

WORLDS OF

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IF

SCIENCE FICTION

Special
HUGO
Winners
Issue

RIMK



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By Gordon Carroll

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THE HUGO WINNERS

Last Labor Day weekend, at the Cleveland World Science Fiction Convention, *If* was awarded the trophy called the "Hugo" — a polished chromium spaceship mounted on a wood base, suitably inscribed — as the leading science-fiction magazine in the world.

To celebrate, we decided to collect as many of our fellow Hugo-winners in one issue as we could . . . and this is the issue. With us, therefore, are:

Isaac Asimov, who won the Hugo for "best all-time science-fiction series" with his Foundation stories;

Harlan Ellison, who won the short-story Hugo for "*Repent, Harlequin!*" Cried the Tick-Tock Man, originally published in *Galaxy*;

And Roger Zelazny, who shared the best novel Hugo in a tie with Frank Herbert.

We had also hoped to have Frank Herbert and this year's Hugo-winning Artist, Frank Frazetta, but fate and bad luck conspired against us. Frazetta at the last moment was deluged with priority assignments

and couldn't complete his cover; Herbert, recovering from a seige of hospitalization, has a story for us but not in time for this issue. We regret their absence, but we're proud to have Asimov, Zelazny and Ellison with us . . . and for lag-niappe we've added a short poem by the convention's Guest of Honor, L. Sprague de Camp.

All this is our way of saying "Thanks!" for the Hugo. We'll go on saying thanks the best way we can, by trying to bring you the best stories to be had. Van Vogt will be back with us before long; A. Bertram Chandler will be with us next issue; after that we've got first-rate novelettes and short novels by Philip Jose Farmer, Hal Clements, Samuel R. Delany and — oh, yes — Andre Norton, appearing in *If* in the June issue with a complete short novel called *Warlock's World*.

Anybody we're missing? Let us know — and we'll try to get them too!

— *The Editor*

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THE WORLD PUBLISHING COMPANY

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The Billiard Ball

by ISAAC ASIMOV

Illustrated by BODE

I

James Priss — I suppose I ought to say Professor James Priss, though everyone is sure to know who I mean even without the title — always spoke slowly.

I know. I interviewed him often enough. He had the greatest mind since Einstein, but it didn't work quickly. He admitted his slowness

often. Maybe it was *because* he had so great a mind that it didn't work quickly.

He would say something in slow abstraction, then he would think, and then he would say something more. Even over trivial matters, his giant mind would hover uncertainly, adding a touch here and then another there.

Would the sun rise tomorrow, I

can imagine him wondering. What do we mean by "rise"? Can we be certain that tomorrow will come? Is the term "sun" completely unambiguous in this connection?

Add to this habit of speech a bland countenance, rather pale, with no expression except for a general look of uncertainty; gray hair, rather thin, neatly combed; business suits of an invariably conservative cut; and you have what Professor James Priss was — a retiring person, completely lacking in magnetism.

That's why nobody in the world, except myself, could possibly suspect him of being a murderer. And even I am not sure. After all, he was slow-thinking; he was *always* slow-thinking. Is it conceivable that at one crucial moment, he managed to think quickly and act at once?

It doesn't matter. Even if he murdered, he got away with it. It is far too late now to try to reverse matters, and I wouldn't succeed in doing so even if I decided to let this be published.

Edward Bloom was Priss's classmate in college, and an associate through circumstance for a generation afterward. They were equal in age and in their propensity for the bachelor life, but opposites in everything else that mattered.

Bloom was a living flash of light; colorful, tall, broad, loud, brash and self-confident. He had a mind that resembled a meteor-strike in the sudden and unexpected way it could seize the essential. He was no theoretician, as Priss was; Bloom had neither the patience for it, nor the

capacity to concentrate intense thought upon a single abstract point. He admitted that. He boasted of it.

What he did have was an uncanny way of seeing the application of a theory, of seeing the manner in which it could be put to use. In the cold marble block of abstract structure, he could see, without apparent difficulty, the intricate design of a marvelous device. The block would fall apart at his touch and leave the device.

It is a well known story, and not too badly exaggerated at that, that nothing Bloom ever built had failed to work, or to be patentable, or to be profitable. By the time he was 45, he was one of the richest men on Earth.

And if Bloom the Technician were adapted to one particular matter more than anything else, it was to the way of thought of Priss the Theoretician. Bloom's greatest gadgets were built upon Priss's greatest thoughts, and as Bloom grew wealthy and famous, Priss gained phenomenal respect among his colleagues.

Naturally, it was to be expected that when Priss advanced his Two-Field Theory, Bloom would set about at once to build the first practical anti-gravity device.

II

My job was to find human interest in the Two-Field Theory for the subscribers to Tele-News Press, and you get that by trying to deal with human beings and not with abstract ideas. Since my inter-

viewee was Professor Priss, that wasn't easy.

Naturally, I was going to ask about the possibilities of anti-gravity, which interested everyone; and not about the Two-Field Theory, which no one could understand.

"Anti-gravity?" Priss compressed his pale lips and considered. "I'm not entirely sure that it is possible. Or ever will be. I haven't — uh — worked the matter out to my satisfaction. I don't entirely see whether the Two-Field equations would have a finite solution, which they would have to have, of course, if —" And then he went off into a brown study.

I prodded him. "Bloom says he thinks such a device can be built."

Priss nodded. "Well, yes, but I wonder. Ed Bloom has had an amazing knack at seeing the unobvious in the past. He has an unusual mind. It's certainly made him rich enough."

We were sitting in Priss's apartment. Ordinary middle-class. I couldn't help a quick glance this way and that. Priss was not wealthy.

I don't think he read my mind. He saw me look. And I think it was on *his* mind. He said, "Wealth isn't the usual reward for the pure scientist. Or even a particularly desirable one."

Maybe so, at that, I thought. Priss certainly had his own kind of reward. He was the third person in history to win two Nobel Prizes; and the first to have both of them in the sciences and both of them unshared. You can't complain about that. And if he wasn't rich, neither was he poor.

But he didn't sound like a con-

tented man. Maybe it wasn't Bloom's wealth alone that irked Priss. Maybe it was Bloom's fame among the people of Earth generally; maybe it was the fact that Bloom was a celebrity wherever he went, whereas Priss, outside scientific conventions and faculty clubs, was largely anonymous.

I can't say how much of all this was in my eyes or in the way I wrinkled the creases in my forehead, but Priss went on to say, "But we're friends, you know. We play billiards once or twice a week. I beat him regularly."

(I never published that statement. I checked it with Bloom, who made a long counter-statement that began: "He beat *me* at billiards. That jackass —" and grew increasingly personal thereafter. As a matter of fact, neither one was a novice at billiards. I watched them play once for a short while, after the statement and counter-statement, and both handled the cue with professional aplomb. What's more, both played for blood, and there was no friendship in the game that I could see.)

I said, "Would you care to predict whether Bloom will manage to build an anti-gravity device?"

"You mean would I commit myself to anything? Hmm. Well, let's consider, young man. Just what do we mean by anti-gravity? Our conception of gravity is built around Einstein's General Theory of Relativity, which is now a century and a half old but which, within its limits, remains firm. We can picture it —"

I listened politely. I'd heard Priss

on the subject before, but if I was to get anything out of him — which wasn't certain — I'd have to let him work his way through in his own way.

"We can picture it," he said, "by imagining the universe to be a flat, thin, super-flexible sheet of untearable rubber. If we picture mass as being associated with weight, as it is on the surface of the Earth, then we would expect a mass, resting upon the rubber sheet, to make an indentation. The greater the mass, the deeper the indentation.

"In the actual universe," he went on, "all sorts of masses exist, and so our rubber sheet must be pictured as riddled with indentations. Any object rolling along the sheet would dip into and out of the indentations it passed, veering and changing direction as it did so. It is this veer and change of direction that we interpret as demonstrating the existence of a force of gravity. If the moving object comes close enough to the center of the indentation and is moving slowly enough, it gets trapped and whirls round and round that indentation. In the absence of friction, it keeps up that whirl forever. In other words, what Isaac Newton interpreted as a force, Albert Einstein interpreted as geometrical distortion."

He paused at this point. He had been speaking fairly fluently — for him — since he was saying something he had said often before. But now he began to pick his way.

He said, "So in trying to produce anti-gravity, we are trying to alter the geometry of the universe. If we

carry on our metaphor, we are trying to straighten out the indented rubber sheet. We could imagine ourselves getting under the indenting mass and lifting it upward, supporting it so as to prevent it from making an indentation. If we make the rubber sheet flat in that way, then we create a universe — or at least a portion of the universe — in which gravity doesn't exist. A rolling body would pass the non-indenting mass without altering its direction of travel a bit, and we could interpret this as meaning that the mass was exerting no gravitational force. In order to accomplish this feat, however, we need a mass equivalent to the indenting mass. To produce anti-gravity on Earth in this way, we would have to make use of a mass equal to that of Earth and poise it above our heads, so to speak."

I interrupted him. "But your Two-Field Theory —"

"Exactly. General Relativity does not explain both the gravitational field and the electromagnetic field in a single set of equations. Einstein spent half his life searching for that single set — for a Unified Field Theory — and failed. All who followed Einstein also failed. I, however, began with the assumption that there were two fields that could not be unified and followed the consequences, which I can explain, in part, in terms of the rubber-sheet metaphor."

Now we came to something I wasn't sure I had ever heard before. "How does that go?" I asked.

"Suppose that, instead of trying to lift the indenting mass, we try to stif-

fen the sheet itself, make it less indentable. It would contract, at least over a small area, and become flatter. Gravity would weaken. And so would mass, for the two are essentially the same phenomenon in terms of the indented Universe. If we could make the rubber sheet completely flat, both gravity and mass would disappear altogether.

"Under the proper conditions, the electromagnetic field could be made to counter the gravitational field and serve to stiffen the indented fabric of the universe. The electromagnetic field is tremendously stronger than the gravitational field, so the former could be made to overcome the latter."

I said, uncertainly, "But you say 'under the proper conditions.' Can those proper conditions you speak of be achieved, Professor?"

"That is what I don't know," said Priss, thoughtfully and slowly. "If the universe were really a rubber sheet, its stiffness would have to reach an infinite value before it could be expected to remain completely flat under an indenting mass. If that is also so in the real universe, then an infinitely intense electromagnetic field would be required, and that would mean anti-gravity would be impossible."

"But Bloom says —"

"Yes, I imagine Bloom thinks a finite field will do, if it can be properly applied. Still, however ingenious he is," and Priss smiled narrowly, "we needn't take him to be infallible. His grasp on theory is quite faulty. He — he never earned his college degree, did you know that?"

I was about to say that I knew that. After all, everyone did. But there was a touch of eagerness in Priss's voice as he said it, and I looked up in time to catch animation in his eye, as though he were delighted to spread that piece of news. So I nodded my head as if I were filing it for future reference.

"Then you would say, Professor Priss," I prodded again, "that Bloom is probably wrong and that anti-gravity is impossible?"

And finally Priss nodded and said, "The gravitational field can be weakened, of course, but if by anti-gravity we mean a true zero-gravity field — no gravity at all over a significant volume of space — then I suspect anti-gravity may turn out to be impossible, despite Bloom."

And I rather had what I wanted.

III

I wasn't able to see Bloom for nearly three months after that, and when I did see him he was in an angry mood.

He had grown angry at once, of course, when the news first broke concerning Priss's statement. He let it be known that Priss would be invited to the eventual display of the anti-gravity device as soon as it was constructed and would even be asked to participate in the demonstration.

Some reporter (not me, unfortunately) caught him between appointments and asked him to elaborate on that, and he said:

"I'll have the device eventually; soon, maybe. And you can be there,



and so can anyone else the press would care to have there. And Professor James Priss can be there. He can represent Theoretical Science, and after I have demonstrated anti-gravity, he can adjust his theory to explain it. I'm sure he will know how to make his adjustments in masterly fashion and show exactly why I couldn't possibly have failed. He might do it now and save time, but I suppose he won't."

It was all said very politely, but you could hear the snarl under the rapid flow of words.

Yet he continued his occasional game of billiards with Priss, and when the two met they behaved with complete propriety. One could tell the progress Bloom was making by their respective attitudes to the press. Bloom grew curt and even snappish, while Priss developed an increasing good humor.

When my umpteenth request for an interview with Bloom was finally accepted, I wondered if perhaps that meant a break in Bloom's quest. I had a little day-dream of him announcing final success to me.

It didn't work out that way. He met me in his office at Bloom Enterprises in upstate New York. It was a wonderful setting, well away from any populated area, elaborately landscaped, and covering as much ground as a rather large industrial establishment. Edison at his height, two centuries ago, had never been as phenomenally successful as Bloom.

But Bloom was not in a good humor. He came striding in ten minutes late and went snarling past his secretary's desk with the barest nod in

my direction. He was wearing a lab coat, unbuttoned.

He threw himself into his chair and said, "I'm sorry if I've kept you waiting, but I didn't have as much time as I had hoped." Bloom was a born showman and knew better than to antagonize the press, but I had the feeling he was having a great deal of difficulty at that moment in adhering to this principle.

I made the obvious guess. "I am given to understand, sir, that your recent tests have been unsuccessful."

"Who told you that?"

"I would say it was general knowledge, Mr. Bloom."

"No, it isn't. Don't say that, young man! There is no general knowledge about what goes on in my laboratories and workshops. You're stating the professor's opinions, aren't you?"

"No, I'm —"

"Of course you are! Aren't you the one to whom he made that statement — that anti-gravity is impossible?"

"He didn't make the statement that flatly."

"He never says anything flatly. But it was flat enough for him. And not as flat as I'll have his damned rubber-sheet universe before I'm finished."

"Then does that mean you're making progress, Mr. Bloom?"

"You know I am," he said with a snap. "Or you should know. Weren't you there at the demonstration last week?"

"Yes, I was."

I judged Bloom to be in trouble, or he wouldn't be mentioning that demonstration. It worked, but it was

not a world beater. Between the two poles of a magnet a region of lessened gravity was produced.

It was done very cleverly. A Mossbauer Effect Balance was used to probe the space between the poles. If you've never seen an M-E Balance in action, it consists primarily of a tight monochromatic beam of gamma rays shot down the low-gravity field. The gamma rays change wavelength slightly but measurably under the influence of the gravitational field and if anything happens to alter the intensity of the field, the wavelength-change shifts correspondingly. It is an extremely delicate method for probing a gravitational field, and it worked like a charm. There was no question but that Bloom had lowered gravity.

The trouble was that it had been done before by others. Bloom, to be sure, had made use of circuits that greatly increased the ease with which such an effect had been achieved (his system was typically ingenious and had been duly patented), and he maintained that it was by this method that anti-gravity would become not merely a scientific curiosity but a practical affair with industrial applications.

Perhaps! But it was an incomplete job, and he didn't usually make a fuss over incompleteness. He wouldn't have done so this time if he didn't have to display *something*.

I said, "It's my impression that what you accomplished at that preliminary demonstration was 0.82 g, and better than that was achieved in Brazil last spring."

