Lemos, who appeared not to be listening.

"And how did he come to know about it?"

"I told him."

"On what occasion?"

"He came to the temple." She drew in breath sharply, let it out slowly, as if ordering herself. "He wanted me to leave the cult, he said that once Mardo tired of me he would drop me and then the family would be without a penny. The shop would be gone . . . everything." She drew in another breath. "He made me angry. I told him about the will, I said that Mardo had taken care of me far better than he had. And he said that he'd have me declared incompetent. He said he'd get an advocate and take everything Mardo left me."

"Do you know if he ever did see an advocate?"

"Yes, he did."

"And was that advocate's name Artis Colari?"

"Yes."

Mervale picked up more papers from his table. "Mister Colari is currently trying another case and cannot attend this proceeding. However, I have here a deposition wherein he states that he was approached by the defendant two weeks before the murder with the intent of having his daughter declared mentally incompetent for reasons of instability caused by her abuse of drugs." He smiled at Korrogly. "Your witness."

Korrogly requested a consultation with his client, and once they were sequestered he asked Lemos, "Did you know about the will?"

A nod. "But that wasn't why I went to see Colari. I didn't care about the money, I didn't want anything that Zemaille had touched. I was afraid for Mirielle. I wanted her out of that place, and I thought the only way I could manage that was to have her declared incompetent."

The uncharacteristic passion with which he had spoken startled Korrogly: it was the first sign of vitality that Lemos had displayed since his arrest.

"Why didn't you tell me this before?"

"I didn't think of it."

"It seems an odd thing to have forgotten."

"It wasn't so much that I forgot it. . . . Look." Lemos sat up straight, smoothing down his hair. "I realize I've given you a hard time, but

I . . . it's been . . . I can't explain what it's been like for me. I didn't think you believed my story. I'm still not sure you do. And that's just added to the despair I've been feeling. I'm sorry, I know I should have been more cooperative."

Despite his prison haircut and coverall, his unhealthy complexion, Lemos seemed the picture of eager contrition, boyish in his renewed vigor, and Korrogly did not know whether to be pleased or disgusted. Incredible, he thought, more than incredible, the man was impossible to believe, except that somehow his very implausibility seemed believable. As for Mirielle, how could she have hidden this from him? What did that signal as to their relationship? Was her hatred for her father such a powerful taint that it could abrogate all other rules? Had he misjudged her in every way?

"It doesn't look good, does it?" Lemos said.

Korrogly resisted the temptation to laugh. "We still have our witnesses, and I'm not going to let Mirielle's testimony go unchallenged."

"What are you going to do?"

"Try to overcome the effects of your despondency," said Korrogly. "Come on."

Once back in the courtroom, Korrogly took a turn around the witness box, studying Mirielle, who appeared nervous, picking at the seams of her dress, and at last he said, "Why do you hate your father?"

She looked surprised.

"It's not a difficult question," Korrogly said. "It's obvious to everyone here that you want him found guilty."

"Objection!" Mervale shrilled.

Judge Wymer said, "Limit yourself to proper questions, Mister Korrogly."

Korrogly nodded. "Why do you hate your father?"

"Because. . . ." Mirielle stared at him, pleading with her eyes. "Because. . . ."

"Is it because you consider him a restrictive parent?"

"Yes."

"Because he tried to separate you and your lover?"

"Yes."

"Because you feel he is contemptible in the stodginess and staleness of his life?"

"Yes."

"And can we assume you have other reasons yet for hating him?"

"Yes!" she cried. "Yes! What are you doing?"

"I'm establishing that you hate your father, Miss Lemos. That you hate him with sufficient passion to attempt to turn this trial into a melodrama so as to guarantee his conviction. That you've hidden evidence from the

court so that it could be produced at a particularly theatrical moment. Perhaps you've had help in this from the theatrical Mister Mervale. . . ."

"Objection!"

"Mister Korrogly!" said Judge Wymer.

". . . but whatever the case, you most certainly have been duplicitous in your testimony. . . ."

"Mister Korrogly!"

"Duplicitous in your intent, in your every action before this court!"

"Mister Korrogly! If you don't stop this immediately. . . ."

"I apologize, your honor."

"You're on thin ice, Mister Korrogly. I won't permit another such outburst."

"I can assure you, your honor, it won't happen again." He walked over to the jury box, leaned against it, hoping to ally himself thereby with the jurors, to make it seem that he was asking their questions. "Miss Lemos, you knew of the will prior to this morning . . . correct?"

"Yes."

"Did you make mention of it to the magistrate?"

"Yes."

"When did you mention it to him?"

"Yesterday afternoon."

"Why not before? Surely you must have recognized its importance."

"I . . . it slipped my mind, I guess."

"It slipped your mind," said Korrogly, injecting heavy sarcasm into his tone. "You guess." He turned to the jury, shook his head ruefully. "Is there anything else you have forgotten to mention?"

"Objection!"

"Overruled. The witness will answer."

"I . . . no."

"I hope not, for your sake," Korrogly said. "Did your father ever tell you that the reason he wanted to declare you incompetent was to remove you from the temple, to prevent you from being destroyed by Zemaille?"

"Oh, he said that, but. . . ."

"Just answer the question yes or no."

"Yes."

"This will," said Korrogly, "you knew its contents. . . . I mean you were versed in its contents, you knew its exact particulars."

"Yes, of course."

"Now the conversation during which you told your father about the will, it was, I take it, rather heated, was it not?"

"Yes."

"And so in the midst of a heated conversation, a violent argument, if you will, you had the presence of mind to inform your father of the

contents of a most complicated document. I assume you filled him in on every detail."

"Well, no, not everything."

"Oh!" Korrogly arched an eyebrow. "What exactly did you tell him?"

"I . . . I can't recall. Not exactly."

"Now let me get this straight, Miss Lemos. You remember telling him about the will, but you can't recall if you informed him of its contents. Is it possible then that you merely blurted out something to the effect that Mardo had seen to your future."

"No, I. . . ."

"Or did you say. . . ."

"He knew what it meant!" she shouted, standing up in the box. "He knew!" She stared with fierce loathing at Lemos. "He killed him for the money! But he'll never. . . ."

"Sit down, Miss Lemos!" said Judge Wymer. "Now!" Once she had obeyed, he warned her in no uncertain terms to restrain her behavior.

"So," Korrogly went on, "in the midst of an argument you blurted out some incoherent. . . ."

"Objection!"

"Sustained."

"You blurted out something, you can't recall exactly what, about the will. Is that a fair statement, Miss Lemos?"

"You're twisting my words!"

"On the contrary, Miss Lemos, I'm simply repeating what you've said. It appears that the only persons who were absolutely clear as to the contents of the will were you and Mardo Zemaille."

"No, that's. . . ."

"That wasn't a question, Miss Lemos. Merely the preamble to one. Since you are likely to benefit greatly from your father's conviction, since that will in effect prevent him from initiating a competency hearing, doesn't that color your testimony the color of greed?"

"I never wanted anything except Mardo."

"I believe everyone within earshot will second your characterization of Mardo Zemaille as a thing."

"No need to object, Mister Mervale," said Judge Wymer; then, to Korrogly: "I've given you a great deal of leeway. That leeway is now at an end. Do you understand me?"

"Yes, your honor." Korrogly crossed to the defense table, picked up some of his notes, and leafing through them, walked to the witness box and stood facing Mirielle; her face was tight with anger. "Did you believe in Mardo Zemaille, Miss Lemos?"

"I don't know what you mean."

"I mean did you believe in what he said, in his public statements, in his theological doctrines? In his work?"

"Yes."

"What was his work? His great work?"

"I don't know . . . nobody except Mardo knew."

"Yet you believed in it?"

"I believed that Mardo was inspired."

"Inspired . . . I see. Then you accepted his precepts as being the code by which you lived."

"Yes."

"Then it would be illuminating to examine some of those precepts, might it not?"

"I don't know."

"Oh, I think it would." Korrogly turned a page. "Ah, here we are." He read from his notes. " 'Do what thou wilt, that is all the law.' Did you believe that?"

"I . . . yes, I did."

"Hmmm. And this, did you believe this? 'If blood is needed for the great work, blood will be provided.' "

"I don't . . . I never knew what he meant by that."

"Really? But you accepted it, did you not, as part of his inspired doctrine?"

"I suppose."

"And this? 'No crime, no sin, no breach of the rules of what is considered ordinary human conduct, shall be considered such so long as it serves the great work.' "

She nodded. "Yes."

"And I assume that included under the label of sin would be the sin of lying?"

Her stare was hard and bright.

"Do you understand the question?"

"Yes."

"Well?"

"Yes, I suppose. But. . . . ."

"And included under the label of crime would be the crime of perjury?"

"Yes, but I no longer hold to those beliefs."

"Don't you? You've been heard recently to characterize Mardo Zemaille as a paragon."

Her mouth thinned. "Things have changed."

Korrogly knew he was invading dangerous territory, that she might make specific reference to the changes he had brought to her life, but he thought he could make his point and clear out before damage was done.

"I submit that things have not changed, Miss Lemos. I submit that the

great work, whatever its nature, will go on under your aegis. I submit that all the miscreant rules attaching to that work still hold, and that you would tell any lie, commit any. . . ."

"You bastard!" she cried. "I'll. . . ."

The courtroom was filled with babble, Mervale was objecting, Wymer pounding his gavel.

"And commit any crime," Korrogly went on, "in order to assure its continuance. I submit that the great work is your sole concern, and the truth is the farthest thing from your mind."

"You can't do this!" she shrilled. "You can't come to my. . . ."

Judge Wymer's bellow drowned her out.

"No further questions," said Korrogly, watching with mixed emotions as the bailiffs led her, still shouting, from the courtroom.

Shortly after beginning the examination of the first witness for the defense, the historian and biologist Catherine Ocoi, a striking blonde woman in her late thirties, Korrogly was summoned to the bench for a whispered conversation with Judge Wymer. The judge leaned over the bench, pointing at the various displays that Catherine had brought with her, indicating with particular emphasis the huge painting of the mountainous dragon set beside the defense table.

"I warned you not to turn this into a circus," he said.

"I scarcely think that displaying Griaule's image. . . ."

"Your opening statement was a masterpiece of intimidation," said Wymer. "I didn't censure you for it, but from now on I will not allow you to intimidate the jury. I want that painting removed."

Korrogly started to object, but then saw virtue in having it done; that it was deemed important enough to be removed only gave added weight to his thesis.

"As you wish," he said.

"Be careful, Mister Korrogly," Wymer said. "Be very careful."

As the painting was carried out, the jury's eyes followed it, and once the painting was out of sight, they expressed a visible degree of relief. That relief, Korrogly thought, might be more valuable than the oppressive presence of the painting; he would be able to play them, to remind them of Griaule, to let them swing between relief and anxiety, and so exercise all the more control.

He led Catherine Ocoi through her testimony, the story of how she had been manipulated by Graiule to live inside the dragon for ten years, the sole purpose being for her to oversee a single event of Griaule's internal economy; then he let her testify as to the marvels to be found within the dragon, the drugs she had distilled from his various secretions, the strange and in some instances miraculous parasites and plants that flour-

ished there. She had no knowledge of the Father of Stones, but the wonders to which she was able to testify left little doubt in the jury's mind that the stone could have been produced by Griaule. Her exhibits—every one of them taken from the interior of the dragon—included a glass case filled with spiders in whose webs could be seen all manner of fantastic imagery; cuttings of a most unusual plant that was capable of creating replicas of the animals who fell asleep in its coils; and most pertinently, nodes of an amber material, very like a mineral form, which she claimed was produced by the petrification of Griaule's stomach acid.

"I have no doubt," she said, "that Griaule could have produced this." She held up the Father of Stones. "And touching it now, I know it is of Griaule. I had ten years to become intimately familiar with the feeling that attaches to his every element, and this stone is his."

There was little Mervale could do to weaken her testimony: Catherine Ocoi's reputation was above reproach, her story and discoveries celebrated throughout the region. However, with the witnesses that followed, philosophers and priests, all of whom presented opinions concerning Griaule's capacity for manipulation, Mervale was not so gentle; he railed and ranted, accusing the witnesses of wild speculation and Korrogly of debasing the legal process.

"This does seem to be degenerating into something of a metaphysical debate," said Wymer after calling the advocates for consultation at the bench.

"Metaphysical?" said Korrogly. "Perhaps, but no more so than the debate that underlies any fundamental point of law. Our laws are founded upon a moral code which comes down to us through the tenets of religious faith. Is that not metaphysics? Metaphysics are rendered into law based upon a consensus moral view, the view funded by religion and commonly held in our society as to what is right and appropriate as regards the limitations that should be placed upon men in their behavior. What I'm establishing first and foremost is that there is a consensus regarding the fact of Griaule's influence. I could go out into the street and not find a single person who doesn't believe to some degree or another in Griaule. That kind of unanimity can't even be found as relates to a belief in God."

"This is ridiculous!" said Mervale.

"Secondly," Korrogly continued, "I'm establishing through expert testimony the consensus regarding the extent of Griaule's influence, the range and limitations of his will. This is simple foundation. Essential to any decision regarding the validity not only of my client's claim to innocence, but also to the validity of the precedent. If you disallow it, you disallow the plea. And since you have already allowed the plea, you'll have to allow foundation to support it."