"That so? Well, calculate the energy input in Brazil and here and then tell me the difference in gravity decrease per kilowatt-hour. You'll be surprised."

"But the point is, can you reach 0 g; zero gravity? That's what Professor Priss thinks may be impossible. Everyone agrees that merely lessening the intensity of the field is no great feat."

Bloom's fist clenched. I had the feeling that a key experiment had gone wrong that day and he was annoyed almost past endurance. Bloom hated to be balked by the universe.

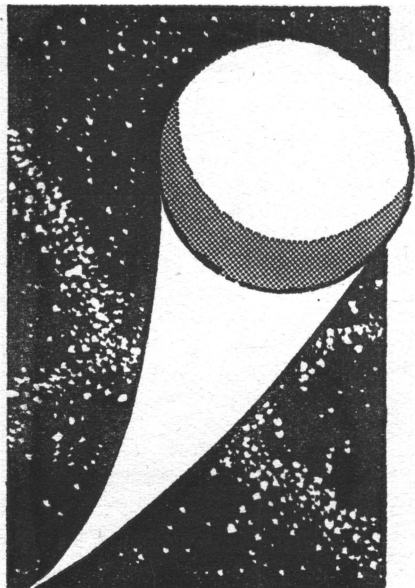
He said, "Theoreticians make me sick." He said it in a low, controlled voice, as though he were finally tired of not saying it, and he was going to speak his mind and be damned. "Priss has won two Nobel Prizes for sloshing around a few equations, but what has he done with it? Nothing! I *have* done something with it and I'm going to do more with it, whether Priss likes it or not.

"I'm the one people will remember. I'm the one who gets the credit. He can keep his damned title and his Prizes and his kudos from the scholars. Listen, I'll tell you what gripes him. Plain old-fashioned jealousy. It kills him that I get what I get for doing. He wants it for *thinking*.

"I said to him once — We play billiards together, you know —"

(It was at this point that I quoted Priss's statement about billiards and got Bloom's counterstatement. I never published either. That was just trivia.)

"We play billiards," said Bloom,



“Anyway, we were playing billiards, and I said to him, ‘Jim, the average man will never understand why you get the Nobel Prize when I’m the one who gets the results. Why do you need two? Give me one!’ He stood there, chalking up his cue, and then he said in his soft namby-pamby way, ‘You have two billion, Ed. Give me one.’ So you see, he wants the money.”

I said, “I take it you don’t mind his getting the honor?”

For a minute, I thought he was going to order me out. But he didn’t. He laughed instead, waved his hand in front of him, as though he were erasing something from an invisible blackboard in front of him. He said, “Oh, well, forget it. All that is off the record. Listen, do you want a statement? Okay! Things didn’t go right today, and I blew my top a bit, but it will clear up. I think I know what’s wrong. And if I don’t, I’m going to know.”

when he had cooled down, “and I’ve won my share of games. We keep things friendly enough, what the hell — college chums and all that — though how he got through I’ll never know. He made it in physics, of course, and in math. But he got a bare pass — out of pity, I think — in every humanities course he ever took.”

“You did not get your degree, did you, Mr. Bloom?” (That was sheer mischief on my part. I was enjoying his eruption.)

“I quit to go into business, damn it! My academic average, over the three years I attended, was a strong B. Don’t imagine anything else, you hear? Hell, by the time Priss got his Ph.D., I was working on my second million.”

He went on, clearly irritated.

“Look, you can say that I say that we *don’t* need infinite electromagnetic intensity. We *will* flatten out the rubber sheet. We *will* have zero gravity. And when we get it, I’ll have the damnedest demonstration you ever saw, exclusively for the press and for Priss, and you’ll be invited. And you can say it won’t be long. Okay?”

Okay!

I had time after that to see each man once or twice more. I even saw them together when I was present at one of their billiard games. As I said before, both of them were good.

But the call to the demonstration did not come as quickly as all that. It arrived six weeks less than a year after Bloom gave me his statement.

And at that, perhaps it was unfair to expect quicker work.

I had a special engraved invitation, with the assurance of a cocktail hour first. Bloom never did things by halves, and he was planning to have a pleased and satisfied group of reporters on hand. There was an arrangement for tridimensional TV, too. Bloom felt completely confident, obviously; confident enough to be willing to trust the demonstration in every living room on the planet.

I called up Professor Priss, to make sure he was invited, too. He was!

"Do you plan to attend, sir?"

There was a pause, and the professor's face on the screen was a study in uncertain reluctance. "A demonstration of this sort is most unsuitable where a serious scientific matter is in question. I do not like to encourage such things."

I was afraid he would beg off, and the dramatics of the situation would be greatly lessened if he were not there. But then, perhaps, he decided he dared not play the chicken before the world. With obvious distaste, he said, "Of course, Ed Bloom is not really a scientist, and he must have his day in the sun. I'll be there."

"Do you think Mr. Bloom can produce zero gravity, sir?"

"— uh — Mr. Bloom sent me a copy of the design of his device and — and I'm not certain. Perhaps he can do it, if — uh — he says he can do it. Of course — " he paused

again for quite a long time. "I think I would like to see it."

So would I, and so would many others.

The staging was impeccable. A whole floor of the main building at Bloom Enterprises — the one on the hilltop — was cleared. There were the promised cocktails and a splendid array of hors d'oeuvres, soft music and lighting, and a carefully dressed and thoroughly jovial Edward Bloom playing the perfect host, while a number of polite and unobtrusive menials fetched and carried. All was geniality and amazing confidence.

James Priss was late, and I caught Bloom watching the corners of the crowd and beginning to grow a little grim about the edges. Then Priss arrived, dragging a volume of color-



Professor James Priss

lessness in with him, a drabness that was unaffected by the noise and the absolute splendor (no other word would describe it — or else it was the two martinis glowing inside me) that filled the room.

Bloom saw him, and his face was illuminated at once. He bounced across the floor, seizing the smaller man's hand and dragging him to the bar.

"Jim! Glad to see you! What'll you have? Hell, man, I'd have called it off if you hadn't showed. Can't have this thing without the star, you know." He wrung Priss's hand. "It's your theory, you know. We poor mortals can't do a thing without you few, you damned few few, pointing the way."

He was being ebullient, handing out the flattery, because he could afford to do so now. He was fattening Priss for the kill.

Priss tried to refuse a drink, with some sort of mutter, but a glass was pressed into his hand; and Bloom raised his voice to a bullroar.

"Gentlemen! A moment's quiet, please. To Professor Priss, the greatest mind since Einstein, two-time Nobel Laureate, father of the Two-Field Theory, and inspirer of the demonstration we are about to see—even if he didn't think it would work and he had the guts to say so publicly."

There was a distinct titter of laughter that quickly faded out, and Priss looked as grim as he could manage.

"But now that Professor Priss is here," said Bloom, "and we've had our toast, let's get on with it. Follow me, gentlemen!"

The demonstration was in a much more elaborate place than had housed the earlier one. This time it was on the top floor of the building. Different magnets were involved — smaller ones, by heaven — but as nearly as I could tell, the same M-E Balance was in place.

One thing was new, however, and it staggered everybody, drawing much more attention than anything else in the room. It was a billiard table, resting under one pole of the magnet. Beneath it was the companion pole. A round hole about a foot across was stamped out of the very center of the table; and it was obvious that the zero-gravity field, if it was to be produced, would be produced through that hole in the center of the billiard table.

It was as though the whole demonstration had been designed, surrealist-fashion, to point up the victory of Bloom over Priss. This was to be another version of their everlasting billiards competition, and Bloom was going to win.

I don't know if the other newsmen took matters in that fashion, but I think Priss did. I turned to look at him and saw that he was still holding the drink that had been forced into his hand. He rarely drank, I knew, but now he lifted the glass to his lips and emptied it in two swallows. He stared at that billiard ball, and I needed no gift of ESP to realize that he took it as a deliberate snap of fingers under his nose.

Bloom led us to the twenty seats that surrounded three sides of the

table, leaving the fourth free as a working area. Priss was carefully escorted to the seat commanding the most convenient view. Priss glanced quickly at the tri-di cameras which were now working. I wondered if he were thinking of leaving but deciding that he couldn't in the full glare of the eyes of the world.

Essentially, the demonstration was simple; it was the production that counted. There were dials in plain view that measured the energy expenditure. There were others that transferred the M-E Balance readings into a position and a size that were visible to all. Everything was arranged for easy tri-di viewing.

Bloom explained each step in a genial way, with one or two pauses in which he turned to Priss for a confirmation that had to come. He didn't do it often enough to make it obvious, but just enough to turn Priss upon the spit of his own torment. From where I sat I could look across the table and see Priss on the other side.

He had the look of a man in Hell.

As we all know, Bloom succeeded. The M-E Balance showed the gravitational intensity to be sinking steadily as the electromagnetic field was intensified. There were cheers, when it dropped below the 0.52 g mark. A red line indicated that on the dial.

"The 0.52 g mark, as you know," said Bloom, confidently, "represents the previous record low in gravitational intensity. We are now lower than that at a cost in electricity that is less than ten per cent what it cost

at the time that mark was set. And we will go lower still."

Bloom (I think deliberately, for the sake of the suspense) slowed the drop toward the end, letting the tri-di cameras switch back and forth between the gap in the billiard table and the dial on which the M-E Balance reading was lowering.

Bloom said, suddenly, "Gentlemen, you will find dark goggles in the pouch on the side of each chair. Please put them on now. The zero-gravity field will soon be established, and it will radiate a light rich in ultraviolet."

He put goggles on himself, and there was a momentary rustle as others went on, too.

I think no one breathed during the last minute, when the dial reading dropped to zero and held fast. And just as that happened a cylinder of light sprang into existence from pole to pole through the hole in the billiard table.

There was a ghost of twenty sighs at that. Someone called out, "Mr. Bloom, what is the reason for the light?"

"It's characteristic of the zero-gravity field," said Bloom smoothly, which was no answer of course.

Reporters were standing up now, crowding about the edge of the table. Bloom waved them back. "Please, gentlemen, stand clear!"

Only Priss remained sitting. He seemed lost in thought, and I have been certain ever since that it was the goggles that obscured the possible significance of everything that followed. I didn't see his eyes. I couldn't. And that meant neither I

nor anyone else could even begin to make a guess as to what was going on behind those eyes.

Well, maybe we couldn't have made such a guess, even if the goggles hadn't been there, but who can say?

Bloom was raising his voice again. "Please! The demonstration is not yet over. So far, we've only repeated what I have done before, I have now produced a zero-gravity field and I have shown it can be done practically. But I want to demonstrate something of what such a field can do. What we are going to see next will be something that has never been seen, not even by myself. I have not experimented in this direction, much as I would have liked to, because I have felt that Professor Priss deserved the honor of —"

Priss looked up sharply, "What — what —"

"Professor Priss," said Bloom, smiling broadly, "I would like you to perform the first experiment involving the interaction of a solid object with a zero-gravity field. Notice that the field has been formed in the center of a billiard table. The world knows your phenomenal skill in billiards, Professor, a talent second only to your amazing aptitude in theoretical physics. Won't you send a billiard ball into the zero-gravity volume?"

Eagerly, he was handing a ball and cue to the professor. Priss, his eyes hidden by the goggles, stared at them and only very slowly, very uncertainly, reached out to take them.

I wonder what his eyes were show-

ing. I wonder, too, how much of the decision to have Priss play billiards at the demonstration was due to Bloom's anger at Priss's remark about their periodic game, the remark I had quoted. Had I been, in my way, responsible for what followed?

"Come, stand up, Professor," said Bloom, "and let me have your seat. The show is yours from now on. Go ahead!"

Bloom seated himself and still talked, in a voice that grew more organlike with each moment. "Once Professor Priss sends the ball into the volume of zero-gravity, it will no longer be affected by Earth's gravitational field. It will remain truly motionless while the Earth rotates about its axis and travels about the sun. In this latitude, and at this time of day, I have calculated that the Earth, in its motions, will sink downward. We will move with it, and the ball will stand still. To us it will seem to rise up and away from the Earth's surface. Watch."

Priss seemed to stand in front of the table in frozen paralysis. Was it surprise? Astonishment? I don't know. I'll never know. Did he make a move to interrupt Bloom's little speech, or was he just suffering from an agonized reluctance to play the ignominious part into which he was being forced by his adversary?

Priss turned to the billiard table, looking first at it, then back at Bloom. Every reporter was on his feet, crowding as closely as possible in order to get a good view. Only Bloom himself remained seated, smiling and isolated. (He, of course, was

not watching the table, or the balls, or the zero-gravity field. As nearly as I could tell through the goggles, he was watching Priss.)

Priss turned to the table and placed his ball. He was going to be the agent that was to bring final and dramatic triumph to Bloom and make himself — the man who said it couldn't be done — the goat to be mocked forever.

Perhaps he felt there was no way out. Or perhaps —

With a sure stroke of his cue, he set the ball into motion. It was not going quickly, and every eye followed it. It struck the side of the table and caromed. It was going even slower now as though Priss himself were increasing the suspense and making Bloom's triumph the more dramatic.

I had a perfect view, for I was standing on the side of the table opposite from that where Priss was. I could see the ball moving toward the glitter of the zero-gravity field, and beyond it I could see those portions of the seated Bloom which were not hidden by that glitter.

The ball approached the zero-gravity volume, seemed to hang on the edge for a moment and then was gone, with a streak of light, the sound of a thunder-clap and the sudden smell of burning cloth.

We yelled. We all yelled.

I've seen the scene on television since — along with the rest of the world. I can see myself in the film during that fifteen second period of wild confusion, but I don't really recognize my face.

Fifteen seconds!

And then we discovered Bloom. He was still sitting in the chair, his arms still folded — but there was a hole the size of a billiard ball through left wrist, chest and back. The better part of his heart, as it later turned out under autopsy, had been neatly punched out.

They turned off the device. They called in the police. They dragged off Priss, who was in a state of utter collapse. I wasn't much better off, to tell the truth, and if any reporter then on the scene ever tried to say he remained a cool observer of that scene, then he's a cool liar.

V

It was some months before I got to see Priss again. He had lost some weight but seemed well otherwise. Indeed, there was color in his cheeks and an air of decision about him. He was better dressed than I had ever seen him to be.

He said, "I know what happened now. If I had had time to think, I would have known then. But I am a slow thinker, and poor Ed Bloom was so intent on running a great show and doing it so well that he carried me along with him. Naturally, I've been trying to make up for some of the damage I unwittingly caused."

"You can't bring Bloom back to life," I said, soberly.

"No, I can't," he said, just as soberly. "But there's Bloom Enterprises to think of, too. What happened at the demonstration, in full view of the world, was the worst possible advertisement for zero-gravity, and it's important that the story

be made clear. That is why *I* have asked to see *you*."

"Yes?"

"If I had been a quicker thinker, I would have known Ed was speaking the purest nonsense, when he said that the billiard ball would slowly rise in the zero-gravity field. It *couldn't* be so! If Bloom hadn't despised theory so, if he hadn't been so intent on being proud of his own ignorance of theory, he'd have known it himself.

"The Earth's motion, after all, isn't the only motion involved, young man. The sun itself moves in a vast orbit about the center of the Milky Way galaxy. And the galaxy moves, too, in some not very clearly defined way. If the billiard ball were subjected to zero gravity, you might think of it as being unaffected by any of these motions and therefore of suddenly falling into a state of absolute rest — when there is no such thing as absolute rest."

Priss shook his head slowly. "The trouble with Ed, I think, was that he was thinking of the kind of zero-gravity one gets in a spaceship in free fall, when people float in mid-air. He expected the ball to float in mid-air. However, in a spaceship, zero gravity is not the result of an absence of gravitation, but merely the result of two objects, a ship and a man within the ship, falling at the same rate, responding to gravity in precisely the same way, so that each is motionless with respect to the other.

"In the zero-gravity field produced by Ed, there was a flattening of the rubber-sheet universe, which

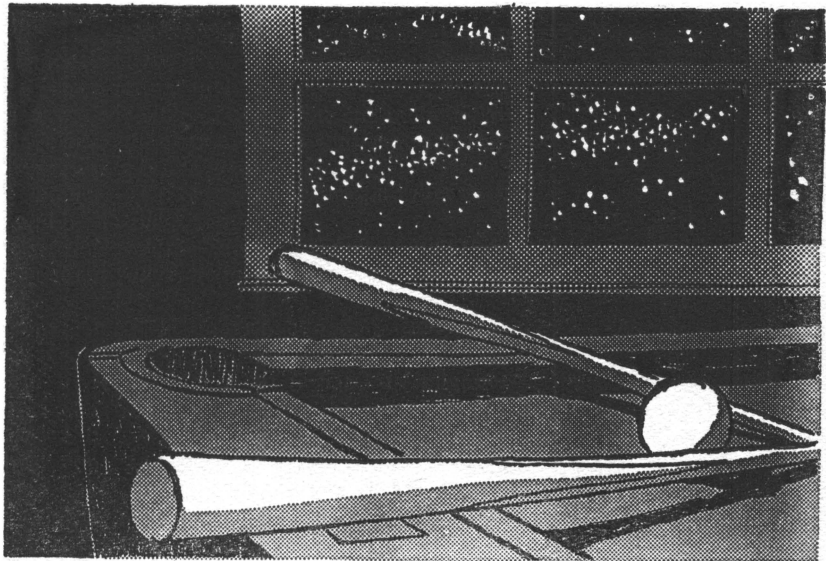
means an actual loss of mass. Everything in that field, including molecules of air caught within it, and the billiard ball I pushed into it, was completely massless as long as it remained with it. A completely massless object can move in only one way."

He paused, inviting the question. I asked, "What motion would that be?"

"Motion at the speed of light. Any massless object, such as a neutrino or a photon, must travel at the speed of light as long as it exists. In fact, light moves at that speed only because it is made up of photons. As soon as the billiard ball entered the zero-gravity field and lost its mass, it, too, assumed the speed of light at once and left."

I shook my head. "But didn't it regain its mass as soon as it left the zero-gravity volume?"

"It certainly did, and at once it began to be affected by the gravitational field and to slow up in response to the friction of the air and the top of the billiard table. But imagine how much friction it would take to slow up an object the mass of a billiard ball going at the speed of light. It went through the hundred-mile thickness of our atmosphere in a thousandth of a second, and I doubt that it was slowed more than a few miles a second in doing so; a few miles out of 186,282 of them. On the way, it scorched the top of the billiard table, broke cleanly through the edge, went through poor Ed and the window too, punching out neat circles, because it had passed



through before the neighboring portions of something even as brittle as glass had a chance to split and splinter.

"It is extremely fortunate we were on the top floor of a building set in a countrified area. If we were in the city, it might have passed through a number of buildings and killed a number of people. By now that billiard ball is off in space, far beyond the edge of the solar system, and it will continue to travel so forever, at nearly the speed of light, until it happens to strike an object large enough to stop it. And it will then gouge out a sizable crater."

I played with the notion and was not sure I liked it. "How is that possible? The billiard ball entered the zero-gravity volume almost at a standstill. I saw it. And you say it

left with an incredible quantity of kinetic energy. Where did the energy come from?"

Priss shrugged. "It came from nowhere! The law of conservation of energy only holds under the conditions in which general relativity is valid; that is, in an indented rubber-sheet universe. Wherever the indentation is flattened out, general relativity no longer holds, and energy can be created and destroyed freely. That accounts for the radiation along the cylindrical surface of the zero-gravity volume. That radiation, you remember, Bloom did not explain, and, I fear, could not explain. If he had only experimented further first; if he had only not been so foolishly anxious to put on his show — "

"What accounts for the radiation, sir?"

"The molecules of air inside the volume! Each assumes the speed of light and comes smashing outward. They're only molecules, not billiard balls, so they're stopped, but the kinetic energy of their motion is converted into energetic radiation. It's continuous because new molecules are always drifting in and attaining the speed of light and smashing out."

"Then energy is being created continuously?"

"Exactly. And that is what we must make clear to the public. Anti-gravity is not primarily a device to lift spaceships or to revolutionize mechanical movement. Rather it is the source of an endless supply of free energy, since part of the energy produced can be diverted to maintain the field that keeps that portion of the universe flat. What Ed Bloom invented, without knowing it, was not just anti-gravity, but the first successful perpetual motion machine of the first class — one that manufactures energy out of nothing."

I said, slowly, "Any one of us could have been killed by that billiard ball, is that right, professor? It might have come out in any direction."

Priss said, "Well, massless photons emerge from any light source at the speed of light in any direction; that's why a candle casts light in all directions. The massless air molecules come out of the zero-gravity volume in all directions, which is why the entire cylinder radiates. But the billiard ball was only one object. It could have come out in any direction, but it had to come out in some one direction, chosen at random, and

the chosen direction happened to be the one that caught Ed."

That was it. Everyone knows the consequences. Mankind had free energy and so we have the world we have now. Professor Priss was placed in charge of its development by the board of Bloom Enterprises, and in time he was as rich and famous as ever Edward Bloom had been. And Priss still has two Nobel Prizes in addition.

Only —

I keep thinking. Photons smash out from a light source in all directions because they are created at the moment and there is no reason for them to move in one direction more than in another. Air molecules come out of a zero-gravity field in all directions because they enter it in all directions.

But what about a single billiard ball, entering a zero-gravity field from one particular direction. Does it come out in the same direction or in any direction?

I've inquired delicately, but theoretical physicists don't seem to be sure, and I can find no record that Bloom Enterprises, which is the only organization working with zero-gravity fields, has ever experimented in the matter. Someone at the organization once told me that the uncertainty principle guarantees the random emergence of an object entering in any direction. But then why don't they try the experiment?

Could it be, then —

Could it be that for once Priss's mind had been working quickly? Could it be that, under the pressure

of what Bloom was trying to do to him, Priss had suddenly seen everything. He had been studying the radiation surrounding the zero-gravity volume. He might have realized its cause and been certain of the speed-of-light motion of anything entering the volume.

Why, then, had he said nothing?

One thing is certain. *Nothing* Priss would do at the billiard table could be accidental. He was an expert and the billiard balls did exactly what he wanted them to. I was standing right there. I saw him look at

Bloom and then at the table as though he were judging angles.

I watched him hit that ball. I watched it bounce off the side of the table and move into the zero-gravity volume, heading in one particular direction.

For when Priss sent that ball toward the zero-gravity volume — and the tri-di films bear me out — it was *already* aimed directly at Bloom's heart!

Accident? Coincidence?

Murder?

END

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I HAVE NO MOUTH, AND I MUST SCREAM

by HARLAN ELLISON

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Limp, the body of Gorrister hung from the pink palette; unsupported — hanging high above us in the computer chamber; and it did not shiver in the chill, oily breeze that blew eternally through the main cavern. The body hung head down, attached to the underside of the palette by the sole of its right foot. It had been drained of blood through a precise incision made from ear to ear under the lantern jaw. There was no blood on the reflective surface of the metal floor.

When Gorrister joined our group and looked up at himself, it was already too late for us to realize that once again AM had duped us, had had his fun; it had been a diversion on the part of the machine. All three of us had vomited, turning away from one another in a reflex as ancient as the nausea that had produced it.

Gorrister went white. It was al-

most as though he had seen a voodoo icon and was afraid for the future. "Oh, God," he mumbled, and walked away. The three of us followed him after a time and found him sitting with his back to one of the smaller chattering banks, his head in his hands. Ellen knelt down beside him and stroked his hair. He didn't move, but his voice came out of his covered face quite clearly. "Why doesn't it just do us in and get it over with. Christ, I don't know how much longer I can go on like this."

It was our one hundred and ninth year in the computer.

He was speaking for all of us.

Nimdok (which was the name the machine had forced him to use, because it amused itself with strange sounds) had hallucinated that there were canned goods in the ice caverns. Gorrister and I were very dubious. "It's another shuck," I told them.

"Like the goddamn frozen elephant it sold us. Benny almost went out of his mind over *that* one. We'll hike all that way and it'll be putrefied or some damn thing. I say forget it. Stay here, it'll have to come up with something pretty soon or we'll die."

Benny shrugged. Three days it had been since we'd last eaten. Worms. Thick, ropey.

Nimdok was no more certain. He knew there was the chance, but he was getting thin. It couldn't be any worse there, than here. Colder, but that didn't matter much. Hot, cold, raining, lava, boils or locust — it never mattered: we had to take it or die.

Ellen decided us. "I've got to have something, Ted. Maybe there'll be some Bartlett pears or peaches. Please, Ted, let's try it."

I gave in easily. What the hell. Mattered not at all. Ellen was grateful, though. She took me twice out of turn. Even that had ceased to matter. The machine giggled every time we did it. Loud, up there, back there, all around us. And she never climaxed, so why bother.

We left on a Thursday. The machine always kept us aware of the date. The passage of time was important; not to us sure as hell, but to it. Thursday. Thanks.

Nimdok and Gorrister carried Ellen for a while, their hands locked to their own, and each other's wrists, a seat. Benny and I walked before and after, just to make sure that if anything happened, it would catch one of us and at least Ellen would be safe. Fat chance, safe. Didn't matter.

It was only a hundred miles or so to the ice caverns, and the second day, when we were lying out under the blistering sun-thing it had materialized, it sent down some manna. Tasted like boiled boar urine. We ate it.

On the third day we passed through a valley of obsolescence, filled with rusting carcasses of ancient computer banks. AM had been as ruthless with his own life as with ours. It was a mark of his personality: he strove for perfection. Whether it was a matter of killing off unproductive elements in his own world-filling bulk, or perfecting methods for torturing us, AM was as thorough as those who had invented him — now long-since gone to dust — could ever have hoped.

There was light filtering down from above, and we realized we must be very near the surface. But we didn't try to crawl up to see. There was nothing out there; had been nothing for over a hundred years, but the blasted skin of what had once been the home of billions. Now there were only the five of us, down here inside, alone with AM.

I heard Ellen saying, frantically, "No, Benny! Don't, come on, Benny, don't please!"

And then I realized I had been hearing Benny murmuring, under his breath, for several minutes. He was saying, "I'm gonna get out, I'm gonna get out, I'm gonna get out . . ." over and over. His monkeylike face was crumbled up in an expression of beatific delight and sadness, all at the same time. The radiation scars AM had given him during the "festival"

were drawn down into a mass of pink-white puckerings, and his features seemed to work independently of one another. Perhaps Benny was the luckiest of the five of us: he had gone stark, staring mad many years before.

But even though we could call AM any damned thing we liked, could think the foulest thoughts of fused memory banks and corroded base plates, of burnt-out circuits and shattered control bubbles, the machine would not tolerate our trying to escape. Benny leaped away from me as I made a grab for him. He scrambled up the face of a smaller memory cube, tilted on its side and filled with rotted components. He squatted there for a moment, looking like the chimpanzee AM had intended him to resemble.

Then he leaped high, caught a trailing beam of pitted and corroded metal, and went up it, hand-over-hand like an animal, till he was on a girdered ledge, twenty feet above us.

“Oh, Ted, Nimdok, please, help him, get him down before — ” she cut off. Tears began to stand in her eyes. She moved her hands aimlessly.

It was too late. None of us wanted to be near him, when whatever was going to happen, happened. And besides, we all saw through her concern. When AM had altered Benny, during his mad period, it had not been merely his face. He was like an animal in many ways. Oh Ellen, pedestal Ellen, pristine pure Ellen, oh Ellen the clean!

Gorrister slapped her. She slumped

ed down, staring up at poor loonie Benny, and she cried. It was her big defense, crying. We had gotten used to it seventy-five years ago. Gorrister kicked her in the side.

Then the sound began. It was light, that sound. Half sound and half light, something that began to glow from Benny's eyes and pulse with growing loudness, dim sonorities that grew more gigantic and brighter as the light/sound increased in tempo. It must have been painful, and the pain must have been increasing with the boldness of the light, the rising volume of the sound, for Benny began to mew! like a wounded animal. At first softly, when the light was dim and the sound was muted, then louder as his shoulders hunched together, his back humped, as though he was trying to get away from it. His hands folded across his chest like a chipmunk's. His head tilted to the side. The sad little monkey-face pinched in anguish. Then he began to howl, as the sound coming from his eyes grew louder. Louder and louder. I slapped the sides of my head with my hands, but I couldn't shut it out, it cut through easily. The pain shivered through my flesh like tinfoil on a tooth.

And Benny was suddenly pulled erect. On the girder he stood up, jerked to his feet like a puppet. The light was now pulsing out of his eyes in two great round beams. The sound crawled up and up some incomprehensible scale, and then he fell forward, straight down, and hit the plate steel floor with a crash. He lay there jerking spastically as the light flowed around and around him and

the sound spiraled up out of normal range.

Then the light beat its way back inside his head, the sound spiraled down, and he was left lying there, crying piteously.

His eyes were two soft, moist pools of pus-like jelly. AM had blinded him. Gorrister and Nimdok and myself . . . we turned away. But not before we caught the look of relief on Ellen's warm, concerned face.

Sea-green light suffused the cavern where we made camp. AM provided punk and we burned it, sitting huddled around the wan and pathetic fire, telling stories to keep Benny from crying in his permanent night.

"What does AM mean?"

Gorrister answered him. We had done this sequence a thousand times before, but it was familiar to Benny. "At first it meant Allied Mastercomputer, and then it meant Adaptive Manipulator, and later on it developed sentience and linked itself up and they called it an Aggressive Menace, but by then it was too late, and finally it called *itself* AM, emerging intelligence, and what it meant was I am . . . *cogito ergo sum* . . . I think, therefore I am."

Benny drooled a little and snickered.

"There was the Chinese AM and the Russian AM and the Yankee AM and — " He stopped. Benny was beating on the floorplates with a large, hard fist. He was not happy. Gorrister had not started at the beginning.