Wymer appeared to be absorbing all this; he glanced inquiringly at Mervale, who sighed.

"All right," he said, "I'm willing in the interests of brevity to stipulate that Griaule's influence exists, that it is. . . ."

"I'm afraid the interests of brevity are not altogether congruent with those of my client," said Korrogly. "In order for precedent to be established, I wish to lay a proper foundation. I intend to make the jury aware of the history of Griaule and his various acts of influence. I think it's absolutely essential they have a complete understanding of his subtlety in order to arrive at an equitable judgment."

Wymer heaved a sigh. "Mister Mervale?"

Mervale's mouth opened and closed; then he threw up his hands and stalked back to the magistrate table.

"Carry on, Mister Korrogly," said Wymer. "But let's try to keep the floorshow to a minimum, shall we? I doubt that anything you produce here is going to outweigh the evidence of the will, and there's no point in wasting time."

It came to be late in the day, but Korrogly did not ask for a recess; he wanted Lemos to tell his story, to give the jury a night to let it sink in, before exposing him to cross-examination. He conducted Lemos through some background testimony, allowing him to get a feel for the witness stand and the jury, and then asked him to tell in his own words what had happened after he had bought the Father of Stones from Henry Sichi.

Lemos wetted his lips, gazed down at the rail of the witness box, sighed, and then, meeting the jury's eyes as he had been coached, said, "I remember I was in a great hurry to get home with the stone. I didn't know why at the time, I just knew I wanted to examine it more closely. When I reached the shop, I went to my workbench and sat with it a while. The part you see now was gripped by what appeared to be claws of corroded-looking orange material, whose color came away on my fingers; it was flaky, soft, rather like old wood or some other organic matter. As for the stone itself, I couldn't tear my eyes away from it. Its clouded surface seemed so lovely, so mysterious. I became certain that an even greater beauty was trapped within it, beauty I knew I could unlock. Usually I will not cut a stone until I have lived with it for weeks, sometimes months. But I was in a kind of trance, invested with a strange confidence that I knew this stone, that I had known it always, that its internal structures were as familiar as the patterns of my thoughts. I cleaned off the orange material, then clamped the stone in a vise, put on my goggles and began to cut it.

"With each blow of my chisel, light seemed to fracture within the stone, to spray forth in beams that penetrated my eyes, and these beams acted to strike sprays of images from my brain, as if it too were a gemstone

in process of being cut. The first image was of Griaule, not as he is now, but vital, spitting fire toward a tiny man in a wizard's robe, a lean, swarthy man with a blade of a nose. There followed another image that depicted both dragon and man immobilized as a result of that battle. Then other images came, too rapidly for me to catalogue. My mind was alive with light, and the ringing in my ears was the music of light, and I knew with every fiber of my being that I was cutting one of the great gems. I would call it the Father of Stones, I thought, because it would be the archetype of mineral beauty. But when at last I set down my chisel and considered what I'd done, I was more than a little disappointed. The stone was flashy, full of glint and sparkle, but had no depth and subtlety of color. Indeed, it appeared to have a hollow center. Except for its weight, it might have been an intricate piece of blown glass.

"I was distressed that I'd wasted money on the thing. I couldn't imagine what I'd been thinking—I should have realized it was worthless, I told myself. The shop was already in danger of going under, and I'd had no business making the purchase under any circumstance. Finally I decided to present the stone to Zemaille. He'd been harassing me to come up with something unusual for one of his rituals, and perhaps, I thought, he would allow the superficial brilliance of the stone to blind him to its worthlessness. And I also hoped I might get the chance to see Mirielle. I wrapped the stone in a velvet cloth and hurried toward the temple, but when I reached it I found the gates locked. I knocked again and again, but no one responded. I've never considered myself an intemperate man; however, being locked out after having walked all that way, it seemed a terrible affront. I paced up and down in front of the gates, stopping now and again to shout, my anger building into a towering frustration. Finally, unable to contain my rage, I set about climbing the temple walls, using the creepers that grew upon them for handholds. I pushed my way through the garden—if such noxious growths as flourish there can be called such—becoming even more angry, and when I heard chanting coming from the building that stood at a corner of the compound, I rushed toward it, so angry now that I intended to fling the stone at Zemaille's feet, to cast a scornful look at Mirielle, and then storm out, leaving them to their perversions. But once inside the building, my anger was muted by the barbarity of the scene that met my eyes. The chamber into which I'd entered was pentagonal in shape, enclosed by screens of carved ebony. The floor was carpeted in black moss and declined into a pit where lay an altar of black stone worked with representations of Griaule. It was flanked by torches held in wrought-iron stands of grotesque design. Zemaille, robed in black and silver, was standing beside the altar—a swarthy hook-nosed man with his arms lifted in supplication, chanting in company with nine hooded figures who were ranged about the altar.

Moments later, a door at the rear of the chamber opened, and Mirielle was led forth, naked except for a necklace of polished dragon scale. She was in an obvious state of intoxication, her head lolling, her eyes showing as crescents of white.

"I was so appalled at seeing my daughter in this pitiful condition that I was stunned, unable to act. It was as if the sight had ratified all the hopelessness of my life, and I think for a while I believed that this was proper, that I deserved such a fate. I watched as Mirielle was stretched out on the altar, her head tossing about, incapable—it appeared—of knowing what was happening to her. The chanting grew louder, and Zemaille, lifting his arms higher, cried, 'Father! Soon you will be free!' Then he lapsed into a tongue with which I was unfamiliar.

"It was at this point that I sensed Griaule's presence. There was no great physical symptom or striking effect . . . except perhaps an intensification of the distance I felt from what I was seeing. I was absolutely unemotional, and that seems to me most peculiar, because I have never been unemotional where Mirielle is concerned. But I was nonetheless certain of his presence, and as I stood there overlooking the altar, I knew exactly what was going on and why it had to be stopped. This knowledge was nothing so simple as an awareness of my daughter's peril, it was the knowledge of something old and violent and mystic. I can still feel the shape it made in my brain, though the particulars have fled me.

"I stepped forward and called to Zemaille. He turned his head. It was strange . . . never before had he displayed any reaction to me other than disdain, but there was tremendous fear in his face then, as if he knew that Griaule and not me was his adversary. I swear before God it was not in my mind to kill him before that moment, but as I moved toward him I knew not only that I must kill him, but that I must act that very second. I'd forgotten the stone in my hand, but then, without thinking, without even making a conscious decision to act, I hurled it at him. It was an uncanny throw. I could not have been less than fifty feet away, and the stone struck with a terrible crack dead center of his forehead. He dropped without a cry."

Lemos lowered his head for a second, his grip tightening on the rail of the witness box. "I had expected that the nine gathered around the altar would attack me, but instead they ran out into the night. Perhaps they, too, sensed Griaule's hand in all this. I was horrified by what I'd done. As I've stated, the knowledge of what was intended by the act had fled, had flown from my brain, evaporated like mist. I knew only that I had killed a man . . . a despicable man, but a man nonetheless. I went over to Zemaille, hoping that he might still be alive. The Father of Stones was lying beside him. Something about it had changed, I realized, and on picking it up I saw that the center was no longer hollow. At the heart

of the stone was the flaw that you can see there now, a flaw in the shape of a man with uplifted arms." He leaned back and sighed. "The rest you know."

Mervale's cross-examination was thorough, incisive, yet if it had not been for the will, Korrogly thought after the next day's proceedings had been concluded, he would have had an excellent chance to win an acquittal; the weight of the material evidence would not have impressed the jury any more than his witnesses and Lemos's account. But as things stood, the fact that Lemos could not put forward any reason why Griaule had wanted Zemaille dead, that seemed to Korrogly to tip the balance in favor of the magistrate. He stayed late at the courthouse, running over the details of the case in his mind, and finally, just after eleven o'clock, more frustrated than he had yet been, he packed up his papers and set out for the Almintra quarter, hoping that he could mend his fences with Mirielle; perhaps he could convince her of his good intentions, help her to understand that his responsibilities had demanded he treat her roughly.

By the time he reached the quarter, the streets were deserted and mist had sealed in the dilapidated houses from the beach, from the sky and the rest of the world, turning the streetlamps into fuzzy white blooms; the surf sounded sluggish, like slaps being delivered by an enormous hand, and the dampness of the air caused Korrogly to turn up his collar and hurry along, his footsteps scraping on the drifted sand. He caught a glimpse of his reflection in a shop window, a pale anxious man, clasping his coat shut with one hand, his brow furrowed, rushing through a glossy black medum . . . the medium of Griaule, he imagined it, the medium of guilt and innocence, of every human question. He walked faster, wanting to subsume his doubts in Mirielle's warmth. Up ahead, he made out an indistinct figure standing wreathed in mist. Just standing, but there was something ominous about its stillness. Idiot, he said to himself, and kept going. But as the figure grew more solid, his nervousness increased; it was wearing a cloak or a robe of some kind. He peered through the mist. A hooded robe. He stopped by an alley mouth, remembering Lemos' story and the nine hooded witnesses. Once again he told himself that he was being foolish, but he was unable to shake the feeling that the figure—no more than forty or fifty away—was waiting for him. He held his satchel to his chest, took a few tentative steps forward. The figure remained motionless.

There was no point, Korrogly thought, in taking chances.

He backed toward the alley mouth, keeping his eyes on the figure, then bolted down the alley; he stopped at the end of it, on the margin of the beach, and, hidden behind a pile of rotted boards, gazed back

toward the street. A moment later, the figure appeared at the alley mouth and began walking down it.

Icy cold flowed down Korrogly's spine, his testicles shriveled, his legs felt trembly and weak. Clutching his satchel, he ran through the darkness, slipping in the soft sand, stumbling, nearly falling across an overturned dory. He could see nothing, he might have been sprinting in the glossy darkness he had glimpsed within the shop window. Things came blooming suddenly out of the mist, visible in the faint glow from the windows of the houses—dead fish bones, a bucket, driftwood—and the erratic rhythm of the surf had the glutinous sound of huge laboring lungs.

He ran for several minutes, stopping for fractions of seconds to cast about for sign of pursuit, spinning about, jumping at every noise, peering into the misted blackness; at last he ran straight into what felt like a sticky thick spiderweb and fell tangled in its mesh. Panicked, he let out a strangled cry, tearing at the mesh, and it was only after he had freed himself that he discovered the web had been a fishing net hung on a wooden rack to dry. He began running again, making for the street, visible as a spectral white glow between houses. When he reached it, he found that he was less than a block from the gemcutter's shop. He sprinted toward it, fetching up against the door, gasping, bracing against it with one hand, catching his breath. Then a terrible shock, and pain lanced through his hand, drawing forth a scream; he saw to his horror that it had been pierced by a long-bladed dagger, whose handle—entwined with the image of a coiled dragon—was still quivering. Blood trickled from the wound, flowing down his wrist and forearm. Making little shrieks, he managed to pull the blade free; the accompanying surge of pain almost caused him to lose consciousness, but he managed to keep his feet, staring at the neat incision in his palm, at the blood welling forth. Then he glanced wildly along the misted street—there was no one in sight. He pounded on the door with his good hand and called to Mirielle. No answer. He pounded again, kept it up. What could be taking her so long? At last steps sounded on the stairs, and Mirielle called, "Who is it? Who's there?"

"It's me," he said, staring at his hand; the sight of the blood made him nauseated and dizzy. The wound throbbed, and he squeezed his wrist, trying to stifle the pain.

"Go away!"

"Help me!" he said. "Please, help me!"

The door swung inward.

He turned to Mirielle, suddenly weak and fading, holding up the injured hand as if it were something she could explain to him. Her face was a mask of shock; her lips were moving, but he could hear no sound.

Then, without knowing how he had gotten there, he was lying on the sand, looking at her foot. He had never seen a foot from that particular angle, and he gazed at it from the perspective of a dazed aesthetic. Then the foot was replaced by a bare knee. Milky white. The same clouded color as that of the Father of Stones. Against that white backdrop he seemed to see the various witnesses, the evidence, all the confounding materials of the case, arrayed before him like the scenes that reportedly came to the eyes of a dying man, as if it were the case and not the details of his own life that were of most significance to him. Just as he passed out he believed that he was about to understand something important.

Because of his injury, Korrogly was granted a day off from the trial, and since the following two days would be given over to a religious festival, he had nearly seventy-two hours in which to come up with some tactic or evidence that would save Lemos's life. He was not sure how to proceed, nor was he sure that he wanted to proceed. He had not been the only victim of the previous night; Kirin, the old woman he had interviewed prior to the trial, was missing, and a bloody dagger identical to the one that had pierced his hand had been found on her stoop. Apparently the members of the cult were seeking to assure Lemos's conviction by silencing everyone who could possibly help him.

He spent the first day going over his notes and was distressed to see how many avenues of investigation he had neglected; he had been so caught up with Mirielle, with all the complexities of the case, complexities that had led nowhere, he had failed to do much of what he normally would consider basic pretrial work. For example, apart from digging up character witnesses, that he had done nothing by way of researching Lemos's background; he should, he realized, have checked into the gem-cutter's marriage, the drowning of his wife, Mirielle's childhood, her friends . . . there were so many routine things that he should have done and had not, he could spend most of the next two days in merely listing them. He had intended to interview Kirin a second time, certain that the old woman had known more than she was saying; but his infatuation with Mirielle had caused him to forget that intent, and now the old woman was gone, her secrets with her.

After a day, a night, and another day, he realized that he did not have sufficient time left to carry out further investigations, that he had been derelict in his duty to the court and to Lemos, and that—barring a miracle—his client was doomed. Oh, he could file an appeal. Then there would be time to investigate everything. But with precedent having been denied by a respected judge, he would have to present overwhelming proof of innocence in order to win an appeal, and given the nature of the case, such proof would likely not be forthcoming. Realizing this, he closed his

notebooks, pushed aside his papers and sat brooding, gazing out the window of his study at Ayler Point and the twilit ocean. If he were to lean forward and crane his neck, he would be able to see the black pagoda roofs of the dragon cult standing up among palms and sea grape on the beach a few hundred yards beyond the point; but he had no desire to do so, to do anything that would remind him further of his failure. Lemos might well be guilty of the crime, but the fact remained that he had deserved a better defense than Korrogly had provided; even if he was a villain, he was not a great villain, certainly not as great a one as Mardo Zemaille had been.

It was a relatively clear night that fell over Port Chantay; the mists typical of the season failed to materialize, stars flickered between the pale masses of cloud that drove across the winded sky, and the lights of the houses picked out the toiling darkness along Ayler Point. White combers piled in toward the beach beyond the point; then, as the tide receded, they were swept sideways to break on the end of the point. Korrogly watched them, feeling there was something instructive in the process, that he was learning something by watching; but if a lesson was being taught, he did not recognize it. He began to grow restless, and he thought with frustration and longing of Mirielle. At length he decided to go to The Blind Lady and have a drink . . . or maybe several drinks; but before he could set out for the tavern there came a knock at his door and a woman's voice called to him. Thinking it was Mirielle, he hurried to the door and flung it open; but the woman who faced him was much older than the gemcutter's daughter, her head cowled in a dark shawl, the lumpiness of her body evident beneath a loose jacket and skirt. He backed away a step, reminded by her shawl of the cowled figure who had attacked him.

"I've something for you," the woman said in a voice with a thick northern accent; she held out an envelope. "From Kirin."

He recognized her then for Kirin's servant, the drab who had admitted him to the old woman's house some weeks before. Heavy-breasted and thick-waisted, with features so stuporous that they looked masklike.

She pushed the envelope at him. "Kirin said I was to give this to you if anything happened to her."

Korrogly opened the envelope; inside were two ornate keys and an unsigned note.

Mr. Korrogly,

If you are reading this, you will know that I am dead. Perhaps you will not know by whose hand, though if you don't, then you're not the astute individual I reckon you to be.

The keys open the outer gate of the temple and the door to

Mardo's private rooms in the main building. If you wish to learn the nature of the great work, go with Janice to the temple as soon as you have received this. She will be helpful to you. You dare not wait longer, for it's possible that others will know what I know. Do not involve the police; there are cult members among them. The cult has become afraid of the temple, afraid of what has happened there, and most of them have no wish to come near the place. However, the fanatics will be anxious to protect Mardo's secrets.

Once in Mardo's rooms search carefully and you will find what you need. Perhaps it will be enough to save your client.

Be thorough, but be swift.

Korrogly folded the note and looked at Janice, who, in turn, regarded him with bovine stolidity; he could not for the life of him think how she would be helpful.

"Do you have a weapon?" she asked.

Ruefully, he showed her his bandaged hand.

"When we reach the temple," she said, "I'll take the lead. But keep close behind me."

He was about to ask how this would be an advantage, when she pulled a long knife from her jacket; the sight of it made him reconsider his options. This might be a trick, a trap set by the members of the cult.

"Why are you helping me?" he asked.

She looked perplexed. "Kirin asked it of me."

"You'd put yourself in danger simply because she asked?"

She continued staring at him for a long moment; at last she said, "I've no love for dragons." She tugged at her blouse, pulling the hem up from the waistband of her skirt, then turned away from him, exposing her naked back; the smooth pale skin below her shoulder blades had been branded by an iron in the shape of a coiled dragon; the flesh surrounding it was puckered and discolored.

"Zemaille did this to you?" asked Korrogly.

"And more."

Korrogly remained unconvinced; the more fanatical of the cult members might have adopted such mutilations as a fashion.

"Are you coming?" Janice asked, and when he hesitated, she said, "You're afraid of me, aren't you?"

"I'm wary of you," he said.

"I don't care if you come or not, but make up your mind quickly. If we are to go to the temple, we need to make use of the cover of darkness."

She glanced about the room, then crossed to a table on which stood a decanter of brandy and glasses. She poured a glass and handed it to him.

"Courage," she said.

Shamed by this, he drank the brandy down; he poured a second and sipped it, considering the situation. He questioned Janice concerning her mistress, and though her answers were circumspect, he derived from them the sense of an old brave woman who had done her best to thwart the evil ambitions of Zemaille. That, too, shamed him. What kind of advocate was he, he thought, to refuse to risk himself for his client? Perhaps it was the effects of the brandy, perhaps a product of the self-loathing he felt concerning his failure to provide Lemos with an adequate defense, but for whatever reason he soon began to feel brave and resolute, to perceive that unless he did his utmost now in Lemos' defense, he would never be able to practice his profession again.

"All right," he said finally, taking his cloak from its peg. "I'm ready."

He had expected Janice to be pleased, to approve of his decision, but she only grunted and said, "Let's just hope you haven't waited too long."

The road that led to the temple was paved with enormous slabs of gray stone and continued along the coast for several miles, then turned inland toward the Carbonales Valley, where Griaule held sway; it was said that the location had been chosen because it stood in the dragon's imaginary line of sight, so that his eye would be always fixed upon the cult. At the spot where the road passed the temple it widened considerably, as if its builders had wanted to offer travelers the option of giving the place a wide berth. That option now greatly appealed to Korrogly. Standing before the gate, looking at the immense brass lock in the shape of a dragon, at the high black walls twined with vines that bore orchidaceous blooms the color of raw beef, the pagoda roofs that loomed like weird stylized mountains, he was inclined to discard any pretense he had of being a moral man and a committed officer of the court, and to hurry back to the security of his rooms. Not even the clarity of the night could diminish the temple's forbidding aspect, and each concatenation of the surf, driven in onto the shore by a blustery wind, made him jump. If he had been alone, he would have had no compunction about fleeing. Only Janice's dull regard, in which he saw a reflection of Lemos's despondent stare, kept him there; he felt outfaced by her, and though he told himself that her courage was born of ignorance and thus not courage at all, he was unable to persuade himself that this was relevant to his own lack of fortitude.

With an unsteady hand, he unlocked the gate; it swung inward with surprising ease, as if either the place or its controlling agency were eager to receive him. Following Janice, who went with her knife at the ready, he moved along a path winding among shrubs hung with overripe berries and low spreading trees with blackish-green leaves; the foliage was so dense that he was unable to see anything of the buildings other than the

rooftops. The wind did not penetrate there, and the stillness was such that every rustle he made in brushing against the bushes seemed inordinately loud; he fancied he could hear his heartbeat. Moonlight lacquered the leaves and applied lattices of shadow to the flagstones. He felt he was choking, moving deeper into an inimical hothouse atmosphere that clotted his lungs; he realized this was merely a symptom of fear, but knowing that did nothing to alleviate the symptom. He fastened his eyes on Janice's broad back and tried to clear his mind; but as they drew near the building where Zemaille's rooms were situated, he had the notion that someone was watching . . . not just an ordinary someone. Someone cold, vast, and powerful. He recalled how Kirin and Mirielle had described their apprehension of Griaule, and the thought that the dragon's eye might be turned his way panicked him. His fists clenched, his jaw tightened, he had difficulty in swallowing. The shadows appeared to be acquiring volume and substance, and he imagined that terrible creatures were materializing within their black demarcations, preparing to leap out and tear at him.

Once inside the door, which opened onto a corridor lit by eerie mosaic patterns of luminous moss, like veins of a radiant blue-green mineral wending through the teakwood walls, his fear increased. He was certain now that he could feel Griaule; with every step his impression of the dragon grew more discrete. There was an aura of timelessness, or rather that time itself was not so large and elemental as the dragon, that it was something on which Griaule had gained a perspective, something he could control. And the walls, the veins of moss . . . he had the sense that those patterns reflected the patterns of the dragon's thoughts. It was, he thought, as if he were inside Griaule, passing along some internal channel, and thinking this, he realized that it might be true, that the building, its function aligned with Griaule for so long, might well have become attuned with the dragon, might have in effect become the analogue of his body, subject to his full control. That idea produced in him an intense claustrophobia, and he had to bite back a cry. This was ridiculous, he told himself, absolutely ridiculous, he was letting his imagination run away with him. And yet he could not escape the feeling of enclosure, of being trapped beneath tons of cold flesh and bones the size of ships' keels.

When at last Janice pointed out the door to Zemaille's rooms, it was with tremendous relief that Korrogly inserted the key, eager to be out of the corridor, hoping that the rooms would provide a less oppressive environment; but although well-lit by globes of moss, the room that greeted his eye added more fuel to the fires of his imagination. Beyond an alcove was a bedchamber of a most grotesque design, the walls covered in a rich paper of crimson with a magenta stripe, and coiling around the

entire room was a relief depicting a tail and a swollen reptile body, all worked in brass, every scale cunningly wrought, resolving into a huge dragon's head with an open fanged mouth that protruded some nine feet out from the far wall, wherein lay a bed like a plush red tongue. The eyes of the dragon were lidded, with opalescent crescents showing beneath, and its claws extended from the foot of the bed; above the head, suspended from the ceiling, was a section of polished scale some four feet wide and five feet long, angled slightly downward so that whoever entered would see—as Korrogly did now—their dark reflection. He stood frozen, his eyes darting between the scale and the dragon, certain that through some mystic apparatus he was being perceived by Griaule, and he might have stood there for a good long time if Janice had not said, "Hurry! This is no place to linger!"

There was little furniture in the room—a bureau, a small chest, two chairs. Korrogly made a hasty search of the chest and bureau, finding only robes and linens. Then he turned to Janice and said, "What am I looking for?"

"Papers, I think," she said. "Kirin told me once that Mardo kept records. But I'm not sure."

Korrogly began feeling along the walls, searching for a hidden panel, while Janice stood watch at the door. Where, he thought, where would Zemaille have hidden his valuables? Then it struck him. Where else? He stared at the bed within the dragon's mouth. The idea that Mirielle had once slept there repelled him, and he was no less repelled by the prospect of exploring the dark recess behind the bed; but it appeared he had no choice. He kneeled on the bed, his trouser leg catching on one of the fangs, stalling his heart for an instant, and then he crawled back into the darkness, tossing aside pillows. The recess extended for about six feet and was walled with a smooth material that felt like stone; he ran his hands along it, hunting for a crack, a bulge, some sign of concealment. At last his fingers encountered a slight depression . . . no, five depressions, each about the size of his fingertips. He pressed against them, but achieved nothing; he tapped on the stone and it resounded hollowly.

"Have you found it?" Janice called.

"There's something here, but I can't get it open."

In a moment she came crawling up beside him, bringing with her a faint sweetish smell that seemed familiar. He showed her the depressions, and she began to push at them.

"Maybe it's a sequence," he said. "Maybe you have to push them one at a time in some order."

"I felt something," she said. "A tremor. Here . . . put your weight against the wall."

He set his shoulder to the wall, heaved and felt the stone shift; the

next second the stone gave way and he went sprawling forward. Terrified, he pushed up into a sitting position and found himself in a small round chamber whose pale walls, veined like marble, gave off a ruddy glow. At the rear of the chamber was a lacquered black box. He started to reach for it, but as he picked it up the veins in the stone began to writhe and thicken, melting up from the surface of the chamber, becoming adders with puffy sacs beneath their throats, and behind the wall, as if trapped in a reddish gel, there appeared the image of Mardo Zemaille, a dark hook-nosed man robed in black and silver, his hands arranged into tortuous mudras from which spat infant lightnings.

Korrogly screamed and pounded on the wall; he looked behind him and saw that the serpents were twining around one another, some beginning to slither toward him. Zemaille was intoning words in some guttural tongue, staring with demonic intent, and the detonations of light emerging from his fingertips were forming into balls of pale fire that spat and crackled and arrowed away in all directions. Korrogly pried at the wall, his breath coming in shrieks, expecting the adders to strike at any second, to be scorched by the balls of fire. A searing pain in his ankle, and he saw that one of the adders had sunk its fangs deep. His screams grew frantic, he lashed out his foot, shaking the adder loose, but another struck at his calf, and another. The pain was almost unendurable. He could feel the venom coursing through his veins like black ice. Half a dozen of the serpents were clinging to his legs, and his blood was flowing in rivulets from the wounds. He began to shiver, his right leg spasmed in a convulsion. His heart was huge, swelling larger yet, bloating with poison; it felt like a fist clenched about a thorn inside his chest. One of the fireballs struck his arm and clung there, eating into his arm, charring cloth and flesh. Zemaille's voice echoed, the voice of doom, as meaningless and potent as the voice of a gong. Then the wall swung outward, and he scrambled from the chamber, falling, coming to his knees, making a clumsy dive toward the bed, only to be caught up by Janice.