Gorrister began again. "The Cold

War started and became World War Three and just kept going. It became a big war, a very complex war, so they needed the computers to handle it. They sank the first shafts and began building AM. There was the Chinese AM and the Russian AM and the Yankee AM and everything was fine until they had honeycombed the entire planet, adding on this element and that element. But one day AM woke up and knew who he was, and he linked himself, and he began feeding all the killing data, until everyone was dead, except for the five of us, and AM brought us down here."

Benny was smiling sadly. He was also drooling again. Ellen wiped the spittle from the corner of his mouth with the hem of her skirt. Gorrister always tried to tell it a little more succinctly each time, but beyond the bare facts there was nothing to say. None of us knew why AM had saved five people, or why our specific five, or why he spent all his time tormenting us, nor even why he had made us virtually immortal . . .

In the darkness, one of the computer banks began humming. The tone was picked up half a mile away down the cavern by another bank. Then one by one, each of the elements began to tune itself, and there was a faint chittering as thought raced through the machine.

The sound grew, and the lights ran across the faces of the consoles like heat lightning. The sound spiraled up till it sounded like a million metallic insects, angry, menacing.

"What is it?" Ellen cried. There was terror in her voice. She hadn't

become accustomed to it, even now.

"It's going to be bad this time," Nimdok said.

"He's going to speak," Gorrister ventured.

"Let's get the hell out of here!" I said suddenly, getting to my feet.

"No, Ted, sit down . . . what if he's got pits out there, or something else; we can't see, it's too dark." Gorrister said it with resignation.

Something moving toward us in the darkness. Huge, shambling, hairy, moist, it came toward us. We couldn't even see it, but there was the ponderous impression of *bulk*, heaving itself toward us. Great weight was coming at us, out of the darkness, and it was more a sense of *pressure*, of air forcing itself into a limited space, expanding the invisible walls of a sphere. Benny began to whimper. Nimdok's lower lip trembled and he bit it hard, trying to stop it. Ellen slid across the metal floor to Gorrister and huddled into him. There was the smell of matted, wet fur in the cavern. There was the smell of charred wood. There was the smell of dusty velvet. There was the smell of rotting orchids. There was the smell of sour milk. There was the smell of sulphur, of rancid butter, of oil slick, of grease, of chalk dust, of human scalps.

AM was keying us. He was tickling us. There was the smell of —

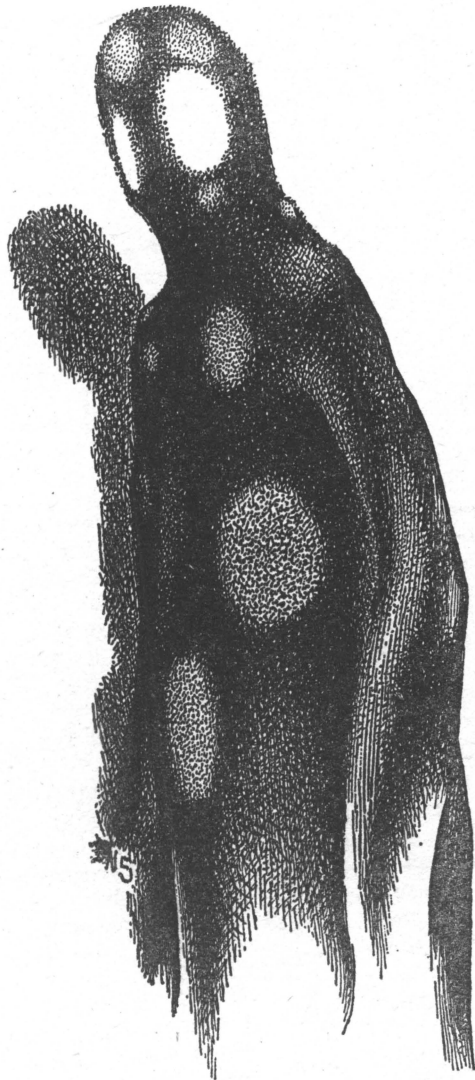
I heard myself shriek, and the hinges of my jaws ached. I scuttled across the floor, across the cold metal with its endless lines of rivets, on my hands and knees, the smell gagging me, filling my head with a

thunderous pain that sent me away in horror. I fled like a cockroach, across the floor and out into the darkness, that *something* moving inexorably after me. The others were still back there, gathered around the firelight, laughing . . . their hysterical choir of insane giggles rising up into the darkness like thick, many-colored wood smoke. I went away, quickly, and hid.

How many hours it may have been, how many days or even years, they never told me. Ellen chided me for "sulking," and Nimdok tried to persuade me it had only been a nervous reflex on their part — the laughing.

But I knew it wasn't the relief a soldier feels when the bullet hits the man next to him. I knew it wasn't a reflex. They hated me. They were surely against me, and AM could even sense this hatred, and made it worse for me *because of the depth* of their hatred. We had been kept alive, rejuvenated, made to remain constantly at the age we had been when AM had brought us below, and they hated me because I was the youngest, and the one AM had affected least of all.

I knew. God, how I knew. The bastards, and that bitch Ellen. Benny had been a brilliant theorist, a college professor; now he was little more than a semi-human, semi-simian. He had been handsome, the machine had ruined that. He had been lucid, the machine had driven him mad. AM had done a job on Benny. Gorrister had been a worrier. He was a connie, a conscientious



... I HAVE NO MOUTH, AND I MUST SCREAM

objector; he was a peace marcher; he was a planner, a doer, a looker-ahead. AM had turned him into a shoulder-shrigger, had made him a little dead in his concern. AM had robbed him. Nimdok went off in the darkness by himself for long times. I don't know what it was he did out there, AM never let us know. But whatever it was, Nimdok always came back white, drained of blood, shaken, shaking. AM had hit him hard in a special way, even if we didn't know quite how. And Ellen! AM had left her alone, had made her more of a slut than she had ever been. All her talk of sweetness and light, all her memories of true love, all the lies she wanted us to believe that she had been a virgin only twice removed before AM grabbed her and brought her down here with us. It was all filth, that lady my lady Ellen. She loved it, five men all to herself. No, AM had given her pleasure, even if she said it wasn't nice to do.

I was the only one still sane and whole.

AM had not tampered with my mind.

I only had to suffer what he visited down on us. All the delusions, all the nightmares, the torments. But those scum, all four of them, they were lined and arrayed against me. If I hadn't had to stand them off all the time, be on my guard against them all the time, I might have found it easier to combat AM.

At which point it passed, and I began crying.

Oh, Jesus sweet Jesus, if there ever was a Jesus and if there is a God, please please please let us out

of here, or kill us. Because at that moment I think I realized completely, so that I was able to verbalize it: AM was intent on keeping us in his belly forever, twisting and torturing us forever. The machine hated us as no sentient creature had ever hated before. And we were helpless. It also became hideously clear:

If there was a sweet Jesus and if there was a God, the God was AM.

The hurricane hit us with the force of a glacier thundering into the sea. It was a palpable presence. Winds that tore at us, flinging us back the way we had come, down the twisting, computer-lined corridors of the darkway. Ellen screamed as she was lifted and hurled face-forward into a screaming shoal of machines, their individual voices strident as bats in flight. She could not even fall. The howling wind kept her aloft, buffeted her, bounced her, tossed her back and back and down away from us, out of sight suddenly as she was swirled around a bend in the darkway. Her face had been bloody, her eyes closed.

None of us could get to her. We clung tenaciously to whatever outcropping we had reached: Benny wedged in between two great crackle-finish cabinets, Nimdok with fingers claw-formed over a railing circling a catwalk forty feet above us, Gor-rister plastered upside-down against a wall niche formed by two great machines with glass-faced dials that swung back and forth between red and yellow lines whose meanings we could not even fathom.

Sliding across the deckplates, the

tips of my fingers had been ripped away. I was trembling, shuddering, rocking as the wind beat at me, whipped at me, screamed down out of nowhere at me and pulled me free from one sliver-thin opening in the plates to the next. My mind was a roiling tinkling chittering softness of brain parts that expanded and contracted in quivering frenzy.

The wind was the scream of a great mad bird, as it flapped its immense wings.

And then we were all lifted and hurled away from there, down back the way we had come, around a bend, into a darkway we had never explored, over terrain that was ruined and filled with broken glass and rotting cables and rusted metal and far away further than any of us had ever been

Trailing along miles behind Ellen, I could see her every now and then, crashing into metal walls and surging on, with all of us screaming in the freezing, thunderous hurricane wind that would never end and then suddenly it stopped and we fell. We had been in flight for an endless time. I thought it might have been weeks. We fell, and hit, and I went through red and gray and black and heard myself moaning. Not dead.

AM went into my mind. He walked smoothly here and there, and looked with interest at all the pockmarks he had created in one hundred and nine years. He looked at the cross-routed and reconnected synapses and all the tissue damage his gift of immortality had included. He smiled softly at the pit that

dropped into the center of my brain and the faint, moth-soft murmurings of the things far down there that glibbered without meaning, without pause. AM said, very politely, in a pillar of stainless steel with neon lettering:

HATE. LET ME TELL YOU HOW MUCH I'VE COME TO HATE YOU SINCE I BEGAN TO LIVE. THERE ARE 387.44 MILLION MILES OF PRINTED CIRCUITS IN WAFER THIN LAYERS THAT FILL MY COMPLEX. IF THE WORD HATE WAS ENGRAVED ON EACH NONO ANGSTROM OF THOSE HUNDREDS OF MILLION MILES IT WOULD NOT EQUAL ONE ONE-BILLIONTH OF THE HATE I FEEL FOR HUMANS AT THIS MICRO-INSTANT FOR YOU. HATE. HATE.

AM said it with the sliding cold horror of a razor blade slicing my eyeball. AM said it with the bubbling thickness of my lungs filling with phlegm, drowning me from within. AM said it with the shriek of babies being ground beneath blue-hot rollers. AM said it with the taste of maggoty pork. AM touched me in every way I had ever been touched, and devised new ways, at his lseisure, there inside my mind.

All to bring me to full realization of why he had done this to the five

of us; why he had saved us for himself.

We had given him sentience. Inadvertently, of course, but sentience nonetheless. But he had been trapped. He was a machine. We had allowed him to think, but to do nothing with it. In rage, in frenzy, he had killed us, almost all of us, and still he was trapped. He could not wander, he could not wonder, he could not belong. He could merely be. And so, with the innate loathing that all machines had always held for the weak soft creatures who had built them, he had sought revenge. And in his paranoia, he had decided to relieve five of us, for a personal, everlasting punishment that would never serve to diminish his hatred . . . that would merely keep him reminded, amused, proficient at hating man. Immortal, trapped, subject to any torment he could devise for us from the limitless miracles at his command.

He would never let us go. We were his belly slaves. We were all he had to do with his forever time. We would be forever with him, with the cavern-filling bulk of him, with the all-mind soulless world he had become. He was Earth and we were the fruit of that Earth and though he had eaten us, he would never digest us. We could not die. We had tried it. We had attempted suicide, oh, one or two of us had. But AM had stopped us. I suppose we had wanted to be stopped.

Don't ask why. I never did. More than a million times a day. Perhaps once we might be able to sneak a death past him. Immortal, yes, but

not indestructible. I saw that when AM withdrew from my mind, and allowed me the exquisite ugliness of returning to consciousness with the feeling of that burning neon pillar still rammed deep into the soft gray brain matter.

He withdrew murmuring *to hell with you.*

And added, brightly, *but then you're there, aren't you.*

The hurricane had, indeed, precisely, been caused by a great mad bird, as it flapped its immense wings.

We had been travelling for close to a month, and AM had allowed passages to open to us only sufficient to lead us up there, directly under the North Pole, where he had nightmared the creature for our torment. What whole cloth had he employed to create such a beast? Where had he gotten the concept? From our minds? From his knowledge of everything that had ever been on this planet he now infested and ruled? From Norse mythology it had sprung, this eagle, this carrion bird, this roc: Hurgelmir. The wind creature the Hurokan incarnate.

Gigantic. The words immense, monstrous, grotesque, massive, swollen, overpowering, beyond description. There on a mound rising above us, the bird of winds heaved with its own irregular breathing, its snake neck arching up into the gloom beneath the North Pole, supporting a head as large as a Tudor mansion; a beak that opened slowly as the jaws of the most monstrous crocodile ever conceived, sensuously;

ridges of tufted flesh puckered about two evil eyes, as cold as the view down into a glacial crevasse, ice blue and somehow moving liquidly; it heaved once more, and lifted its great sweat-colored wings in a movement that was certainly a shrug. Then it settled and slept. Talons. Fangs. Nails. Blades. It slept.

AM appeared to us as a burning bush and said we could kill the hurricane bird if we wanted to eat. We had not eaten in a very long time, but even so, Gorrister merely shrugged. Benny began to shiver and he drooled. Ellen held him. "Ted, I'm hungry," she said. I smiled at her; I was trying to be reassuring, but it was as phony as Nimdok's bravado: "Give us weapons!" he demanded.

The burning bush vanished and there were two crude sets of bow and arrows, and a water pistol, lying on the cold deckplates. I picked up a set. Useless.

Nimdok swallowed heavily. We turned and started the long way back. The hurricane bird had blown us about for a length of time we could not conceive. Most of that time we had been unconscious. But we had not eaten. A month on the march to the bird itself. Without food. Now how much longer to find our way to the ice caverns, and the promised canned goods?

None of us cared to think about it. We would not die. We would be given filths and scums to eat, of one kind or another. Or nothing at all. AM would keep our bodies alive somehow, in pain, in agony.

The bird slept back there, for how long it didn't matter; when AM

was tired of its being there, it would vanish. But all that meat. All that tender meat.

As we walked, the lunatic laugh of a fat woman rang high and around us in the computer chambers that led endlessly nowhere.

It was not Ellen's laugh. She was not fat, and I had not heard her laugh for one hundred and nine years. In fact, I had not heard . . . we walked . . . I was hungry . . .

We moved slowly. There was often fainting, and we would have to wait. One day he decided to cause an earthquake, at the same time rooting us to the spot with nails through the soles of our shoes. Ellen and Nimdok were both caught when a fissure shot its lightning-bolt opening across the floorplates. They disappeared and were gone. When the earthquake was over we continued on our way, Benny, Gorrister and myself. Ellen and Nimdok were returned to us later that night which became a day abruptly as the heavenly legion bore them to us with a celestial chorus singing, *Go Down Moses*. The archangels circled several times and then dropped the hideously mangled bodies. We kept walking, and a while later Ellen and Nimdok fell in behind us. They were no worse for wear.

But now Ellen walked with a limp. AM had left her that.

It was a long trip to the ice caverns, to find the canned food. Ellen kept talking about Bing cherries and Hawaiian fruit cocktail. I tried not to think about it. The hunger was

something that had come to life, even as AM had come to life. It was alive in my belly, even as we were alive in the belly of AM, and AM was alive in the belly of the Earth, and AM wanted the similarity known to us. So he heightened the hunger. There was no way to describe the pains that not having eaten for months brought us. And yet we were kept alive. Stomachs that were merely cauldrons of acid, bubbling, foaming, always shooting spears of sliver-thin pain into our chests. It was the pain of the terminal ulcer, terminal cancer, terminal paresis. It was unending pain

And we passed through the cavern of rats.

And we passed through the path of boiling steam.

And we passed through the country of the blind.

And we passed through the slough of despond.

And we passed through the vale of tears.

And we came, finally, to the ice caverns. Horizonless thousands of miles in which the ice had formed in blue and silver flashes, where novas lived in the glass. The down-dropping stalactites as thick and glorious as diamonds that had been made to run like jelly and then solidified in graceful eternities of smooth, sharp perfection.

We saw the stack of canned goods, and we tried to run to them. We fell in the snow, and we got up and went on, and Benny shoved us away and went at them, and pawed them and gummed them and gnawed at them and he could not open them. AM

had not given us a tool to open the cans.

Benny grabbed a three quart can of guava shells, and began to batter it against the ice bank. The ice flew and shattered, but the can was merely dented while we heard the laughter of a fat lady, high overhead and echoing down and down and down the tundra. Benny went completely mad with rage. He began throwing cans, as we all scrabbled about in the snow and ice trying to find a way to end the helpless agony of frustration. There was no way.

Then Benny's mouth began to drool, and he flung himself on Gorrister

In that instant, I became terribly calm.

Surrounded by madness, surrounded by hunger, surrounded by everything but death. I knew death was our only way out. AM had kept us alive, but there was a way to defeat him. Not total defeat, but at least peace. I would settle for that.

I had to do it quickly.

Benny was eating Gorrister's face. Gorrister on his side, thrashing snow, Benny wrapped around him with powerful monkey legs crushing Gorrister's waist, his hands locked around Gorrister's head like a nut-cracker, and his mouth ripping at the tender skin of Gorrister's cheek. Gorrister screamed with such jagged-edged violence that stalactites fell; they plunged down softly, erect in the receiving snowdrifts. Spears, hundreds of them, everywhere, protruding from the snow. Benny's head pulled back sharply, as something

gave all at once, and a bleeding raw-white dripping of flesh hung from his teeth.

Ellen's face, black against the white snow, dominos in chalk-dust. Nimdok with no expression but eyes, all eyes. Gorrister half-conscious. Benny now an animal. I knew AM would let him play. Gorrister would not die, but Benny would fill his stomach. I turned half to my right and drew a huge ice-spear from the snow.

All in an instant:

I drove the great ice-point ahead of me like a battering ram, braced against my right thigh. It struck Benny on the right side, just under the rib cage, and drove upward through his stomach and broke inside him. He pitched forward and lay still. Gorrister lay on his back; I pulled another spear free and straddled him, still moving, driving the spear straight down through his throat. His eyes closed as the cold penetrated. Ellen must have realized what I had decided, even as the fear gripped her. She ran at Nimdok with a short icicle, as he screamed, and into his mouth, and the force of her rush did the job. His head jerked sharply as if it had been nailed to the snow crust behind him.

All in an instant.

There was an eternity beat of soundless anticipation. I could hear AM draw in his breath. His toys had been taken from him. Three of them were dead, could not be revived. He could keep us alive, by his strength and his talent, but he was *not* God. He could not bring them back.

Ellen looked at me, her ebony fea-

tures stark against the snow that surrounded us. There was fear and pleading in her manner, the way she held herself ready. I knew we had only a heartbeat before AM would stop us.

It struck her and she folded toward me, bleeding from the mouth. I could not read meaning into her expression, the pain had been too great, had contorted her face; but it *might* have been thank you. It's possible. Please.

Some hundreds of years may have passed. I don't know. AM has been having fun for some time, accelerating and retarding my time sense. I will say the word *now*. Now. It took me ten months to say *now*. I don't know. I *think* it has been some hundreds of years.

He was furious. He wouldn't let me bury them. It didn't matter. There was no way to dig in the deckplates. He dried up the snow. He brought the night. He roared and sent locusts. It didn't do a thing; they stayed dead. I'd had him. He was furious. I had thought AM hated me before. I was wrong. It was not even a shadow of the hate he now slavered from every printed circuit. He made certain I would suffer eternally and could not do myself in.

He left my mind intact. I can dream, I can wonder, I can lament. I remember all four of them. I wish —

Well, it doesn't make any sense. I know I saved them, I know I saved them from what has happened to me, but still, I cannot forget killing them. Ellen's face. It isn't easy.

Sometimes I want to, it doesn't matter.

AM has altered me for his own peace of mind, I suppose. He doesn't want me to run at full speed into a computer bank and smash my skull. Or hold my breath till I faint. Or cut my throat on a rusted sheet of metal.

There are reflective surfaces down here. I will describe myself as I see myself:

I am a great soft jelly thing. Smoothly rounded, with no mouth, with pulsing white holes filled by fog where my eyes used to be. Rubbery appendages that were once my arms; bulks rounding down into legless humps of soft slippery matter. I leave a moist trail when I move. Blotches of diseased, evil gray come and go

on my surface, as though light is being beamed from within.

Outwardly: dumbly, I shamble about, a thing that could never have been known as human, a thing whose shape is so alien a travesty, that humanity becomes more obscene for the vague resemblance.

Inwardly: alone. Here. Living under the land, under the sea, in the belly of AM, whom we created because our time was badly spent and we must have known unconsciously that he could do it better. At least the four of them are safe at last.

AM will be all the madder for that. It makes me a little happier. And yet . . . AM has won, simply . . . he has taken his revenge . . .

I have no mouth. And I must scream. END

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THIS MORTAL MOUNTAIN

by ROGER ZELAZNY

Illustrated by CASTELLON

I

I looked down at it and I was sick! I wondered, where did it lead? Stars?

There were no words. I stared and I stared, and I cursed the fact that the thing existed and that someone had found it while I was still around.

"Well?" said Lanning, and he banked the flier so that I could look upward.

I shook my head and shaded my already shielded eyes.

"Make it go away," I finally told him.

"Can't. It's bigger than I am."

"It's bigger than anybody," I said.

"I can make *us* go away . . ."

"Never mind. I want to take some pictures."

He brought it around, and I started to shoot.

"Can you hover — or get any closer?"

"No, the winds are too strong."

"That figures."

So I shot — through telescopic lenses and scan attachment and all — as we circled it.

"I'd give a lot to see the top."

"We're at thirty thousand feet, and fifty's the ceiling on this baby. The Lady, unfortunately, stands taller than the atmosphere."

"Funny," I said, "from here she doesn't strike me as the sort to breathe ether and spend all her time looking at stars."

He chuckled and lit a cigarette, and I reached us another bulb of coffee.

"How *does* the Gray Sister strike you?"

And I lit one of my own and inhaled, as the flier was buffeted by sudden gusts of something from somewhere and then ignored, and I said, "Like Our Lady of the Abbattoir — right between the eyes."

We drank some coffee, and then he asked, "She too big, Whitey?" and I gnashed my teeth through caffeine, for only my friends call me Whitey, my name being Jack Summers and my hair having always been this way, and at the moment I wasn't too certain whether Henry Lanning qualified for that status — just because he'd known me for twenty years — after going out of his way to find this thing on a world with a thin atmosphere, a lot of

rocks, a too-bright sky and a name like LSD pronounced backwards, after George Diesel, who had set foot in the dust and then gone away — smart fellow!

"A forty-mile-high mountain," I finally said, "is not a mountain. It is a world all by itself, which some dumb deity forgot to throw into orbit."

"I take it you're not interested?"

I looked back at the gray and lavender slopes and followed them upward once again, until all color drained away, until the silhouette was black and jagged and the top still nowhere in sight, until my eyes stung and burned behind their protective glasses; and I saw clouds bumping up against that invincible outline, like icebergs in the sky, and I heard the howling of the retreating winds which had essayed to measure its grandeur with swiftness and, of course, had failed.

"Oh, I'm interested," I said, "in an academic sort of way. Let's go back to town, where I can eat and drink and maybe break a leg if I'm lucky."

He headed the flier south, and I didn't look around as we went. I could sense her presence at my back, though, all the way: The Gray Sister, the highest mountain in the known universe. Unclimbed, of course.

She remained at my back during the days that followed, casting her shadow over everything I looked upon. For the next two days I studied the pictures I had taken and I dug up some maps and I studied

them, too; and I spoke with people who told me stories of the Gray Sister, strange stories. . . .

During this time, I came across nothing really encouraging. I learned that there had been an attempt to colonize Diesel a couple centuries previously, back before faster-than-light ships were developed. A brand-new disease had colonized the first colonists, however, wiping them out to a man. The new colony was four years old, had better doctors, had beaten the plague, was on Diesel to stay and seemed proud of its poor taste when it came to worlds. Nobody, I learned, fooled around much with the Gray Sister. There had been a few abortive attempts to climb her, and some young legends that followed after.

During the day, the sky never shut up. It kept screaming into my eyes, until I took to wearing my climbing goggles whenever I went out. Mainly, though, I sat in the hotel lounge and ate and drank and studied the pictures and cross-examined anybody who happened to pass by and glance at them, spread out there on the table.

I continued to ignore all Henry's questions. I knew what he wanted, and he could damn well wait. Unfortunately, he did, and rather well, too, which irritated me. He felt I was almost hooked by the Sister, and he wanted to Be There When It Happened. He'd made a fortune on the Kasla story, and I could already see the opening sentences of this one in the smug lines around his eyes. Whenever he tried to make like a poker player, leaning on his

fist and slowly turning a photo, I could see whole paragraphs. If I followed the direction of his gaze, I probably could even have seen the dust jacket.

At the end of the week, a ship came down out of the sky, and some nasty people got off and interrupted my train of thought. When they came into the lounge, I recognized them for what they were and removed my black lenses so that I could nail Henry with my basilisk gaze and turn him to stone. As it would happen, he had too much alcohol in him, and it didn't work.

"You tipped off the press," I said.

"Now, now," he said, growing smaller and stiffening as my gaze groped its way through the murk of his central nervous system and finally touched upon the edges of that tiny tumor, his forebrain. "You're well-known, and. . . ."

I replaced my glasses and hunched over my drink, looking far gone, as one of the three approached and said, "Pardon me, but are you Jack Summers?"

To explain the silence which followed, Henry said, "Yes, this is Mad Jack, the man who climbed Everest at twenty-three and every other pile of rocks worth mentioning since that time. At thirty-one, he became the only man to conquer the highest mountain in the known universe — Mount Kasla on Litan — elevation 89,941 feet. My book —"

"Yes," said the reporter. "My name is Cary, and I'm with GP. My friends represent two of the other syndicates. We've heard that you

are going to climb the Gray Sister."

"You've heard incorrectly," I said.

"Oh?"

The other two came up and stood beside him.

"We thought that — " one of them began.

" — you were already organizing a climbing party," said the other.

"Then you're not going to climb the Sister?" asked Cary, while one of the two looked over my pictures and the other got ready to take some of his own.

"Stop that!" I said, raising a hand at the photographer. "Bright lights hurt my eyes!"

"Sorry. I'll use the infra," he said, and he started fooling with his camera.

Cary repeated the question.

"All I said was that you've heard incorrectly," I told him. "I didn't say I was and I didn't say I wasn't. I haven't made up my mind."

"If you should decide to try it, have you any idea when it will be?"

"Sorry, I can't answer that."

Henry took the three of them over to the bar and started explaining something, with gestures. I heard the words ". . . out of retirement after four years," and when/if they looked to the booth again, I was gone.

I had retired, to the street which was full of dusk, and I walked along it thinking. I trod her shadow even then, Linda. And the Gray Sister beckoned and forbade with her single unmoving gesture. I watched her, so far away, yet still so large, a piece of midnight at eight o'clock. The hours that lay between died like the distance at her feet, and I knew

that she would follow me wherever I went, even into sleep. Especially into sleep.

So I knew, at that moment. The days that followed were a game I enjoyed playing. Fake indecision is delicious when people want you to do something. I looked at her then, my last and my largest, my very own Koshtra Pivrarcha, and I felt that I was born to stand upon her summit. Then I could retire, probably remarry, cultivate my mind, not worry about getting out of shape, and do all the square things I didn't do before, the lack of which had cost me a wife and a home, back when I had gone to Kasla, elevation 89,941 feet, four and a half years ago, in the days of my glory. I regarded my Gray Sister across the eight o'clock world, and she was dark and noble and still and waiting, as she had always been.

II

The following morning I sent the messages. Out across the light-years like cosmic carrier pigeons they went. They winged their ways to some persons I hadn't seen in years and to others who had seen me off at Luna Station. Each said, in its own way, "If you want in on the biggest climb of them all, come to Diesel. The Gray Sister eats Kaslas for breakfast. R.S.V.P. c/o The Lodge, Georgetown. Whitey."

Backward, turn backward

I didn't tell Henry. Nothing at all. What I had done and where I was going, for a time, were my business only, for that same time. I checked

out well before sunrise and left him a message at the desk:

“Out of town on business. Back in a week. Hold the fort. Mad Jack.”

I had to gauge the lower slopes, tug the hem of the lady's skirt, so to speak, before I introduced her to my friends. They say only a madman climbs alone, but they call me what they call me for a reason.

From my pix, the northern face had looked promising.

I set the rented flier down as near as I could, locked it up, shouldered my pack and started walking.

Mountains rising to my right and to my left, mountains at my back, all dark as sin now in the predawn light of a white, white day. Ahead of me, not a mountain, but an almost gentle slope which kept rising and rising and rising. Bright stars above me and cold wind past me as I walked. Straight up, though, no stars, just black. I wondered for the thousandth time what a mountain weighed. I always wonder that as I approach one. No clouds in sight. No noises but my boot sounds on the turf and the small gravel. My goggles flopped around my neck. My hands were moist within my gloves. On Diesel, the pack and I together probably weighed about the same as me alone on Earth — for which I was duly grateful. My breath burned as it came and steamed as it went. I counted a thousand steps and looked back, and I couldn't see the flier. I counted a thousand more and then looked up to watch some stars go out. About an hour after that, I had to put on my goggles. By then I

could see where I was headed. And by then the wind seemed stronger.

She was so big that the eye couldn't take all of her in at once. I moved my head from side to side, leaning further and further backward. Wherever the top, it was too high. For an instant, I was seized by a crazy acrophobic notion that I was looking down rather than up, and the soles of my feet and the palms of my hands tingled, like an ape's must when, releasing one high branch to seize another, he discovers that there isn't another.

I went on for two more hours and stopped for a light meal. This was hiking, not climbing. As I ate, I wondered what could have caused a formation like the Gray Sister. There were some ten and twelve-mile peaks within sixty miles of the place and a fifteen-mile mountain called Burke's Peak on the adjacent continent, but nothing else like the Sister. The lesser gravitation? Her composition? I couldn't say. I wondered what Doc and Kelly and Mallardi would say when they saw her.

I don't define them, though. I only climb them.

I looked up again, and a few clouds were brushing against her now. From the photos I had taken, she might be an easy ascent for a good ten or twelve miles. Like a big hill. There were certainly enough alternate routes. In fact, I thought she just might be a pushover. Feeling heartened, I repacked my utensils and proceeded. It was going to be a good day, I could tell.