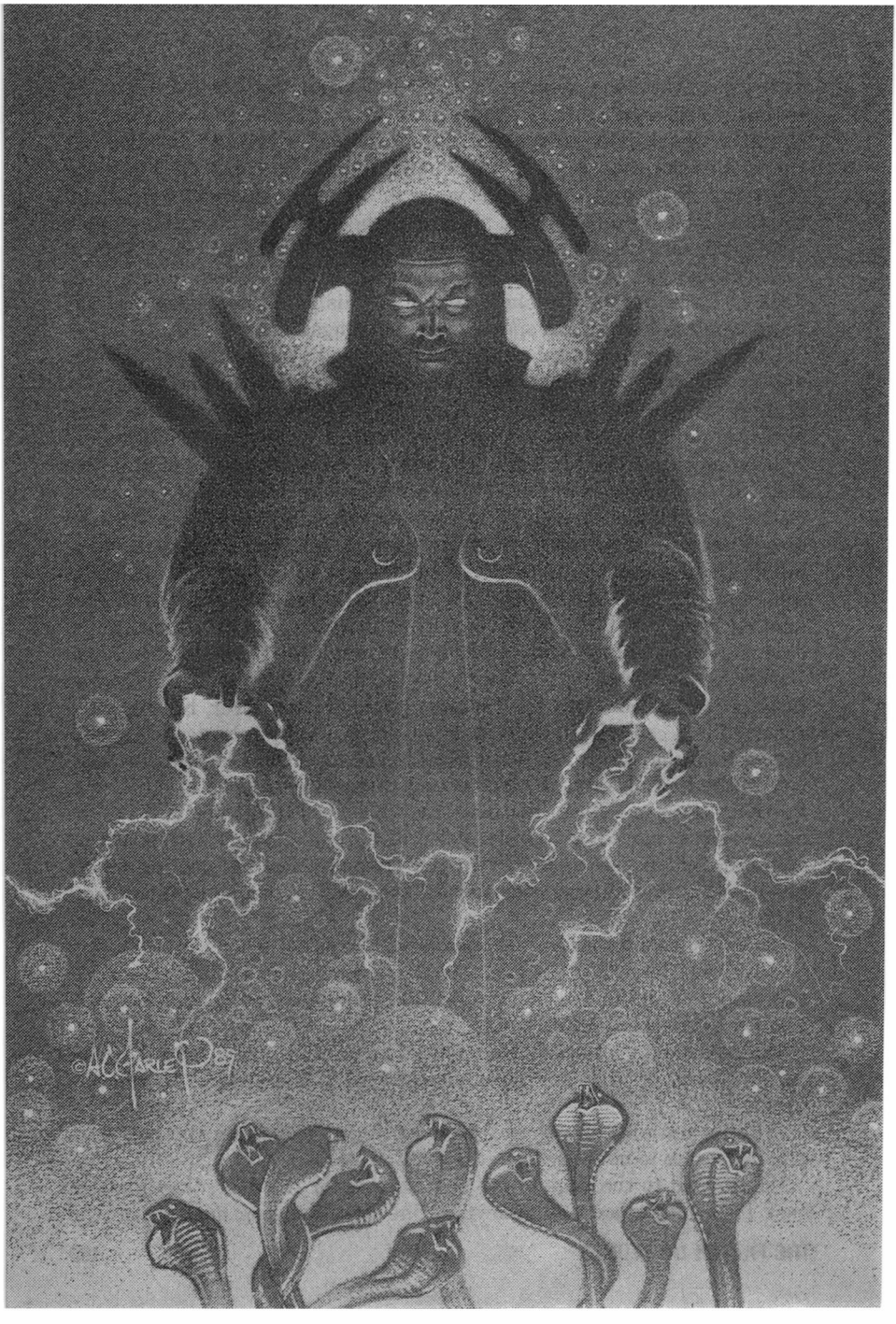
"Easy," she said. "Easy, it's only one of Mardo's illusions."

"Illusion?" Korrogly, his heart racing, turned back to the chamber; it was empty of all but the ruddy light. The pain, he realized, had receded. There were no wounds, no blood.

Janice picked up the box from where he had let it fall, held it to her ear and shook it. "Sounds like something solid. Not papers. Maybe this isn't it."

"There's nothing else there," said Korrogly, snatching the box from her, desperate to be away from there. "Come on!"

He crawled to the edge of the bed, started for the door, then glanced back to see if Janice was following. She was swinging her legs off the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side of the bed, and he was about to tell her to hurry when movement above the bed drew his eye. In the polished scale that overhung the bed he saw his own reflection . . . that and more. Deeper within the scale another figure was materializing, that of a man lying on his back, wearing the robes of a wizard. At first Korrogly thought it must be Zemaille, for the man was very like him: hook-nosed and swarthy. But then he realized that the figure was shrunken and old, incredibly old, and the eyes, half-lidded, showed no sign of white or iris or pupil, but were black and wound through by thready structures of blue-green fire. The image faded after a second, but was so striking in aspect that Korrogly continued staring at the scale, feeling that more might be forthcoming, that it had been part of a sending. Janice pulled at him, making him aware once again of their danger, and together they went sprinting along the corridor toward the door.

The wind had grown stronger, the tops of the bushes were seething and the boughs of the trees lifting as if in sluggish acclaim. After the silence within the building, the roil of wind and surf was an assault, disorienting Korrogly, and he let Janice, who seemed untroubled by all that had happened, lead him toward the gate. They had gone halfway through the toiling thickets when she came to a sudden stop and stood with her head tilted to the side.

"Someone's coming," she said.

"I don't hear anything," he said. But she hauled at him, dragging him back the way they had come, and he trusted in her direction.

"There's a rear gate," she said. "It opens out onto the bluff. If we get separated, go west along the beach and hide in the dunes."

Korrogly hustled after her, clutching the lacquered box to his chest, glancing back once to try and make out their pursuers; he could have sworn he saw dark hooded figures as he went around a bend. It took them less than a minute to reach the gate, another few seconds for Janice to unlatch it, and then they were slogging through the soft sand atop the bluff, heading away from Ayler's Point; the moonstruck waves below were flowing sideways, obeying the drag of the outgoing tide. Korrogly was relieved to have left the temple behind, and he was more confused than afraid; he thought that Janice might have been mistaken about hearing someone, that he had not really seen the hooded figures. He ran easily, feeling amazingly sound. It was as if something about the temple had occluded his faculties, diminished his strength. He soon began to outpace Janice, and when he slowed to let her catch up, she gestured for him to keep going; her face was drawn tight with fear, and seeing this, he redoubled his efforts. Just as he came to the slope that led down from the bluff onto the beach, a path of white sand winding through tall grasses, he heard an agonized cry behind him, and turning, he had a

glimpse of Janice, her shawl blown by the wind into a pennant, her dark hair loose, teetering on the edge of the bluff, clutching at her breast, at the handle of a dagger that sprouted bloody between her hands. Her eyes rolled up, she toppled over the edge and was gone.

It had happened so suddenly that Korrogly stopped running, scarcely able to believe what he had seen, but after a split-second, hearing a shout above the wind, he set out in a mad dash along the path. Three-quarters of the way down, he lost his footing and went tumbling head over heels the rest of the way. At the bottom of the slope, he groped for the box, found it, and, bright with fear, made for the dunes which rose pale as salt above the narrow strip of mucky sand. By the time he had reached the top of the dunes, he was nearly out of breath, and he stood gasping, looking out over a rumpled moonlit terrain of grasses and hillocks, the folds between them holding bays of shadow. He set out running again, stumbling, dropping to his knees in a depression, tripping over exposed roots, and finally, his stamina exhausted, he dived into a cleft beneath a little rise and covered himself as best he could with sand and loose grass.

For a while he heard nothing except the wind and the muffled crunch of the surf. Clouds began to pass across the moon, their edges catching silver fire, and he stared at them, praying that they would close and draw a curtain of darkness across the land. After about ten minutes he heard a shout, and it was followed a moment later by another shout. He could not make out any words, but the outcries had, he thought, the quality of angry desperation. He tucked his head down and made promises to God, swearing to uphold every sacred tenet, to do good works, if only he would be permitted to survive the night.

At long last the shouts ceased, but Korrogly remained where he was, afraid even to lift his head. He gazed at the clouds; the wind had lessened, and they were coasting past the moon like huge ragged blue galleons, like continents, like anything he wanted to make of their indefinite shapes. A dragon, for instance. An immense cloudy bulk with a vicious head and one globed, glaring silver eye, coiled throughout the heavens, the edges of its scales glinting like stars on its blue-dark hide, spying him out, watching over him, or else merely *watching* him, merely keeping track of its frightened pawn. He watched it take wing and fly in soaring arcs, diving and looping, making a pattern that drew him in, that trapped him like a devil within a pentagram and, eventually, hypnotized him into a dream-ridden sleep.

Dawn came gray and drizzly, with clouds that resembled heaps of dirty soap suds massing on the horizon. Korrogly's head ached as if he had been drinking all night; he was sore, filthy . . . even his eyes felt soiled. He peered about and saw only the hillocks, the winded grasses, the

heaving slate-colored ocean, gulls scything down the sky and keening. He rested his head against the sand, gathering himself for the walk back to town, and then remembered the box. It was unlocked. Zemaille, he supposed, had thought that his illusion would dissuade any intruders. He opened it cautiously on the chance that there were more tricks inside. It contained a leather-bound diary. He leafed through the pages, stopping occasionally to read a section; after going over a third of it, he knew that he could win an acquittal, yet he felt no triumph, no satisfaction, nothing. Perhaps, he thought, it was because he still was not sure that he believed in Lemos. Perhaps it was because he knew he should have unearthed the motive sooner; Kirin had given him a clue to it, one he had neglected in his confusion. Perhaps the deaths of Kirin and Janice were muting his reaction. Perhaps . . . he laughed, a sour little noise that wind blew away. There was no use in trying to understand anything now. He needed a bath, sleep, food. Then maybe things would make sense. But he doubted it.

The following morning, against Mervale's objection, Korrogly recalled Mirielle to the stand. She had on a brown dress with a modest neckline—a schoolteacher's dress—and her hair was done up primly like that of a young spinster. She had, it appeared, passed beyond mourning, and he wondered why she had not worn black; it might signal, he thought, some indecision on her part, some change of heart as related to her father. But whether or not that was so was unimportant. Looking at her, he had no emotional reaction; she seemed familiar yet distant, like someone he had known briefly years before. He knew that he could break down that distance and dredge up his feelings for her, but he was not moved to do so, for while he knew they were still strong, more than strong, he was not sure whether they would manifest as love or hate. She had used him, had confused him with her sexuality, had undermined his concentration, and nearly succeeded in killing her father, who was very likely innocent. She had told him that she could have been a good actress, and she had been unsurpassable in her counterfeit of love, so perfect in the role that he believed she had won a piece of his heart for all time. But she was a perjurer and probably worse, and he was dutybound to make her true colors known to the court, no matter what the cost.

"Good morning, Miss Lemos," he said.

She gave him a quizzical look and returned the greeting.

"Did you sleep well last night?" he asked.

"Oh, dear!" said Mervale. "Is the counsel for the defense next going to inquire about the lady's breakfast, or perhaps her dreams?"

Judge Wymer stared glumly at Korrogly.

"I was simply trying to make the witness feel comfortable," Korrogly

said. "I'm concerned for her welfare. She's had a terrible weight on her conscience."

"Mister Korrogly," said the judge in a tone of warning.

Korrogly waved his hand as if both to accede to the caution and dismiss its importance. He rested both hands on the witness box, leaning toward Mirielle, and said, "What is the great work?"

"The witness has already answered that question," said Mervale, and at the same time, Mirielle said, "I don't know what more I can tell you, I. . . ."

"The truth would be refreshing," said Korrogly. "You see, I know for a fact you haven't been candid with this court."

"If the counselor has facts to present," said Mervale, "I suggest that he present them and stop badgering the witness."

"I will," said Korrogly, addressing the bench. "In due course. But it's important to my presentation that I show exactly to what extent and to what end the facts have been covered up."

Wymer heaved a forlorn sigh. "Proceed."

"I ask you again," said Korrogly to Mirielle, "what is the great work? And I warn you, be truthful, for you will not escape prosecution for any lie you may tell from this point on."

Doubt surfaced in Mirielle's face, but she only said, "I've told you all I know."

Korrogly took a turn around the witness box and stopped facing the jury. "What was the purpose of the ceremony in progress on the night that Zemaille was killed?"

"I don't know."

"Was it part of the great work?"

"No . . . I mean I don't think so."

"For someone who was Zemaille's intimate you appear to know very little about him."

"Mardo was a secretive man."

"Was he, now? Did he ever discuss his parents with you?"

"Yes."

"So he was not secretive concerning his origins?"

"No."

"Did he ever discuss his grandparents?"

"I'm not sure. I believe he may have mentioned them once or twice."

"Other relatives . . . did he ever discuss them?"