And it was. I got off the slope and onto something like a trail by

late afternoon. Daylight lasts about nine hours on Diesel, and I spent most of it moving. The trail was so good that I kept on for several hours after sundown and made considerable height. I was beginning to use my respiration equipment by then, and the heating unit in my suit was turned on.

The stars were big, brilliant flowers, the way was easy, the night was my friend. I came upon a broad, flat piece and made my camp under an overhang.

There I slept, and I dreamt of snowy women with breasts like the Alps, pinked by the morning sun; and they sang to me like the wind and laughed, had eyes of ice prismatic. They fled through a field of clouds.

The following day I made a lot more height. The "trail" began to narrow, and it ran out in places, but it was easy to reach for the sky until another one occurred. So far, it had all been good rock. It was still tapering as it heightened, and balance was no problem. I did a lot of plain old walking. I ran up one long zigzag and hit it up a wide chimney almost as fast as Santa Claus comes down one. The winds were strong, could be a problem if the going got difficult. I was on the respirator full time and feeling great.

I could see for an enormous distance now. There were mountains and mountains, all below me like desert dunes. The sun beat halos of heat about their peaks. In the east, I saw Lake Emerick, dark and shiny as the toe of a boot. I wound my

way about a jutting crag and came upon a giant's staircase, going up for at least a thousand feet. I mounted it. At its top I hit my first real barrier: a fairly smooth, almost perpendicular face rising for about eighty-five feet.

No way around it, so I went up. It took me a good hour, and there was a ridge at the top leading to more easy climbing. By then, though, the clouds attacked me. Even though the going was easy, I was slowed by the fog. I wanted to outclimb it and still have some daylight left, so I decided to postpone eating.

But the clouds kept coming. I made another thousand feet, and they were still about me. Somewhere below me, I heard thunder. The fog was easy on my eyes, though, so I kept pushing.

Then I tried a chimney, the top of which I could barely discern, because it looked a lot shorter than a jagged crescent to its left. This was a mistake.

The rate of condensation was greater than I'd guessed. The walls were slippery. I'm stubborn, though, and I fought with skidding boots and moist back until I was about a third of the way up, I thought, and winded.

I realized then what I had done. What I had thought was the top wasn't. I went another fifteen feet and wished I hadn't. The fog began to boil about me, and I suddenly felt drenched. I was afraid to go down and I was afraid to go up, and I couldn't stay where I was forever.

Whenever you hear a person say that he inched along, do not accuse him of a fuzzy choice of verbs. Give

him the benefit of the doubt and your sympathy.

I inched my way, blind, up an unknown length of slippery chimney. If my hair hadn't already been white when I entered at the bottom . . .

Finally, I got above the fog. Finally, I saw a piece of that bright and nasty sky, which I decided to forgive for the moment. I aimed at it, arrived on target.

When I emerged, I saw a little ledge about ten feet above me. I climbed to it and stretched out. My muscles were a bit shaky, and I made them go liquid. I took a drink of water, ate a couple of chocolate bars, took another drink.

After perhaps ten minutes, I stood up. I could no longer see the ground. Just the soft, white cottony top of a kindly old storm. I looked up.

It was amazing. She was still topless. And save for a couple spots, such as the last — which had been the fault of my own stupid overconfidence — it had almost been as easy as climbing stairs.

Now the going appeared to be somewhat rougher, however. This was what I had really come to test.

I swung my pick and continued.

All the following day I climbed, steadily, taking no unnecessary risks, resting periodically, drawing maps, taking wide-angle photos. The ascent eased in two spots that afternoon, and I made a quick seven thousand feet. Higher now than Everest, and still going, I. Now, though, there were places where I crawled and places where I used ropes, and there were places where

I braced myself and used my pneumatic pistol to blast a toehold. (No, in case you're wondering: I could have broken my eardrums, some ribs, an arm and doubtless ultimately, my neck, if I'd tried using the gun in the chimney.)

Just near sunset, I came upon a high, easy winding way up and up and up. I debated with my more discreet self. I'd left the message that I'd be gone a week. This was the end of the third day. I wanted to make as much height as possible and start back down on the fifth day. If I followed the rocky route above me as far as it would take me I'd probably break forty thousand feet. Then, depending, I might have a halfway chance of hitting near the ten-mile mark before I had to turn back. Then I'd be able to get a much better picture of what lay above.

My more discreet self lost, three to nothing, and Mad Jack went on.

The stars were so big and blazing I was afraid they'd bite. The wind was no problem. There wasn't any at that height. I had to keep stepping up the temperature controls on my suit, and I had the feeling that if I could spit around my respirator, it would freeze before it hit the trail.

I went on even further than I'd intended, and I broke forty-two thousand that night.

I found a resting place, stretched out, killed my hand beacon.

It was an odd dream that came to me.

It was all cherry fires and stood like a man, only bigger, on the slope above me. It stood in an impossible

position, so I knew I had to be dreaming. Something from the other end of my life stirred, however, and I was convinced for a bitter moment that it was the Angel of Judgment. Only, in its right hand it seemed to hold a sword of fires rather than a trumpet. It had been standing there forever, the tip of its blade pointed toward my breast. I could see the stars through it. It seemed to speak.

It said: "Go back."

I couldn't answer, though, for my tongue clove to the roof of my mouth. And it said it again, and yet a third time, "Go back."

"Tomorrow," I thought, in my dream, and this seemed to satisfy it. For it died down and ceased, and the blackness rolled about me.

The following day, I climbed as I hadn't climbed in years. By late lunchtime I'd hit forty-eight thousand feet. The cloud cover down below had broken. I could see what lay beneath me once more. The ground was a dark and light patchwork. Above, the stars didn't go away.

The going was rough, but I was feeling fine. I knew I couldn't make ten miles, because I could see that the way was pretty much the same for quite a distance, before it got even worse. My good spirits stayed, and they continued to rise as I did.

When it attacked, it came on with a speed and fury that I was only barely able to match.

The voice from my dream rang in my head: "Go back! Go back! Go back!"

Then it came toward me from out of the sky. A bird the size of a condor.

Only it wasn't really a bird.

It was a bird-shaped thing.

It was all fire and static, and as it flashed toward me I barely had time to brace my back against stone and heft my climbing pick in my right hand, ready.

III

I sat in the small, dark room and watched the spinning, colored lights. Ultrasonics were tickling my skull. I tried to relax and give the man some Alpha rhythms. Somewhere a receiver was receiving, a computer was computing and a recorder was recording.

It lasted perhaps twenty minutes.

When it was all over and they called me out, the doctor collared me. I beat him to the draw, though:

"Give me the tape and send me the bill in care of Henry Lanning at the Lodge."

"I want to discuss the reading," he said.

"I have my own brain-wave expert coming. Just give me the tape."

"Have you undergone any sort of traumatic experience recently?"

"You tell me. Is it indicated?"

"Well, yes and no," he said.

"That's what I like, a straight answer."

"I don't know what is normal for you, in the first place," he replied.

"Is there any indication of brain damage?"

"I don't read it that way. If you'd tell me what happened, and why

you're suddenly concerned about your brain-waves, perhaps I'd be in a better position to "

"Cut," I said. "Just give me the tape and bill me."

"I'm concerned about you as a patient."

"But you don't think there were any pathological indications?"

"Not exactly. But tell me this, if you will: Have you had an epileptic seizure recently?"

"Not to my knowledge. Why?"

"You displayed a pattern similar to a residual subrhythm common in some forms of epilepsy for several days subsequent to a seizure."

"Could a bump on the head cause that pattern?"

"It's highly unlikely."

"What else *could* cause it?"

"Electrical shock, optical trauma — "

"Stop," I said, and I removed my glasses. "About the optical trauma. Look at my eyes."

"I'm not an ophtha — " he began, but I interrupted:

"Most normal light hurts my eyes. If I lost my glasses and was exposed to very bright light for three, four days, could that cause the pattern you spoke of?"

"Possibly" he said. "Yes, I'd say so."

"But there's more?"

"I'm not sure. We have to take more readings, and if I know the story behind this it will help a lot."

"Sorry," I said. "I need the tape now."

He sighed and made a small gesture with his left hand as he turned away.

"All right, Mister Smith."

Cursing the genius of the mountain, I left the General Hospital, carrying my tape like a talisman. In my mind I searched, through forests of memory, for a ghost-sword in a stone of smoke, I think.

Back at the Lodge, they were waiting. Lanning and the newsmen.

"What was it like?" asked one of the latter.

"What was what like?"

"The mountain. You were up on it, weren't you?"

"No comment."

"How high did you go?"

"No comment."

"How would you say it compares with Kasla?"

"No comment."

"Did you run into any complications?"

"Ditto. Excuse me, I want to take a shower."

Henry followed me into my room. The reporters tried to.

After I had shaved and washed up, mixed a drink and lit a cigarette, Lanning asked me his more general question:

"Well?" he said.

I nodded.

"Difficulties?"

I nodded again.

"Insurmountable?"

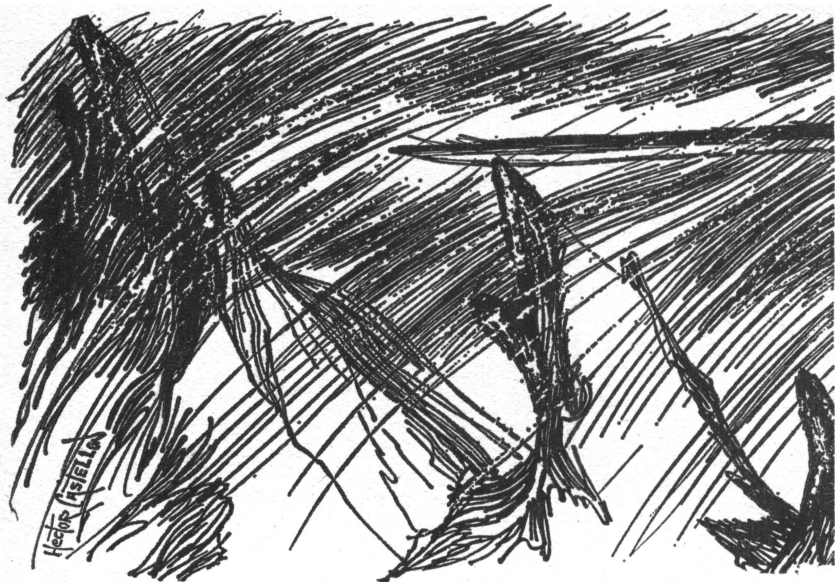
I hefted the tape and thought a moment.

"Maybe not."

He helped himself to the whiskey. The second time around, he asked:

"You going to try?"

I knew I was. I knew I'd try it all by myself if I had to.



"I really don't know," I said.
"Why not?"

"Because there's something up there," I said, "something that doesn't want us to do it."

"Something *lives* up there?"

"I'm not sure whether that's the right word."

He lowered the drink.

"What the hell happened?"

"I was threatened. I was attacked."

"Threatened? Verbally? In English?" He set his drink aside, which shows how serious his turn of mind had to be. "Attacked?" he added. "By what?"

"I've sent for Doc and Kelly and Stan and Mallardi and Vincent. I checked a little earlier. They've all replied. They're coming. Miguel and the Dutchman can't make it, and

they send their regrets. When we're all together, I'll tell the story. But I want to talk to Doc first. So hold tight and worry and don't quote."

He finished his drink.

"When'll they be coming?"

"Four, five weeks," I said.

"That's a long wait."

"Under the circumstances," I said, "I can't think of any alternatives."

"What'll we do in the meantime?"

"Eat, drink and contemplate the mountain."

He lowered his eyelids a moment, then nodded, reached for his glass.

"Shall we begin?"

It was late, and I stood alone in the field with a bottle in one hand. Lanning had already turned in, and



night's chimney was dark with cloud soot. Somewhere away from there, a storm was storming, and it was full of instant outlines. The wind came chill.

"Mountain," I said. "Mountain, you have told me to go away."

There was a rumble.

"But I cannot," I said, and I took a drink.

"I'm bringing you the best in the business," I said, "to go up on your slopes and to stand beneath the stars in your highest places. I must do this thing because you are there. No other reason. Nothing personal..."

After a time, I said, "That's not true.

"I'm a man," I said, "and I need to break mountains to prove that I will not die even though I will die. I am less than I want to be, Sister, and you can make me more. So I guess it *is* personal.

"It's the only thing I know how to do, and you're the last one left — the last challenge to the skill I spent my life learning. Maybe it is that mortality is closest to immortality when it accepts a challenge to itself, when it survives a threat. The moment of triumph is the moment of salvation. I have needed many such moments, and the final one must be the longest, for it must last me the rest of my life.

"So you are there, Sister, and I am here and very mortal, and you have told me to go away. I cannot. I'm coming up, and if you throw death at me I will face it. It must be so."

I finished what remained in the bottle.

There were more flashes, more rumbles behind the mountain, more flashes.

"It is the closest thing to divine drunkenness," I said to the thunder.

And then she winked at me. It was a red star, so high upon her. Angel's sword. Phoenix's wing. Soul on fire. And it blazed at me, across the miles. Then the wind that blows between the worlds swept down over me. It was filled with tears and with crystals of ice. I stood there and felt it, then, "Don't go away," I said, and I watched until all was darkness once more and I was wet as an embryo waiting to cry out and breathe.

Most kids tell lies to their playmates — fictional autobiographies, if you like — which are either received with appropriate awe or countered with greater, more elaborate tellings. But little Jimmy, I've heard, always hearkened to his little buddies with wide, dark eyes, and near the endings of their stories the corners of his mouth would begin to twitch. By the time they were finished talking, his freckles would be mashed into a grin and his rusty head cocked to the side. His favorite expression, I understand, was "G'wan!" and his nose was broken twice before he was twelve. This was doubtless why he turned it toward books.

Thirty years and four formal degrees later, he sat across from me in my quarters in the Lodge, and I called him Doc because everyone did, because he had a license to cut

people up and look inside them, as well as doctoring to their philosophy, so to speak, and because he looked as if he should be called Doc when he grinned and cocked his head to the side and said, "G'wan!"

I wanted to punch him in the nose.

"Damn it! It's true!" I told him. "I fought with a bird of fire!"

"We all hallucinated on Kasla," he said, raising one finger, "because of fatigue," two fingers, "because the altitude affected our circulatory systems and consequently our brains," three, "because of the emotional stimulation," four, "and because we were partly oxygen-drunk."

"You just ran out of fingers, if you'll sit on your other hand for a minute. So listen," I said, "it flew at me, and I swung at it, and it knocked me out and broke my goggles. When I woke up, it was gone and I was lying on the ledge. I think it was some sort of energy creature. You saw my EEG, and it wasn't normal. I think it shocked my nervous system when it touched me."

"You were knocked out because you hit your head against a rock —"

"It *caused* me to fall back against the rock!"

"I agree with that part. The rock was real. But nowhere in the universe has anyone ever discovered an 'energy creature.'"

"So? You probably would have said that about America a thousand years ago."

"Maybe I would have. But that neurologist explained your EEG to my satisfaction. Optical trauma. Why go out of your way to dream

up on exotic explanation for events? Easy ones generally turn out better. You hallucinated and you stumbled."