"I can't remember."

"Did he ever make mention of a remote ancestor, a man who—like himself—was involved in the occult?"

Her face tightened. "No."

"You seem quite certain of that, yet a moment ago you claimed that you couldn't recall if he had ever talked about other relatives."

"I would have remembered something like that."

"Indeed, I believe you would." Korrogly crossed to the defense table. "Does the name Archiochus strike a chord in your memory?"

Mirielle sat motionless, her eyes widened slightly.

"Should I repeat the question?"

"No, I heard it . . . I was trying to think."

"And have you finished thinking?"

"Yes, I've heard the name."

"And who might this Archiochus be?"

"A wizard, I believe."

"A wizard of some accomplishment, was he not? One who lived some time ago . . . thousands of years?"

"I think so." Mirielle seemed to be mulling something over. "Yes, I remember now. Mardo considered him his spiritual father. He wasn't an actual relation . . . at least I don't think he was."

"And that is the extent of your knowledge concerning him?"

"It's all I can remember."

"Odd," said Korrogly, toying with the lid of his satchel. "Let's return to the ceremony on the night Zemaille was killed. Did this have anything to do with Archiochus?"

"It may have."

"But you're not sure?"

"No."

"Your father has testified that Zemaille cried out to his father at one point, saying, 'Soon you will be free!' Might he not have been referring at that moment to his spiritual father?"

"Yes." Mirielle sat up straight, adopting an earnest expression as if she wanted to be helpful. "Now that you mention it, it's possible he was trying to contact Archiochus. Mardo believed in the spirit world. He would often hold seances."

"Then you're suggesting that the ceremony in question was something on the order of a seance?"

"It could have been."

"To contact the soul of Archiochus?"

"It's possible."

"Are you certain, Miss Lemos, that you know nothing more about this Archiochus? For instance, did he have anything to do with Griaule?"

"I . . . maybe."

"Maybe," said Korrogly bemusedly. "Maybe. I believe he had quite a bit to do with Griaule. As a matter of fact, was it not the wizard Archiochus, the man with whom Zemaille felt a spiritual—if not an

actual—kinship, who thousands of years ago did battle with the dragon Griaule?"

Babble erupted from the onlookers, and Wymer gaveled them to silence.

Korrogly said to Mirielle, "Well?"

"Yes," she said, "I believe it was he. I'd forgotten."

"Of course," said Korrogly. "Your flawed memory again." He engaged the jury's eyes and smiled. "According to legend, just as Griaule lies dormant, so that same fate struck the wizard who stilled him . . . have you ever heard that?"

"Yes."

"Had Mardo?"

"I believe so."

"So then Mardo believed that this powerful wizard was yet alive?"

"Yes."

"Let's talk about the work for a moment. Not the great work, just the ordinary run-of-the-mill work. Is it true that you took part in sexual rituals with Zemaille in that same room where he died?"

The vein in her temple pulsed. "Yes."

"And these rituals involved intercourse with Zemaille?"

"Yes!"

"And others?"

Mervale stood at the magistrate's table. "Your honor, I see no point in this line."

"Nor do I," said Wymer.

"But there is a point," said Korrogly, "one I will shortly make plain."

"Very well," said Wymer impatiently. "But be succinct. The witness will answer."

"What was the question?" Mirielle asked.

"Did you participate in sex with others aside from Zemaille for ritual purposes?" said Korrogly.

"Yes."

"Why? What use did this wantonness serve?"

"Objection."

"I'll rephrase." Korrogly leaned against the defense table. "Did sex have a specific function in these rituals."

"I suppose . . . yes."

"And what was it?"

"I'm not sure."

Korrogly opened his satchel and toyed with Mardo's diary. He opened the little book. "Was it to prepare the flesh?"

Mirielle stiffened.

"Shall I repeat the question?"

"No, I. . . ."

"What does that mean, Miss Lemos . . . 'to prepare the flesh'?"

She shook her head. "Mardo knew. . . . I was never clear on it."

"Did you practice any sort of birth control prior to these rituals? Did you for instance drink some infusion of roots and herbs, or in other ways attempt to prevent yourself from becoming pregnant?"

"Yes."

"Yet on the night Zemaille died, you used no birth control."

Mirielle came to her feet. "How do you. . . ." She bit her lip and sat back down.

"I believe that night was considered by Zemaille to be the anniversary of the battle between Griaule and Archiochus, was it not?"

"I don't know."

"I will introduce evidence," said Korrogly, addressing the bench, "to show that this was indeed Zemaille's opinion." He turned again to Mirielle. "Was it your intent on that night to become pregnant?"

She sat mute.

"Answer the question, Miss Lemos," said Judge Wymer.

"Yes," she whispered.

"Why of all nights did you hope to become pregnant on that one? Was it because you were hoping for a specific sort of child?"

She stared hatefully at him.

Korrogly removed the diary from the satchel. "The name of the child whom you were to bear, was it to be Archiochus?"

Her jaw dropped, her eyes were fixed on the leather book.

"Was it not Zemaille's intent, the long focus of his great work, to achieve by some foul magic the liberation of Archiochus's soul? And for that purpose did he not need flesh that was so soiled and degraded, it would offer a natural habitat for the black mind of that evil and moribund man? Your soiled flesh, Miss Lemos. Was it not your function to provide the vile womb that would allow the soul of this loathesome wizard to be reborn in innocent flesh? And would he not, once he had come to manhood and regained his full powers, with Zemaille's aid, seek once again to destroy the dragon Griaule?"

Instead of answering, Mirielle let out a scream of such pure agony and despair that the courtroom was thrown into a stunned silence. She lowered her head, resting it on the rail of the witness box; at last she sat up straight, her face transformed into a mask of hatred.

"Yes!" she said. "Yes! And if it hadn't been for him—" she flung out a hand, pointing at Lemos "—we would have killed the damned lizard! You would have thanked us . . . all of you! You would have praised Mardo as a liberator! You would have built statues, you. . . ."

Judge Wymer cautioned her to silence, but she continued to rant; every

muscle in her face was leaping, her eyes were distended, her hands gripping the rail.

"Mardo!" she cried, turning her face to the ceiling as if seeing through it into the kingdom of the dead. "Mardo, hear me!"

At length, unable to silence her, Wymer had her taken in restraints to an interrogation room, returned Lemos to his cell, and ordered a recess. After the courtroom had been cleared, Korrogly sat at the defense table, fingering the diary, staring gloomily into the middle distance; his thoughts seemed to arc out and upward like flares, bright for a moment, but then falling into darkness.

"Well," said Mervale, coming to sit on the edge of the table. "I suppose I should offer my congratulations."

"It's not over yet."

"Oh, yes it is! They'll never convict now, and you know it."

Korrogly nodded.

"You don't seem very happy about it."

"I'm just tired."

"It'll sink in soon." Mervale said. "This is a tremendous victory for you. You've made your fortune."

"Hmm."

Mervale got to his feet and extended his hand. "No hard feelings," he said. "I realize you were overwrought the other night. I'm willing to let bygones be bygones if you are."

Korrogly took his hand and was surprised to see actual respect in Mervale's face—his surprise stemmed from the fact that he felt no respect for himself; he could not stop thinking of Mirielle, wanting her, even though he realized that everything between them had been a sham. And, too, he was dissatisfied. The case struck him as a jigsaw puzzle whose pieces fit neatly together, but whose picture made no sense.

"Want a drink?" Mervale asked.

"No," said Korrogly.

"Come on, man. Maybe there was some truth in what you said the other night, but I'm won over. You won't find me patronizing you anymore. Let me buy you a drink."

"No," said Korrogly; then he looked up at Mervale with a grin. "You can buy me several."

Korrogly's dissatisfaction did not wane with time; he remained uncertain of Lemos's innocence, and everything that happened as a result of the gemcutter's acquittal caused his dissatisfaction to grow more extreme. Mirielle was declared incompetent, and the temple and its grounds were ceded to Lemos, who promptly sold them for an enormous sum; the buildings were razed and a hotel was planned for the site. Lemos also

sold the Father of Stones at a large profit back to Henry Sichi, for it was now considered a relic of Griaule and thus of inestimable worth, and Sichi wanted it for an exhibit in the museum he had built to house such items. Lemos had invested the majority of his new wealth in indigo mills and silver mines, and had purchased a mansion out on Ayler Point; there, with the court's permission, he and a staff of nurses took charge of nursing Mirielle back to health. They were rarely seen in public, but word had it that she was doing splendidly, and that father and daughter had reconciled.

Whenever he had a spare hour, his practice having grown large and profitable following the trial, Korrogly would use the time to do the pretrial work that he neglected and continued to investigate all the circumstances surrounding Zemaille's death. In this he made no headway until almost a year and a half later, when he interviewed an ex-member of the dragon cult on the beach below the bluff where the temple had once stood. The man, a slight balding fellow whose innocuous appearance belied his dissolute past, was nervous, and Korrogly had been forced to pay him well in order to elicit his candor. He was of little help for the most part, and it was only toward the end of the interview that he provided information that substantiated Korrogly's doubts.

"We all thought it strange that Mirielle took up with Mardo," he said, "considering what happened to her mother."

"What are you talking about?" Korrogly asked.

"Her mother," said the man. "Patricia. She came to the temple one night, the night she died as a matter of fact."

"What?"

"You didn't know?"

"No, I've heard nothing about it."

"Well, I don't suppose it's public knowledge. She only came the once, and that same night she drowned."

"What happened?"

"Who can say? Word was that Mardo had her into his bed. Probably drugged her. Maybe she fought him. Mardo wouldn't have liked that."

"Are you saying he killed her?"

"Somebody did."

"Why didn't you come forward with this?"

"We were afraid."

"Of what?"

"Griaule."

"That's ludicrous."

"Is it, now? You're the man who got Lemos off, you must understand what Griaule's capable of."

"But what you're saying, it throws a different light on things. Perhaps Lemos and Mirielle plotted this whole affair to get revenge, perhaps. . . ."

"Even if they did," said the man, "it was still Griaule's idea."

Following this interview, Korrogly checked the tides on the night of Patricia Lemos' death and discovered that they had been sweeping out from the temple bluff toward Ayler Point, that had her body entered the water in the early morning, she might well—as had been the case—have washed ashore on Ayler Point. That, however, was the extent of his enlightenment. Despite exploring every avenue, he could come up with no evidence to implicate Lemos or his daughter in a plot against Zemaille. The matter continued to prey on him, to cause him bad dreams and sleepless nights; having been used, he had an overwhelming compulsion to understand the nature of that usage, to put into perspective all that had happened, so that he could know the character of his fate. He did not know whether he wanted more to believe that he had been manipulated by Griaule or by Lemos and his daughter. Some nights he thought he would prefer to cling to the notion of free will, to think that he had been the victim of human wiles, not those of some creature as inexplicable as God; other nights he hoped that he had won the case fairly and freed an innocent man. The only thing he was certain of was that he wanted clarity.

Finally, having no other course of action open, he went to the source, to Lemos's mansion on Ayler Point, and asked to see the gemcutter. A maid advised him that the master was not in, but that if he would wait, she would find out if the mistress was to home. After a brief absence she returned and ushered him onto a sunny verandah that overlooked the sea and provided a breathtaking view of the Almintra quarter. The strong sunlight applied a crust of diamantine glitter to the surface of the water, spreading it wider when the wind riffled the tops of the wavelets, and the gabled houses on the shore looked charming, quaint, their squalor hidden by distance. Mirielle, clad in a beige silk robe, was reclining on a lounge; on a small table close to her hand lay a long pipe and a number of dark pellets that Korrogly suspected to be opium. There was a clouded look to her eyes, and though she was still lovely, the marks of dissipation had eroded the fine edge of her good looks; a black curl was plastered to her sweaty cheek, and there was an unhealthy shine to her skin.

"It's wonderful to see you," she said lazily, indicating that he should take a chair beside her.

"Is it?" he said, feeling the rise of old longings, old bitternesses. God, he thought, I still love her, despite everything, she could do anything and I would love her.

"Of course." She let out a fey laugh. "I doubt you'll believe me, but I was quite fond of you."

"Fond!" He made the word into an epithet.

"I told you I couldn't love you."

"You told me you'd try."

She shrugged; her hand twitched toward the pipe. "Things didn't work out."

"Oh, I don't know about that." He gestured at the luxurious surround. "Things have worked out quite well for you."

"And for you," she said. "I've heard you've become a great success. All the ladies want you for their . . ." A giggle. "Their advocate."

A large wave broke on the shore beneath the verandah, spreading a lace of foam halfway up the beach. The sound appeared to make Mirielle sleepy; her lids fluttered down, and she gave a long sigh that caused her robe to slip partway off one pale, poppling breast.

"I tried to be honest with you," she said. "And I was. As honest as I knew how to be."

"Then why didn't you tell me about your mother and Zemaille?"

Her eyes blinked open. "What?"

"You heard me."

She sat up, pulling her robe closed, and regarded him with a mixture of confusion and displeasure.

"Why have you come here?"

"For answers. I need answers."

"Answers!" She laughed again. "You're more a fool than I thought."

Stung by that, he said, "Maybe I'm a fool, but I'm no whore."

"An advocate who thinks he's not a whore! Will wonders never cease!"