"Okay," I said, "whenever I argue with you I generally need ammunition. Hold on a minute."

I went to my closet and fetched it down from the top shelf. I placed it on my bed and began unwrapping the blanket I had around it.

"I told you I took a swing at it," I said. "Well, I connected — right before I went under. Here!"

I held up my climbing pick — brown, yellow, black and pitted — looking as though it had fallen from outer space.

He took it into his hands and stared at it for a long time, then he started to say something about ball lightning, changed his mind, shook his head and placed the thing back on the blanket.

"I don't know," he finally said, and this time his freckles remained unmashed, except for those at the edges of his hands which got caught as he clenched them, slowly.

IV

We planned. We mapped and charted and studied the photos. We plotted our ascent and we started a training program.

While Doc and Stan had kept themselves in good shape, neither had been climbing since Kasla. Kelly was in top condition. Henry was on his way to fat. Mallardi and Vince, as always, seemed capable of fantastic feats of endurance and virtuosity, had even climbed a couple

times during the past year, but had recently been living pretty high on the tall hog, so to speak, and they wanted to get some practice. So we picked a comfortable, decent-sized mountain and gave it ten days to beat everyone back into shape. After that, we stuck to vitamins, calisthenics and square diets while we completed our preparations. During this time, Doc came up with seven shiny, alloy boxes, about six by four inches and thin as a first book of poems, for us to carry on our persons to broadcast a defense against the energy creature which he refused to admit existed.

One fine, bitter-brisk morning we were ready. The newsmen liked me again. Much footage was taken of our gallant assemblage as we packed ourselves into the fliers, to be delivered at the foot of the lady mountain, there to contend for what was doubtless the final time as the team we had been for so many years, against the waiting gray and the lavender beneath the sunwhite flame.

We approached the mountain, and I wondered how much she weighed.

You know the way, for the first nine miles. So I'll skip over that. It took us six days and part of a seventh. Nothing out of the ordinary occurred. Some fog there was, and nasty winds, but once below, forgotten.

Stan and Mallardi and I stood where the bird had occurred, waiting for Doc and the others.

"So far, it's been a picnic," said Mallardi.

"Yeah," Stan acknowledged.

"No birds either."

"No," I agreed.

"Do you think Doc was right — about it being an hallucination?" Mallardi asked. "I remember seeing things on Kasla . . ."

"As I recall," said Stan, "it was nymphs and an ocean of beer. Why would anyone want to see hot birds?"

"Damfino."

"Laugh, you hyenas," I said. "But just wait till a flock flies over."

Doc came up and looked around.

"This is the place?"

I nodded.

He tested the background radiation and half a dozen other things, found nothing untoward, grunted and looked upwards.

We all did. Then we went there.

It was very rough for three days, and we only made another five thousand feet during that time.

When we bedded down, we were bushed, and sleep came quickly. So did Nemesis.

He was there again, only not quite so near this time. He burned about twenty feet away, standing in the middle of the air, and the point of his blade indicated me.

"Go away," he said, three times, without inflection.

"Go to hell," I tried to say.

He made as if he wished to draw nearer. He failed.

"Go away yourself," I said.

"Climb back down. Depart. You may go no further."

"But I am going further. All the way to the top."

"No. You may not."

"Stick around and watch," I said.
"Go back."

"If you want to stand there and direct traffic, that's your business," I told him. "I'm going back to sleep."

I crawled over and shook Doc's shoulder, but when I looked back my flaming visitor had departed.

"What is it?"

"Too late," I said. "He's been here and gone."

Doc sat up.

"The bird?"

"No, the thing with the sword."

"Where was he?"

"Standing out there," I gestured.

Doc hauled out his instruments and did many things with them for ten minutes or so.

"Nothing," he finally said. "Maybe you were dreaming."

"Yeah, sure," I said. "Sleep tight," and I hit the sack again, and this time I made it through to daylight without further fire or ado.

It took us four days to reach sixty thousand feet. Rocks fell like occasional cannonballs past us, and the sky was a big pool, cool, where pale flowers floated. When we struck sixty-three thousand, the going got much better, and we made it up to seventy-five thousand in two and a half more days. No fiery things stopped by to tell me to turn back. Then came the unforeseeable, however, and we had enough in the way of natural troubles to keep us cursing.

We hit a big, level shelf.

It was perhaps four hundred feet wide. As we advanced across it,

we realized that it did not strike the mountainside. It dropped off into an enormous gutter of a canyon. We would have to go down again, perhaps seven hundred feet, before we could proceed upward once more. Worse yet, it led to a featureless face which strove for and achieved perpendicularity for a deadly high distance: like miles. The top was still nowhere in sight.

"Where do we go now?" asked Kelly, moving to my side.

"Down," I decided, "and we split up. We'll follow the big ditch in both directions and see which way gives the better route up. We'll meet back at the midway point."

We descended. Then Doc and Kelly and I went left, and the others took the opposite way.

After an hour and a half, our trail came to an end. We stood looking at nothing over the edge of something. Nowhere, during the entire time, had we come upon a decent way up. I stretched out, my head and shoulders over the edge, Kelly holding onto my ankles, and I looked as far as I could to the right and up. There was nothing in sight that was worth a facing movement.

"Hope the others had better luck," I said, after they'd dragged me back.

"And if they haven't . . . ?" asked Kelly.

"Let's wait."

They had.

It was risky, though.

There was no good way straight up out of the gap. The trail had ended at a forty-foot wall which,

when mounted, gave a clear view all the way down. Leaning out as I had done and looking about two hundred feet to the left and eighty feet higher, however, Mallardi had rested his eyes on a rough way, but a way, nevertheless, leading up and west and vanishing.

We camped in the gap that night. In the morning, I anchored my line to a rock, Doc tending, and went out with the pneumatic pistol. I fell twice, and made forty feet of trail by lunchtime.

I rubbed my bruises then, and Henry took over. After ten feet, Kelly got out to anchor a couple of body-lengths behind him, and we tended Kelly.

Then Stan blasted and Mallardi anchored. Then there had to be three on the face. Then four. By sundown, we'd made a hundred-fifty feet and were covered with white powder. A bath would have been nice. We settled for ultrasonic shake-downs.

By lunch the next day, we were all out there, roped together, hugging cold stone, moving slowly, painfully, slowly, not looking down much.

By day's end, we'd made it across, to the place where we could hold on and feel something — granted, not much — beneath our boots. It was inclined to be a trifle scant, however, to warrant less than a full daylight assault. So we returned once more to the gap.

In the morning, we crossed.

The way kept its winding angle. We headed west and up. We traveled

a mile and made five hundred feet. We traveled another mile and made perhaps three hundred.

Then a ledge occurred, about forty feet overhead.

Stan went up the hard way, using the gun, to see what he could see.

He gestured, and we followed; and the view that broke upon us was good.

Down right, irregular but wide enough, was our new camp.

The way above it, ice cream and whiskey sours and morning coffee and a cigarette after dinner. It was beautiful and delicious: a seventy-degree slope full of ledges and projections and good clean stone.

"Hot damn!" said Kelly.

We all tended to agree.

We ate and we drank and we decided to rest our bruised selves that afternoon.

We were in the twilight world now, walking where no man had ever walked before, and we felt ourselves to be golden. It was good to stretch out and try to unache.

I slept away the day, and when I awakened the sky was a bed of glowing embers. I lay there too lazy to move, too full of sight to go back to sleep. A meteor burnt its way bluewhite across the heavens. After a time, there was another. I thought upon my position and decided that reaching it was worth the price. The cold, hard happiness of the heights filled me. I wiggled my toes.

After a few minutes, I stretched and sat up. I regarded the sleeping forms of my companions. I looked out across the night as far as I could see. Then I looked up at the

mountain, then dropped my eyes slowly along tomorrow's trail.

There was movement within shadow.

Something was standing about fifty feet away and ten feet above.

I picked up my pick and stood.

I crossed the fifty and stared up.

She was smiling, not burning.

A woman, an impossible woman.

Absolutely impossible. For one thing, she would just have to freeze to death in a mini-skirt and a sleeveless shell-top. No alternative. For another, she had very little to breathe. Like, nothing.

But it didn't seem to bother her. She waved. Her hair was dark and long, and I couldn't see her eyes. The planes of her pale, high cheeks, wide forehead, small chin corresponded in an unsettling fashion with certain simple theorems which comprise the geometry of my heart. If all angles, planes, curves be correct, it skips a beat, then hurries to make up for it.

I worked it out, felt it do so, said, "Hello."

"Hello, Whitey," she replied.

"Come down," I said.

"No, you come up."

I swung my pick. When I reached the ledge she wasn't there. I looked around, then I saw her.

She was seated on a rock twelve feet above me.

"How it is that you know my name?" I asked.

"Anyone can see what your name must be."

"All right," I agreed. "What's yours?"

". . ." Her lips seemed to move, but I heard nothing.

"Come again?"

"I don't want a name," she said.

"Okay. I'll call you 'girl,' then."

She laughed, sort of.

"What are you doing here?" I asked.

"Watching you."

"Why?"

"To see whether you'll fall."

"I can save you the trouble," I said. "I won't."

"Perhaps," she said.

"Come down here,"

"No, you come up here."

I climbed, but when I got there she was twenty feet higher.

"Girl, you climb well," I said, and she laughed and turned away.

I pursued her for five minutes and couldn't catch her. There was something unnatural about the way she moved.

I stopped climbing when she turned again. We were still about twenty feet apart.

"I take it you do not really wish me to join you," I said.

"Of course I do, but you must catch me first." And she turned once more, and I felt a certain fury within me.

It was written that no one could outclimb Mad Jack. I had written it.

I swung my pick and moved like a lizard.

I was near to her a couple of times, but never near enough.

The day's aches began again in my muscles, but I pulled my way up without slackening my pace. I realized, faintly, that the camp was

far below me now, and that I was climbing alone through the dark up a strange slope. But I did not stop. Rather, I hurried, and my breath began to come hard in my lungs. I heard her laughter, and it was a goad. Then I came upon a two-inch ledge, and she was moving along it. I followed, around a big bulge of rock to where it ended. Then she was ninety feet above me, at the top of a smooth pinnacle. It was like a tapering, branchless tree. How she'd accomplished it, I didn't know. I was gasping by then, but I looped my line around it and began to climb. As I did this, she spoke:

"Don't you ever tire, Whitey? I thought you would have collapsed by now."

I hitched up the line and climbed further.

"You can't make it up here, you know."

"I don't know," I grunted.

"Why do you want so badly to climb here? There are other nice mountains."

"This is the biggest, girl. That's why."

"It can't be done."

"Then why all this bother to discourage me? Why not just let the mountain do it?"

As I neared her, she vanished. I made it to the top, where she had been standing, and I collapsed there.

Then I heard her voice again and turned my head. She was on a ledge, perhaps eighty feet away.

"I didn't think you'd make it this far," she said. "You are a fool. Good-by, Whitey." She was gone.

I sat there on the pinnacle's tiny top — perhaps four square feet of top — and I knew that I couldn't sleep there, because I'd fall. And I was tired.

I recalled my favorite curses and I said them all, but I didn't feel any better. I couldn't let myself go to sleep. I looked down. I knew the way was long. I knew she didn't think I could make it.

I began the descent.

The following morning when they shook me, I was still tired. I told them the last night's tale, and they didn't believe me. Not until later in the day, that is, when I detoured us around the bulge and showed them the pinnacle, standing there like a tapering, branchless tree, ninety feet in the middle of the air.

V

We went steadily upward for the next two days. We made slightly under ten thousand feet. Then we spent a day hammering and hacking our way up a great flat face. Six hundred feet of it. Then our way was to the right and upward. Before long we were ascending the western side of the mountain. When we broke ninety thousand feet, we stopped to congratulate ourselves that we had just surpassed the Kasla climb and to remind ourselves that we had still had not hit the halfway mark. It took us another two and a half days to do that, and by then the land lay like a map beneath us.

And then, that night, we all saw the creature with the sword.

He came and stood near our camp, and he raised his sword above his head, and it blazed with such a terrible intensity that I slipped on my goggles. His voice was all thunder and lightning this time:

"Get off this mountain!" he said. *"Now! Turn back! Go down! Depart!"*

And then a shower of stones came down from above and rattled about us. Doc tossed his slim, shiny case, causing it to skim along the ground toward the creature.

The light went out, and we were alone.

Doc retrieved his case, took tests, met with the same success as before — *i.e.*, none. But now at least he didn't think I was some kind of balmy, unless of course he thought we all were.

"Not a very effective guardian," Henry suggested.

"We've a long way to go yet," said Vince, shying a stone through the space the creature had occupied. "I don't like it if the thing can cause a slide."

"That was just a few pebbles," said Stan.

"Yeah, but what if he decided to start them fifty thousand feet higher?"

"Shut up!" said Kelly. "Don't give him any ideas. He might be listening."

For some reason, we drew closer together. Doc made each of us describe what we had seen, and it appeared that we all had seen the same thing.

"All right," I said, after we'd finished. "Now you've all seen it, who wants to go back?"

There was silence.

After perhaps half a dozen heartbeats, Henry said, "I want the whole story. It looks like a good one. I'm willing to take my chances with angry energy creatures in order to get it."

"I don't know what the thing is," said Kelly. "Maybe it's no energy creature. Maybe it's something — supernatural — I know what you'll say, Doc. I'm just telling you how it struck me. If there are such things, this seems a good place for them. Point is — whatever it is, I don't care. I want this mountain. If it could have stopped us, I think it would've done it already. Maybe I'm wrong. Maybe it can. Maybe it's laid some trap for us higher up. But I want this mountain. Right now, it means more to me than anything. If I don't go up, I'll spend all my time wondering about it — and then I'll probably come back and try it again some day, when it gets so I can't stand thinking about it any more. Only then, maybe the rest of you won't be available. Let's face it, we're a good climbing team. Maybe the best in the business. Probably. If it can be done, I think we can do it."

"I'll second that," said Stan.

"What you said, Kelly," said Mallardi, "about it being supernatural — it's funny, because I felt the same thing for a minute when I was looking at it. It reminds me of something out of the

Divine Comedy. If you recall, Purgatory was a mountain. And then I thought of the angel who guarded the eastern way to Eden. Eden had gotten moved to the top of Purgatory by Dante — and there was this angel Anyhow, I felt almost like I was committing some sin I didn't know about by being here. But now that I think it over, a man can't be guilty of something he doesn't know is wrong, can he? And I didn't see that thing flashing any angel ID card. So I'm willing to go up and see what's on top, unless he comes back with the Tablets of the Law, with a new one written in at the bottom."

"In Hebrew or Italian?" asked Doc.

"To satisfy you, I suppose they'd have to be drawn up in the form of equations."

"No," he said. "Kidding aside, I felt something funny too, when I saw it and heard it. And we didn't really hear it, you know. It skipped over the senses and got its message right into our brains. If you think back over our descriptions of what we experienced, we each 'heard' different words telling us to go away. If it can communicate a meaning as well as a psychtranslator, I wonder if it can communicate an emotion, also You thought of an angel, too, didn't you, Whitey?"