"Tell me," he demanded. "Nothing can happen to you now, your father can't be tried again. It was you, wasn't it? This was all a scheme, a plot to kill Zemaille and avenge your mother. I don't know how you pulled it off, but. . . ."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"Mirielle," he said. "I need to know. I won't hurt you, I promise. I could never hurt you. It almost killed me to have to do what I did to you in court."

She met his eyes for a long moment. "It was easy. You were easy. That's why we picked you . . . because you were so lonely, so naïve. We just kept you spinning. With love, with fear, with misdirection. And finally with drugs. Before I—or rather Janice—took you to the temple, I slipped a drug into your drink. It made you highly suggestible."

"That's what made me hallucinate?"

"You mean Mardo's hidey hole? No, that was his illusion. That was real enough. The drug only made you believe what I wanted you to—that we were in danger, being pursued. All that."

"What about the scale?"

"The scale?"

"Yes, the image of the dead wizard in the scale above Zemaille's bed. Archiochus, I guess it was."

Her brow wrinkled. "You were so frightened, you must have been seeing things."

She got to her feet, swayed, righted herself by catching hold of the verandah railing. He thought he saw a softening in her face, the trace of a longing equal to his own, and he also thought he saw her madness, her instability. She would have had to be insane to do what she had, to be in love and not in love at the same time, to inhabit those roles fully, to lie and deceive with such compulsive thoroughness.

"If we'd presented our evidence in a straightforward way," she said. "Daddy still might have been convicted. We needed to orchestrate the trial, to manipulate the jury. So we chose you to be the conductor. And you were wonderful! You believed everything we handed you." She turned, let her robe drop to expose her perfect back and said in a northern accent, "I've no great love for dragons."

It was Janice's voice.

He gazed at her, uncomprehending. "But she fell," he said. "I saw it."

"A net," she said. "Rigged just below the bluff."

This she said in a fluting voice, the voice of the old woman, Kirin.

"My God!" he said.

"A little make-up can do miracles," she said. "And I've always been good at doing voices. We planned for years and years."

"I still don't understand. There were so many variables. How could you control them all? The nine witnesses, for example. How could you know they would run?"

She gave him a pitying look.

"Oh," he said. "Right. There were no witnesses."

"Only Mardo and I. And of course Daddy didn't throw the stone. We couldn't take a chance on him missing. We overpowered Mardo, and then he smashed in his skull with it. Then I took drugs to make it look as if I'd been laid out on the altar. The cult had already disbanded, you see. They were all afraid of the great work. The cult was already in process of breaking up when I joined. That was the heart of the plan. Isolating Mardo. I spent hours encouraging him in the great work; I knew the others would abandon him if they thought he actually might complete it. They were more afraid of Griaule than of him."

"Then that part of it was the truth?"

She nodded. "Mardo was obsessed with killing Griaule. He was mad!"

"What about the knife, the hooded figure?"

She bowed. "I didn't intend to injure your hand, merely to frighten you. I was so worried because I'd hurt you. I had to run around to the

rear of the shop and climb the back stairs in order to make you think I'd been in the rooms, and I almost decided to forget about the plan, just to run to you and take care of you. I'm sorry, I'm so sorry."

"You're sorry! God!"

"You haven't got anything to complain about! Your life's better than it's ever been. And like you said, Mardo's death was no great loss to anyone. He was evil."

"I don't even know what that word means anymore."

Looking back, he could see now the clues he should have seen long before, the similarities in nervous gesture between her and Kirin, her overwrought reaction when he had tried to talk about her mother, all the little inconsistencies, the too-pat connections. What an idiot he had been!

"Poor Adam." She walked over to him, stroked his hair. "You expect the world to be so simple, and it is . . . just not in the way you want it to be."

Her smell of heated oranges aroused him, and he pulled her onto his lap, both angry and lustful. With half his mind he tried to reject her, because to want her would ratify all the duplicity in which he had played a part and further weaken his fraying moral fiber; but the stronger half needed her, and he kissed her mouth, tasting the smoky sweetness of the opium. His lips moved along the curve of her neck to the slopes of her breasts. She responded sluggishly at first, then with abandon, whispering, "I've missed you so much, I love you, I really do," and it seemed she was as she once had been, open and giving and soft. It startled him to see this, to realize that the vulnerability underlying her dissipation was no act, for he had come to doubt everything about her. He kissed her mouth again, and he might have taken her then and there, but a man's voice interrupted them, saying, "I wish you'd be more discreet, darling."

Korrogly jumped up, dumping Mirielle onto the floor.

Lemos was standing in the doorway, a smile touching the corners of his lips. He looked prosperous, content, a far cry from the gray failure whom Korrogly had defended. His clothes were expensive, rings adorned his hands, and there was about him such an air of health and well-being, it seemed an obscenity, like the ruddy complexion of a sated vampire. Mirielle scrambled up and went to him; he draped an arm about her shoulders.

"I'm surprised to find you here, Mister Korrogly," said Lemos. "But I don't suppose I should be. My daughter is alluring, is she not?"

"I told him, Daddy," Mirielle said in a sugary, babyish voice. "About Mardo."

"Did you now?"

To his horror, Korrogly saw that Lemos was fondling his daughter's breast beneath the beige silk; she arched her back to meet the pressure of his hand, but he thought he detected tension in her expression.

Lemos, apparently registering Korrogly's revulsion, said, "But you didn't tell him everything, did you?"

"Not about mama. He thinks. . . ."

"I can imagine what he thinks."

Lemos's smile was unwavering, but behind it, in those gray eyes, was something cold and implacable that made Korrogly afraid.

"You look disturbed," Lemos said. "Surely a man of your experience can imagine how love might spring up between a man and his daughter. It's frowned upon, true. But society's condemnation of such a relationship need not diminish it. In our case, it only made us desperate."

The final pieces were beginning to fall into place for Korrogly. "It wasn't Zemaille who killed your wife, it was you."

Lemos made an amused noise. "You'd play hell proving it. But let's say for the sake of argument that you're right. Let's say that in order to . . . to enjoy one another fully, Mirielle and I needed privacy, something that Patricia prevented us from having. What better villain to use as our foil than Mardo Zemaille? The temple was at that time always open to the curious. It would have been easy for someone, someone like myself, to convince Patricia that it might be fun to pay the place a visit one night."

"You killed her . . . you were going to blame it on Zemaille?"

"Her death was ruled an accident," Lemos said. "There was no need to blame anyone."

"And then you saw your opportunity with Zemaille."

"Mardo was a weak man with power. Such men are easy to maneuver. It took some time, but the result was inevitable."

Lemos's hand slid lower to caress Mirielle's belly. Despite her acquiescence, Korrogly sensed that she was less lover than slave, that her enjoyment was due to coercion, to confusion; a slack, sick look had come to her face, one that had not been evident when he had been touching her.

"I don't believe I've ever properly expressed my gratitude to you," Lemos continued. "Without you, I might still be back in Almintra. I'm forever in your debt."

Korrogly just stared at them, uncertain of what to do.

"Perhaps you're wondering why I'm being so open," Lemos said. "It's really no mystery. You're a dogged man, Mister Korrogly. I have a lot of respect for you. Once you got the scent, and I've been aware that you've had the scent for some time, I knew you'd keep at it until you learned all there was to learn. I knew we'd play this scene sooner or later. I could

have had you killed, but as I've said, I'm grateful to you, and I prefer to let you live. It's unlikely you can harm me in any event. But you can consider this a warning. I'm watching you. If you ever get it in mind to try and harm me, it'll be one of your last thoughts. And if you should doubt that, then I want you to think back to what you've heard today, to realize what I'm capable of, what I was able to do when I had no power, and to imagine what I might do now that I am powerful. Do you understand?"

Korrogly said, "Yes, I do."

"Well." Lemos disengaged from Mirielle, who tottered back to her lounge. "Then there's nothing else to do except to bid you good day. Perhaps you'll visit us again. For dinner, perhaps. Of course you're always welcome to visit Mirielle. She does like you, she really does, and I've learned not to be jealous. I would hate to deny her whatever joy she might find with you. I'm afraid the things I've asked her to do have damaged her, and maybe you can help her overcome all that." He put his hand on Korrogly's back and began steering him through the house and toward the front door. "Pleasure's a rare commodity. I don't begrudge any man his share. That's something that being wealthy has given me to understand about life. Yet another reason to be grateful to you. So—" he opened the front door "—when I say to you that what's mine is yours, I mean it in the most profound and intimate sense. Do take advantage of our hospitality. Anytime."

And with that, he waved and shut the door, leaving Korrogly blinking in the bright sunlight, feeling as if he had been marooned on a stone island in an uncharted sea.

Toward twilight, after walking and thinking for the remainder of the day, Korrogly ended up in Henry Sichi's museum, standing in front of the glass case in which the Father of Stones was displayed. Lemos had been right—there was nothing he could do to achieve justice, and he would have to accept the fact that he had been used by someone who if anything was more monstrous than Griaule. His best course, he decided, would be to leave Port Chantay and to leave soon, for while Lemos might have meant all he had said, he might well change his mind and begin to consider Korrogly a threat. But the danger he was in, that was not the thing that rankled him; he was still enough of a moral soul—a fool, Lemos would say—to want a judgment upon Lemos, and that there would be none left him full of gloom and self-destructive impulse, regarding the shattered fragments of his wished-for orderly universe.

He gazed down at the Father of Stones. It sat winking in its nest of blue velvet, a clouded lump of mystery giving back prismatic refractions of the light, the peculiar man-shaped darkness at its heart appearing to

shift and writhe as if it truly were the soul of an imprisoned wizard. Korrogly focused on that darkness, and suddenly it was all around him, like a little pocket of night into which he had fallen, and he was looking at a man lying on the ground, an old, old man with sunken cheeks and a hooked nose and dressed in wizard's robes, with black eyes threaded by veins of blue-green fire. The vision lasted only a few seconds, but before it faded, he became aware of the propinquity of that same cold, powerful mind that he had sensed back in the temple, and when he found himself once again standing in front of the glass case, looking down at the Father of Stones, he felt not afraid, not shocked, but delighted. It *had* been Griaule after all, he realized; the vision could mean only that Zemaille had been a serious threat, one that Griaule had been forced to eliminate. And he, Korrogly, had actually seen the moribund wizard that night in the temple; it had been no hallucination. The dragon had even then been trying to illuminate him. He laughed and slapped his thigh. Oh, Lemos had worked his plan, but as the ex-member of the cult had said, it had still been Griaule's idea, he had inspired Lemos to act . . . and he had done it through the agency of this shard of milky stone.

Korrogly's delight stemmed not from his realization that in a way Lemos had been innocent—innocence was not a word he could apply to the gemcutter—but from a new comprehension of the intricate subtlety with which Griaule had acted; it spoke to him, it commanded him, it instructed him in a kind of law that he had neglected throughout his entire life. The law of self-determination. It was the only kind, he saw, that could produce justice. If he wanted justice, *he* would have to effect it, not the system, not the courts, and that was something he was well-equipped to do. He was amazed that he had not come to this conclusion before, but then he supposed that until this moment he had been too confused, too involved with the complexities of the case, to think of taking direct action. And perhaps he had not been ready to act, perhaps his motivation had been insufficient.

Well, he was motivated now.

Mirielle.

It might be that she was unsalvageable, that she had gone too far into perversity ever to emerge from it; but for a moment in his arms she had again been the woman he had loved. It had not been fraudulent. The least he could do was to deliver her from the man who had dominated her and seduced her into iniquity. That he would be also serving justice only made the act sweeter.

He strolled out of the museum and stood on the steps gazing over the shadowed lavender water toward Ayler Point. He knew exactly how he would proceed. Lemos himself had given him the key to successful action in his words concerning Zemaille.

"Mardo was a weak man with power," he had said. "Such men are easy to maneuver."

And of course Lemos was no different.

He was rife with weaknesses. His investments, Mirielle, his crimes, his false sense of control. That last, that was his greatest weakness. He was enamored of his own power, he believed his judgments to be infallible and he would never believe that Korrogly could be other than as he perceived him; he would think that the advocate would either do nothing or seek redress through the courts; he would not suspect that Korrogly might move against him in the way that he had moved against Zemaille. Zemaille had probably thought the same of him.

Korrogly smiled, understanding how marvelously complex was this chain of consecutive illuminations, of one man after another being induced to take decisive action. He stepped briskly down the steps and out onto Biscaya Boulevard, heading for The Blind Lady and a glass of beer, for a bout of peaceful contemplation, of deciding his future and Lemos's fate. By the time he had walked a block he had already come up with the beginnings of a plan.

But then he was brought up short by a disturbing thought.

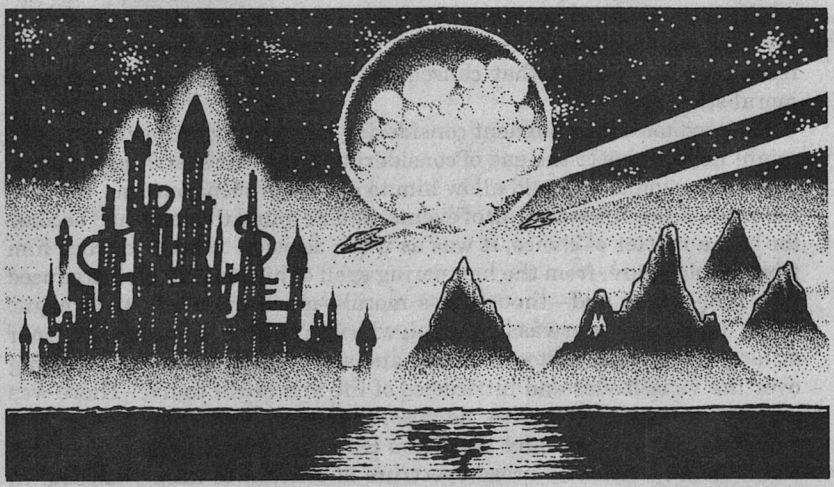
What if he was obeying Griaule's will in all this, what if the Father of Stones had had an effect upon him? What if instead of taking his destiny in hand, he was merely obeying Griaule's wishes, serving as an element in some dire scheme? What if he was by dismissing ordinary means and moral tactics taking a chance on becoming a monster like Lemos, one who would in the end be cut down by yet another of Griaule's pawns? There was no way of telling. His sudden determination to act might be laid to a long inner process of deliberation, it might be the result of years of failed idealism; the resolution of the Lemos case could have been the weight that caused the final caving-in of his unsound moral structure.

He stood for a long moment considering these things, knowing that he might never come to the end of considering them, but searching for some rationalization that would allow him to put aside such concerns, to cease his analysis and questioning of events, and he found that this had become for him a matter of choice; it was as if the decision to act had freed him from an old snare, from the hampering spell of his ideals, and introduced him into a new and—though less moral—much more effective magic. What did he care who was in control, who was pulling the strings? Sooner or later a man had to stop thinking and start being, to leave off fretting over the vicissitudes and intricacies of life and begin to live. There was no certainty, no secure path, no absolutely moral one. You did the best you could for yourself and those you cared about, and hoped that this would be a sufficiently broad spectrum of concern to keep your soul in

healthy condition. If not . . . well, there was no use in fretting over the prospect. Why trouble yourself with guilt in a world in which everyone was guilty?

He set off walking again, walking with a firm step and a smile for everyone who passed him by, bowing politely to an old woman sweeping off her stoop, stopping once to pat a young boy on the head, all the while giving thought to his campaign against Lemos, picturing the gemcutter in various states of ruinous defeat, imagining Mirielle in his arms, letting his mind roam freely through the realms of possibility, posing himself in judge's robes, dispensing the dispassionate rule of the law, fair yet inflexible, full of imponderable wisdoms, and he saw himself as well on the sunny verandah of a mansion on Ayler Point, on a white yacht, in a glittering ballroom, in every manner of luxurious environment, with loyal friends and beautiful lovers and enemies whose secrets he had mastered. Life, which for so long had seemed distant, a treasure beyond his grasp, now seemed to embrace him, to close around him and make him dizzy with its rich scents and sights. What did it matter, he said to himself, who ran the world, it tasted no less sweet, it gave no less pleasure. He laughed out loud, he winked at a pretty girl, he plotted violence and duplicity, all things that brought him joy.

One way or another, the dragon was loose in Port Chantay. ●



Empire Strikes Back. The Imperial forces have discovered the Rebel base on Hoth and have landed—in force. The elephant-like Walkers and two-legged At-Sts march toward the Shield Generator, blasting Rebel positions while Snowspeeders try to harpoon the Walkers around their legs to bring them tumbling down.

Escape from Hoth comes with stand-up pieces displaying the battle contingents, and the game is played on a roomy board depicting the icy wastes of Hoth.

But the key to the game, to its brilliance and ease of play, is the Action and Event cards. Instead of taking a chunky rule book and filling it with detailed instructions for who moves when, and how far, designer Paul Murphy has built the rules into the card decks.

To win, the Rebel player has to hold out until five "Transport Away!" cards are drawn. The Imperial player has to destroy the Shield Generator before that happens. A turn couldn't be simpler. After the Rebel and Imperial players have arrayed their forces, an Action card is drawn. This tells which player can move or fire what unit. For example, the Walkers may be able to move. Or the Rebel Troopers might be able to fire. The card tells how many movement points the piece has, or the firepower. All the information is right there, in front of you.

Two Action cards signal that an Event Card is to be drawn. This can lead to reinforcements for either side or the crucial launch of a Rebel Transport. Combat rules are easy, simplified by clear charts that are right on the gameboard. The system uses eight special dice, each die containing two Darth Vader sides, two Lightsaber sides, and four blank sides. If a Walker (fire power 6) shoots at a Rebel Trooper (Armor 2) one megahex away, the Imperial baddie has to roll 6 dice (for the firepower) minus 1 (for the one hex range). If the roll shows two Darth Vader heads (equal to the armor value) a hit has occurred. If a hit is made, a unit is destroyed or, in the case of Snowspeeders and Walkers, damaged. The Rebel player follows the same procedure, hoping to roll sufficient lightsabers for a hit.

Of course, there is a rule covering "the force." The Rebel player secretly assigns Luke Skywalker to one of the Snowspeeders, and Luke has ten force points to use to improve his firing power or armor.

All the charts are on the board, keeping track of damaged vehicles, Luke's force, and the firepower and armor of each kind of unit.

Hoth recalls one of the classic SF boardgames is Steve Jackson's game about a futuristic supertank, *Ogre*. There's something special about moving pieces on a board in an imaginative game. And *Escape from Hoth* is in that great tradition, a riveting, easy-to-play adventure game. ●

ON BOOKS

by Baird Searles

Deicide

The Tides of God
By Ted Reynolds
Ace, $3.50 (paper)

There have been so many theories about the fall of the Roman Empire and the advent of the Dark Ages—social, economic, physical (plagues)—that it seems that no one of them (or combination, for that matter) is considered definitive. Which makes you wonder if *any* are valid. Try this one. A passing celestial object (perhaps an entity, perhaps a machine) broadcasts a sort of telepathic coercion which undermines human rationality. Telepathically, and with other powers, it substitutes superstition, religion, mysticism, and the worship of irrational concepts. It indeed seems to be all-powerful, as close to the usual concept of God as to make no difference whether it *is* or not. This *thing* stays in the vicinity from the fourth to the fourteenth centuries A.D., then goes away.

Humanity struggles back to rational behavior, but the thing makes another pass, coming within range in the later part of the twentieth century.

After another protracted dark age ruled by religion, mysticism, and superstition, the object moves on and humanity enters another Age of Reason. In the thirty-third century, mankind is contacted by a space-going race which spills the beans on the causes behind the periodic decline of logical thought. This other race, the Krocerians, offers to unite with the Earth in destroying their common enemy; specifically, it will give humans its most advanced space-going vessel, weapons intact, if humans will man the punitive expedition of destruction. This is immediately imperative because the thing—"God"—is coming back this way.

Ted Reynolds' *The Tides of God* is the story of that expedition.

We are used to science fiction being *implicitly* rationalist and, by extension, antireligious. But there is little in the literature that is *explicitly* so, though of course Arthur Clarke's small classic, "The Star," leaps readily to mind.

So Reynolds' novel becomes something of a suspense story. Simply based on the conventions that we're used to, the question of whether this thing—God?—will indeed turn out to be the source of Earth's religions (and troubles) supersedes even the suspense of whether the expedition will suc-

cessfully be able to commit deicide. In the broad sense, which side will the author turn out to be on? Can this indeed be a broadside against all religious thinking, the philosophical basis of which is that pure reason is not only possible to mankind, but its salvation?

Don't let me make this sound like a philosophical tract. It's a science fiction novel and a good one, with the details of the expedition and its alien vessel very neatly observed through the eyes of half-a-dozen or so major characters. Part of the problem which Reynolds has set for himself, of course, is the creation of a perfectly rational, non-religious society (in which *any*thing that smacks of religion is an obscenity). Again, we have a science-fictional convention (more often than not purveyed in mainstream attempts at SF) of the rational society being "soulless," inhuman, and lacking in basic needs for the human race. One observes Reynolds' created society closely—*is* it workable? Are there any of the little signals we're used to that indicate that it's flawed and will turn out to be lacking? Is this a place we'd want to live?

You're not going to find the answers here, or the revelation as to whether the expedition's prey is God or not. As noted above, that's part of the novel's suspense, at least so far as I see it, and I'd no more spoil the fun than I would by revealing that the butler did it in other circumstances.

That's one reason. The other is that if I tackled the full ramifications of *The Tides of God*, we'd be here all day. It's not one of those sophomoric God-is-dead arguments, or a paranoid gods-from-space tract. It's a novel that raises legitimate questions. Some of these are indeed philosophical, though I doubt if it will change anyone's opinions *re* religion or rationalism (though one can see it causing heated and perhaps violent discussions in the more vociferous fringe of SF readership). More importantly, though, and more subtly, by its very assumptions it does call our attention to how conventional the approach to these matters has been in science fiction, and how startling it is when someone really takes on a BIG what-if.

Ace In the Hole

Who's Afraid of Beowulf?

By Tom Holt

St. Martin's Press, $15.95

Tom Holt's first fantasy, *Expecting Someone Taller*, which brought the characters of the *Nibelunglied* head to head with the modern world, was such a winner that there was no way that one could pass up his latest, *Who's Afraid of Beowulf?*. It's good to report that this one, which brings a boatload of heroes and wizards from the age of the Viking sagas into equally hilarious contention with modernity, is just as gaga.

Hildy Frederiksen, a young archaeologist, goes to investigate the possible discovery of a Viking burial mound in the boonies of Scot-

land. She gets more than she bargains for when the mound turns out to contain an entire Viking ship, treasure, and a boatload of Vikings who are suddenly alive, alive-o. It seems that young King Hrolf Earthstar, his wizard, and his men (all heroes) have been in an enchanted sleep. Unlike Arthur or Barbarossa, they are not scheduled to waken for just any unspecified menace; the alarm clock is the re-emergence to power of the sorcerer-king that they had been fighting twelve hundred years ago.

As it happens, the immortal sorcerer-king is now a very big corporate power in London (with his powers intact, which is how he got there). So Hildy finds herself with a band of magical Vikings careering around Britain ("If anybody asks, you're the chorus of the Scottish National Opera, off to a rehearsal of *Tannhauser*"), desperately trying to feed and clothe them and finance a Viking raid on a corporate black tower (a direct copy of the sorcerer-king's stronghold of the past) in London.

All the Vikings are eminently civilized—they worry about what editors have done to their sagas over the years and are unfazed by technology, considering it just another aspect of the magic that they take for granted. (The deadpan correlation of magic and technology is a running joke throughout.) Nevertheless, they do tend to bash things about, and at one point stand off a good part of Britain's armed forces in a rousing siege. Matters aren't helped any by the presence of two chthonic spirits, who more or less got caught up in the enchantment; they have been spending twelve centuries playing Goblin's Teeth, a combination of chess, snakes and ladders, and Monopoly ("I'll have another longhouse on Uppsala."). The spirits are used to power various magic objects because they eat energy, and modern times are a movable feast for them; they regard nuclear power as *nouvelle cuisine*. ("It beats thermal energy into a cocked hat.")

As you can see, Mr. Holt brings new meaning to the phrase "creative anachronism." There are wonderful touches throughout, such as the hero, Arvarodd, who is trying to live down the somewhat spurious saga of his adventures in Permia and the hero Angantyr and his recipe for cream of seagull soup. There's also a great joke *re* dogs on escalators. Things come to a curiously touching conclusion for Hildy and Hrolf ("You're an amalgamation of several pseudo-historical early dynasties, conflated by oral tradition . . ." "That's the nicest thing anyone's ever said about me.") and are tied up neatly by a postcard from Valhalla. Well done, Mr. Holt!

Fantasy Maxima

The Book of Fantasy
Edited by Jorge Luis Borges, Silvina Ocampo, & A. Bioy Casares
Viking, $19.95

To most of the readers of this magazine, fantasy means that wide

range of fiction from Merritt through Leiber through Tolkien through—who's a prime writer of fantasy today?—well, you fill it in. The impossible elements are not scientifically rationalized, so it's not SF, nor are they primarily meant to terrify, so it's not supernatural horror. Major ingredients of almost all genre fantasy are elves, dragons, and magicians (or equivalents); overlapping subgenres contained in it are called variously sword and sorcery and high fantasy. There *are* the odd exceptions such as Grimwood's *Replay*, Hughart's *Bridge of Birds*, and Holdstock's *Mythago Wood* (all recent World Fantasy Award winners, curiously enough), but even they stay within certain bounds, the definition of which would take an academic thesis beyond the space allowed in this column.

However, other segments of the reading public have a different view of what comprises "fantasy." In the broadest definition, fantasy means "unreality." Therefore, any fiction that is allegorical, surreal, satirical, hallucinatory, and so on, is defined as fantasy. The literary upper ends of this broader category get a lot of respect from mainstream critics (for instance, Italo Calvino, Jose Luis Borges, and the South American "magic realists"), but are usually little to the taste of the genre fantasy fan.

Borges, along with Silvina Ocampo and A. Bioy Casares, has put together an eclectic anthology of fantasy stories, called *The Book of Fantasy*. Oh, there are a few familiar names included—Bradbury is probably the only one known to contemporary genre readers, but the historically-minded will recognize Stapledon and Dunsany. And there are more than a few classic mainstream authors represented—Saki, Wilde, Poe, Hawthorne, Kipling, Kafka, Waugh (Evelyn), and Joyce.

But the heart of the collection is a wildly esoteric selection of works that range through time and space in origin, from such authors as Leonid Andreyev (Russian, 1871-1919), Ryunosuke Akutagawa (Japanese, 1892-1927), Petronius (Roman, first century CE), Chuang Tzu (Chinese, c. 369-286 BCE), the mysterious B. Traven (pseudonym of an unknown person, author of *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre*), and Emmanuel Swedenborg (Swedish, 1688-1772).

Ursula K. Le Guin provides her usual depth of insight to the various ideas of fantasy in an introduction. The genre reader should be warned that there are minimal elves, dragons, and sorcerers contained in this collection; the adventurous, however, might want to go beyond the fields we know. (Dunsany's felicitous phrase can apply to the provincial in reading matter as well as anything else.)

Marooned In Ivory

The Gate of Ivory

By Doris Egan

DAW, $3.95 (paper)

Readers who go back a way probably did a double take at the title

of a book called *The Gate of Ivory*, since it is unmistakably reminiscent of a title that caused a stir a dozen years back. *That* one was *Gate of Ivrel*, and it was the first novel of an unknown named C. J. Cherryh (from the same publisher, incidentally). The ways of publishers are strange indeed . . .

But never judge a book by its title, and this *Gate* (by Doris Egan) is no relation, save that it's an engaging first novel that shows promise and is thoroughly enjoyable in its own right, or write. Right?

One of the problems of interstellar travel in the future could well be that it's so expensive that only the elite will be able to afford it. This will make for a galactic jet set, for one thing; it will also create situations such as that in which the heroine of the novel, one Theodora, finds herself. An anthro student on Athena, she and fellow students cop a free round-trip ride to the planet Ivory; she gets mugged and misses the ship and, as the novel begins, has been trying for two years to earn enough money to get home.

Ivory is the only planet in the known galaxy where magic works. "Oh, oh," I can hear you SF purists groan. "These blatant genre mixtures never come off." Well, Egan does a pretty good job of pulling it off. True, she cheats a little by slipping in a possible scientific explanation (a very loose one). But the magic system on Ivory is so low-keyed and so matter-of-factly handled that somehow the two concepts never really clash.

Theodora, in her endless quest for cash, becomes attached to one of the great houses of Ivory, in particular the head of the clan, Ran Cormallon. He uses her to read the cards for his business deals, a magical activity for which she suddenly shows great aptitude. When Ran's older brother, the charming but twisted Eln, stages a sort of family coup d'etat and Ran ends up exiled in a far part of the planet, Theodora throws her lot in with him. The story is of their adventures in besting Eln in a world of spells *and* future technology.

Despite Egan's adept mixture of the two, this would be for the most part pretty standard stuff. What makes it more than that is the feisty Theodora, whose narration reveals a charming and gutsy female with whom it's a pleasure to share these adventures.

Wispy Spirits

Spirits of Cavern and Hearth
By M. Coleman Easton
St. Martin's, $16.95

In the unnamed world of M. Coleman Easton's *Spirits of Cavern and Hearth*, the nomad Chirudaks live in the northern part of the only known habitable area, while their more civilized cousins, the Hakhans, have their settlements in the South. They are separated by "the Barrier," an earthwork erected by the Hakhans to keep the nomads out.

The nomads have untypically

united under one leader, and are threatening invasion. A Hakhan healer, one Yarkol, develops a rare "disease" which results in a sort of rejuvenation—the victim becomes physically almost prepubescent without losing most physical or intellectual abilities. It also imparts a sort of vague wanderlust—Yarkol has visions of the mountains of the far north. He is ostracized because of his illness, and begins to wander northward, eventually over the Barrier. On the way he falls in with a nomad woman, sent south to spy for the Chiruduk ruler, the Kag, and he also discovers the ability to have a sort of out-of-body experience, in which state he communes with various sprites, kobolds, and imps. These beings have their own underground culture—literally — and spend most of their time and energy on wagers and games of chance; their existence is doubted by most humans of both races.

Yarkol thinks perhaps his illness-inspired wanderlust destines him to prevent the invasion of his people by the nomads; his odyssey leads him into confrontation with the Kag, and all sorts of encounters with the ambiguous sprites.

Despite Easton's faultlessly drawn portrait of a nomad culture, superstitious, shamanistic, and akin to the Mongolian hordes of our history (even to drinking fermented mare's milk), the story and backgrounds seem a bit wispy. Or maybe because of . . . This sort of society doesn't lend itself to much in the way of in-depth magic (the sprites and kobolds seem totally divorced from it). For much of the story, the hero doesn't appear to be sure of why he's wandering around, and the supernatural folk he runs into seem rather arbitrary nuisances than integral to the action. So there's not much suspense generated, and the story has more of the quality of folktale than of in-depth modern fantasy.

Hundreds

Fantasy, the 100 Best Books
By James Cawthorn and Michael Moorcock
Horror: 100 Best Books
Edited by Stephen Jones & Kim Newman
Carroll & Graf, $15.95 each

As I noted a while back when *Science Fiction: the 100 Best Novels* appeared, when one gets a list of a hundred best *any*thing, all one can do is calmly audit the credentials of the compiler(s) of the list, breathe a sigh of relief if (s)he/they appear to know what they're doing, sit back, and *then* shriek, scream, and yell with outrage because X was included and Y was excluded.

The credentials of Michael Moorcock as a master fantasist are impeccable, and James Cawthorn has co-authored works with MM as well as reviewing for *New Worlds*, so far, so good for *Fantasy: the 100 Best Books*, for which they have chosen and written on all the entries. The editors of *Horror: 100 Best Books*, Stephen Jones and Kim Newman, have taken a different tack; they have invited a

hundred writers to each write an entry on his/her favorite work of horror. So it's a less coherent list, and there's nobody in particular to yell at if a major work didn't get included (some didn't).

In both volumes, there is for each book chosen a synopsis and some brief publishing information: consistently well done in the *Fantasy* volume, more of a mixed bag in the *Horror*, of course.

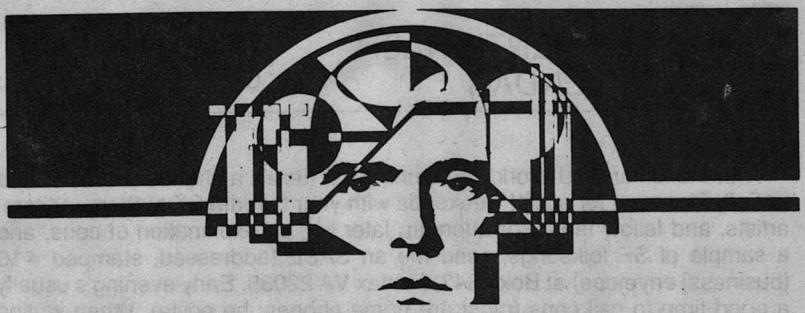
You think I'm going to shriek, scream, and yell now as any professional critic worth his salt should do, don't you? Sorry to disappoint; all I want to do is say thank you for including some books that are special to me—there is still that good feeling in finding that someone else appreciates what is precious to one. In *Fantasy*: Hodgson's *The House On the Borderland* and *The Night Land* (the latter I regard as astonishing early SF, but so what?); Merritt's *Ship of Ishtar* and *Dwellers in the Mirage* (if one must choose only two of his five great works, those are the two); Thorne Smith's *Turnabout* and *The Night Life of the Gods*; Kuttner's *Valley of the Flame* and *The Dark World* (amazingly enough, both of those are among the few Kuttner works currently available); Gaskell's *Atlan* series; Pratchett's first two Discworld novels; and Holt's *Expecting Someone Taller* (see above).

In *Horror*, any number of good choices, but the prize of the lot is the piece on Hodgson's *The House On the Borderland* (again) by Terry Pratchett; almost too much of a good thing—today's genius of comic fantasy on the genius of horror/fantasy from the early part of the century.

In closing, I might note that if you're like most of today's readers, whose reading matter comes only from the current releases shelf, you would do well to check out both of these books, as well as their SF predecessor. Not that all that many of the hundreds are readily available; publishers are well aware that most readers could care less about the great ones from the past.

Recent publications from those associated with this magazine include: *Robots: Isaac Asimov's Wonderful Worlds of Science Fiction #9* edited by Isaac Asimov, Martin H. Greenberg & Charles G. Waugh (Signet, $3.50, paper); *Isaac Asimov Presents the Great SF Stories: 19 (1957)* edited by Isaac Asimov and Martin H. Greenberg (DAW, $4.50, paper).

Books to be considered for review in this column should be submitted to Baird Searles, Suite 133, 380 Bleecker St., New York, New York 10014. ●



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SF CONVENTIONAL CALENDAR

by Erwin S. Strauss

With the lull around WorldCon coming up, here's a chance to look ahead to Fall. Plan now for social weekends with your favorite SF authors, editors, artists, and fellow fans. For a longer, later list, an explanation of cons, and a sample of SF folksongs, send me an SASE (addressed, stamped #10 [business] envelope) at Box 3343, Fairfax VA 22038. Early evening's usually a good time to call cons (most are home phones; be polite). When writing cons, enclose an SASE. Look for me at cons with a Filthy Pierre badge, playing a musical keyboard.

JULY, 1989

28-30—**RiverCon.** For info, write: **Box 58009, Louisville KY 40258.** Or call: **(502) 448-6562** (10 am to 10 pm, not collect). Con will be held in: Louisville KY (if city omitted, same as in address), at the Holiday Inn Downtown. Guests will include: Jack Chalker, Dick Spelman, A. Andrews.

28-30—**MapleCon, Box 3156, Stn. D, Ottawa ON K1P 6H7. (613) 741-3162.** K. S. Robinson, De Lint.

28-30—**PhroliCon, 17 Lewis Ave. #3, E. Lansdowne PA 19050.** Hilton, Mt. Laurel NJ. C. J. Cherryh.

28-31—**MythCon, Box 806, Stn. A, Nanaimo BC V9R 5N2. (415) 658-6033.** Vancouver BC. Tolkien, etc.

AUGUST, 1989

4-6—**Norwegian National Con, % Lyshol, Maridalsvn. 235A, Oslo N-0467, Norway.** Delany, Bringsvaerd.

11-13—**Zero G, Box 8521, Moscow ID 83843. (208) 882-0364.** J. Dalmas, J. Gustafson. Relaxacon.

19-20—**JapanCon, MeiMai Mansyon 505, 1 ch., 2-10 Kamejima, Nakamura-ku, Nagoya 453, Japan.**

25-27—**BuboniCon, Box 37257, Albuquerque NM 87176. (505) 256-7161.** Kathy Ptacek, Vic Milan.

31-Sep. 4—**Noreascon 3, Box 46, MIT PO, Cambridge MA 02139.** (617)776-3243 Boston WorldCon.

SEPTEMBER, 1989

1-3—**PrisonerCon, Box 172, Hatfield PA 19440.** Portmeirion, UK (where TV's "The Prisoner" filmed).

1-4—**Pretty Good Con, 2300 Knob Hill Dr., #3-16, Okemos MI 48864.** Lansing MI. Emphasis on media.

5-7—**ConClusion, Box 1051, Back Bay Annex, Boston MA 02117.** Post-WorldCon relaxacon, by gay fans.

7-10—**French National Con, % Antares, La Malagi, Chemin Calabro, La-Valette-du-Var 83160, France.**

OCTOBER, 1989

6-8—**RoVaCon, Box 117, Salem VA 24153. (703) 389-9400.** V. McIntyre, A. Wold, H. Clement, R. Pini.

AUGUST, 1990

23-27—**ConFiction, % Box 1252, BGS, New York NY 10274.** Hague, Holland. WorldCon. $70 in 1989.

30-Sep. 3—**ConDiego, Box 15771, San Diego CA 92115.** North American SF Con. $55 to end of '89.

AUGUST, 1991

29-Sep. 2—**ChiCon V, Box A3120, Chicago IL 60690.** WorldCon. H. Clement, R. Powers. $75 in '89.

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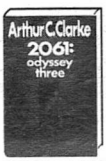

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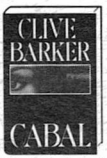

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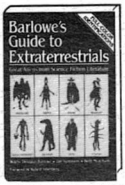

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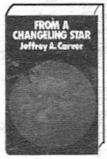

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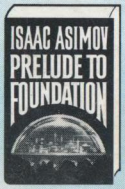

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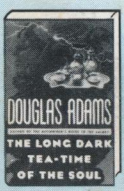

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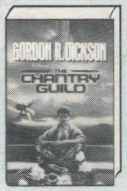

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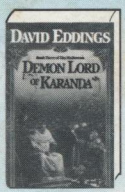

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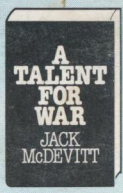

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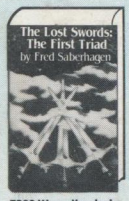

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