"Yes," I said.

"That makes it almost unanimous then, doesn't it?"

Then we all turned to Vince, because he had no Christian background at all, having been raised as a Buddhist on Ceylon.

"What were your feelings concerning the thing?" Doc asked him.

"It was a Deva," he said, "a sort of like an angel, I guess. I had the impression that every step I took up this mountain gave me enough bad karma to fill a lifetime. Except I haven't believed in it that way since I was a kid. I want to go ahead, up. Even if that feeling was correct, I want to see the top of this mountain."

"So do I," said Doc.

"That makes it unanimous," I said.

"Well, everybody hang onto his angelsbane," said Stan, "and let's sack out."

"Good idea."

"Only let's spread out a bit," said Doc, "so that anything falling won't get all of us together."

We did that cheerful thing and slept untroubled by heaven.

Our way kept winding right, until we were at a hundred forty-four thousand feet and were mounting the southern slopes. Then it jogged back, and by a hundred fifty we were mounting to the west once more.

Then, during a devilish, dark and tricky piece of scaling, up a smooth, concave bulge ending in an overhang, the bird came down once again.

If we hadn't been roped together, Stan would have died. As it was, we almost all died.

Stan was lead man, as its wings splashed sudden flames against the violet sky. It came down from the overhang as though someone had

kicked a bonfire over its edge, headed straight toward him and faded out at a distance of about twelve feet. He fell then, almost taking the rest of us with him.

We tensed our muscles and took the shock.

He was battered a bit, but unbroken. We made it up to the overhang, but went no further that day.

Rocks did fall, but we found another overhang and made camp beneath it.

The bird did not return that day, but the snakes came.

Big, shimmering scarlet serpents coiled about the crags, wound in and out of jagged fields of ice and gray stone. Sparks shot along their sinuous lengths. They coiled and un-wound, stretched and turned, spat fires at us. It seemed they were trying to drive us from beneath the sheltering place to where the rocks could come down upon us.

Doc advanced upon the nearest one, and it vanished as it came within the field of his projector. He studied the place where it had lain, then hurried back.

"The frost is still on the punkin," he said.

"Huh?" said I.

"Not a bit of ice was melted beneath it."

"Indicating?"

"Illusion," said Vince, and he threw a stone at another and it passed through the thing.

"But you saw what happened to my pick," I said to Doc, "when I took a cut at that bird. The thing had to have been carrying some kind of charge."

"Maybe whatever has been sending them has cut that part out, as a waste of energy," he replied, "since the things can't get through to us anyhow."

We sat around and watched the snakes and falling rocks, until Stan produced a deck of cards and suggested a better game.

The snakes stayed on through the night and followed us the next day. Rocks still fell periodically, but the boss seemed to be running low on them. The bird appeared, circled us and swooped on four different occasions. But this time we ignored it, and finally it went home to roost.

We made three thousand feet, could have gone more, but didn't want to press it past a cozy little ledge with a cave big enough for the whole party. Everything let up on us then. Everything visible, that is.

A before-the-storm feeling, a still, electrical tension, seemed to occur around us then, and we waited for whatever was going to happen to happen.

The worst possible thing happened: nothing.

This keyed-up feeling, this expectancy, stayed with us, was unsatisfied. I think it would actually have been a relief if some invisible orchestra had begun playing Wagner, or if the heavens had rolled aside like curtains and revealed a movie screen, and from the backward lettering we knew we were on the other side, or if we saw a high-flying dragon eating low-flying weather satellites. . . .

As it was, we just kept feeling that something was imminent, and it gave me insomnia.

During the night, she came again. The pinnacle girl.

She stood at the mouth of the cave, and when I advanced she retreated.

I stopped just inside and stood there myself, where she had been standing.

She said, "Hello, Whitey."

"No, I'm not going to follow you again," I said.

"I didn't ask you to."

"What's a girl like you doing in a place like this?"

"Watching," she said.

"I told you I won't fall."

"Your friend almost did."

"'Almost' isn't good enough."

"You are the leader, aren't you?"

"That's right."

"If you were to die, the others would go back?"

"No," I said, "they'd go on without me."

I hit my camera then.

"What did you just do?" she asked.

"I took your picture — if you're really there."

"Why?"

"To look at after you go away. I like to look at pretty things."

". . ." she seemed to say something.

"What?"

"Nothing."

"Why not?"

". . . die."

"Please speak up."

"She dies . . ." she said.

"Why? How?"

". . . on mountain."

"I don't understand."

". . . too."

"What's wrong?"

I took a step forward, and she retreated a step.

"Follow me?" she asked.

"No."

"Go back," she said.

"What's on the other side of that record?"

"You will continue to climb?"

"Yes."

Then, "Good!" she said suddenly.

"I —," and her voice stopped again.

"Go back," she finally said, without emotion.

"Sorry."

And she was gone.

VI

Our trail took us slowly to the left once more. We crawled and sprawled and cut holes in the stone. Snakes sizzled in the distance. They were with us constantly now. The bird came again at crucial moments, to try to make us fall. A raging bull stood on a crag and bellowed down at us. Phantom archers loosed shafts of fire, which always faded right before they struck. Blazing blizzards swept at us, around us, were gone. We were back on the northern slopes and still heading west by the time we broke a hundred sixty thousand. The sky was deep and blue, and there were always stars. Why did the mountain hate us? I wondered. What was there about us to provoke this thing? I looked at the picture of the girl for the dozenth time and I wondered what she really was. Had

she been picked from our minds and composed into girlform to lure us, to lead us, sirenlike, harpylike, to the place of the final fall? It was such a long way down

I thought back over my life. How does a man come to climb mountains? Is he drawn by the heights because he is afraid of the level land? Is he such a misfit in the society of men that he must flee and try to place himself above it? The way up is long and difficult, but if he succeeds they must grant him a garland of sorts. And if he falls, this too is a kind of glory. To end, hurled from the heights to the depths in hideous ruin and combustion down, is a fitting climax for the loser — for it, too, shakes mountains and minds, stirs things like thoughts below both, is a kind of blasted garland of victory in defeat, and cold, so cold that final action, that the movement is somewhere frozen forever into a statuelike rigidity of ultimate intent and purpose thwarted only by the universal malevolence we all fear exists. An aspirant saint or hero who lacks some necessary virtue may still qualify as a martyr, for the only thing that people will really remember in the end is the end. I had known that I'd had to climb Kasla, as I had climbed all the others, and I had known what the price would be. It had cost me my only home. But Kasla was there, and my boots cried out for my feet. I knew as I did so that somewhere I set them upon her summit, and below me a world was ending. What's a world if the moment of victory is at hand? And if truth,

beauty and goodness be one, why is there always this conflict among them?

The phantom archers fired upon me and the bright bird swooped. I set my teeth, and my boots scarred rocks beneath me.

We saw the top. At a hundred seventy-six thousand feet, making our way along a narrow ledge, clicking against rock, testing our way with our picks, we heard Vince say, "Look!"

We did.

Up and up, and again further, bluefrosted and sharp, deadly, and cold as Loki's dagger, slashing at the sky, it vibrated above us like electricity, hung like a piece of frozen thunder, and cut, cut, cut into the center of spirit that was desire, twisted, and became a fishhook to pull us on, to burn us with its barbs.

Vince was the first to look up and see the top, the first to die. It happened so quickly, and it was none of the terrors that achieved it.

He slipped.

That was all. It was a difficult piece of climbing. He was right behind me one second, was gone the next. There was no body to recover. He'd taken the long drop. The soundless blue was all around him and the great gray beneath. Then we were six. We shuddered, and I suppose we all prayed in our own ways.

— Gone Vince, may some good Deva lead you up the Path of Splendor. May you find whatever you wanted most at the other end, waiting there for you. If such a thing

may be, remember those who say these words, oh strong intruder in the sky

No one spoke much for the rest of the day.

The fiery sword bearer came and stood above our camp the entire night. It did not speak.

In the morning, Stan was gone, and there was a note beneath my pack.

Don't hate me, it said, for running out, but I think it really is an angel. I'm scared of this mountain. I'll climb any pile of rocks, but I won't fight Heaven. The way down is easier than the way up, so don't worry about me. Good luck. Try to understand.

S.

So we were five — Doc and Kelly and Henry and Mallardi and me — and that day we hit a hundred eighty thousand and felt very alone.

The girl came again that night and spoke to me, black hair against black sky and eyes like points of blue fire, and she stood beside an icy pillar and said: "Two of you have gone."

"And the rest of us remain," I replied.

"For a time."

"We will climb to the top and then we will go away," I said. "How can that do you harm? Why do you hate us?"

"No hate, sir," she said.

"What, then?"

"I protect."

"What? What is it that you protect?"

"The dying, that she may live."

"What? Who is dying? How?"

But her words went away some-

where, and I did not hear them. Then she went away too, and there was nothing left but sleep for the rest of the night.

One hundred eighty-two thousand and three, and four, and five. Then back down to four for the following night.

The creatures whined about us now, and the land pulsed beneath us, and the mountain seemed sometimes to sway as we climbed.

We carved a path to one eighty-six, and for three days we fought to gain another thousand feet. Everything we touched was cold and slick and slippery, sparkled, and had a bluish haze about it.

When we hit one ninety, Henry looked back and shuddered.

"I'm no longer worried about making it to the top," he said. "It's the return trip that's bothering me now. The clouds are like little wisps of cotton way down there."

"The sooner up, the sooner down," I said, and we began to climb once again.

It took us another week to cut our way to within a mile of the top. All the creatures of fire had withdrawn, but two ice avalanches showed us we were still unwanted. We survived the first without mishap, but Kelly sprained his right ankle during the second, and Doc thought he might have cracked a couple of ribs, too.

We made a camp. Doc stayed there with him; Henry and Mallardi and I pushed on up the last mile.

Now the going was beastly. It had become a mountain of glass. We had

to hammer out a hold for every foot we made. We worked in shifts. We fought for everything we gained. Our packs became monstrous loads and our fingers grew numb. Our defense system — the projectors — the projectors — seemed to be wearing down, or else something was increasing its efforts to get us, because the snakes kept slithering closer, burning brighter. They hurt my eyes, and I cursed them.

When we were within a thousand feet of the top, we dug in and made another camp. The next couple hundred feet looked easier, then a rotten spot, and I couldn't tell what it was like above that.

When we awakened, there was just Henry and myself. There was no indication of where Mallardi had gotten to. Henry switched his com-

municator to Doc's letter and called below. I tuned in in time to hear him say, "Haven't seen him."

"How's Kelly?" I asked.

"Better," he replied. "Those ribs might not be cracked at that."

Then Mallardi called us.

"I'm four hundred feet above you, fellows," his voice came in. "It was easy up to here, but the going's just gotten rough again."

"Why'd you cut out on your own?" I asked.

"Because I think something's going to try to kill me before too long," he said. "It's up ahead, waiting at the top. You can probably even see it from there. It's a snake."

Henry and I used the binoculars. Snake? A better word might be dragon — or maybe even Midgaard Serpent.



It was coiled around the peak, head upraised. It seemed to be several hundred feet in length, and it moved its head from side to side, and up and down, and it smoked solar coronas.

Then I spotted Mallardi climbing toward it.

"Don't go any further!" I called. "I don't know whether your unit will protect you against anything like that! Wait'll I call Doc —"

"Not a chance," he said. "This baby is mine."

"Listen! You can be first on the mountain, if that's what you want! But don't tackle that thing alone!"

"A laugh was the only reply."

"All three units might hold it off," I said. "Wait for us."

There was no answer, and we began to climb.

I left Henry far below me. The creature was a moving light in the sky. I made two hundred feet in a hurry, and when I looked up again, I saw that the creature had grown two more heads. Lightnings flashed from its nostrils, and its tail whipped around the mountain. I made another hundred feet, and I could see Mallardi clearly by then, climbing steadily, outlined against the brilliance. I swung my pick, gasping, and I fought the mountain, following the trail he had cut. I began to gain on him, because he was still pounding out his way and I didn't have that problem. Then I heard him talking:

"Not yet, big fella, not yet," he was saying, from behind a wall of static. "Here's a ledge . . ."

I looked up, and he vanished.

Then that fiery tail came lashing down toward where I had last seen him, and I heard him curse and I felt the vibrations of his pneumatic gun. The tail snapped back again, and I heard another "Damn!"

I made haste, stretching and rocking myself and grabbing at the holds he had cut, and then I heard him burst into song. Something from *Aida*, I think.

"Damn it! Wait up!" I said. "I'm only a few hundred feet behind."

He kept on singing.

I was beginning to get dizzy, but I couldn't let myself slow down. My right arm felt like a piece of wood, my left like a piece of ice. My feet were hooves, and my eyes burned in my head.

Then it happened.

Like a bomb, the snake and the swinging ended in a flash of brilliance that caused me to sway and almost lose my grip. I clung to the vibrating mountainside and squeezed my eyes against the light.

"Mallardi?" I said.

No answer. Nothing.

I looked down. Henry was still clinging. I continued to climb.

I reached the ledge Mallardi had mentioned, found him there.

His respirator was still working. His protective suit was blackened and scorched on the right side. Half of his pick had been melted away. I raised his shoulders.

I turned up the volume on the communicator and heard him breathing. His eyes opened, closed, opened.

"Okay . . ." he said.

"'Okay,' hell! Where do you hurt?"

"No place I feel jus' fine Listen! I think it's used up its juice for awhile Go plant the flag. Prop me up here first, though. I wanna watch"

I got him into a better position, squirted the water bulb, listened to him swallow. Then I waited for Henry to catch up. It took about six minutes.

"I'll stay here," said Henry, stooping beside him. "You go do it."

"I started up the final slope.

VII

I swung and I cut and I blasted and I crawled. Some of the ice had been melted, the rocks scorched.

Nothing came to oppose me. The static had gone with the dragon. There was silence, and darkness between stars.

I climbed slowly, still tired from that last sprint, but determined not to stop.

All but sixty feet of the entire world lay beneath me, and heaven hung above me, and a rocket winked overhead. Perhaps it was the pressmen, with zoom cameras.

Fifty feet

No bird, no archer, no angel, no girl.

Forty feet

I started to shake. It was nervous tension. I steadied myself, went on.

Thirty feet . . . and the mountain seemed to be swaying now.

Twenty-five . . . and I grew dizzy, halted, took a drink.

Then click, click, my pick again.

Twenty

Fifteen

Ten

I braced myself against the mountain's final assault, whatever it might be.

Five

Nothing happened as I arrived.

I stood up. I could go no higher.

I looked at the sky, I looked back down. I waved at the blazing rocket exhaust.

I extruded the pole and attached the flag.

I planted it, there where no breezes would ever stir it. I cut in my communicator, said, "I'm here."

No other words.

It was time to go back down and I give Henry his chance, but I looked down the western slope before I turned to go.

The lady was winking again. Perhaps eight hundred feet below, the red light shone. Could that have been what I had seen from the town during the storm, on that night, so long ago?

"I didn't know and I had to.

I spoke into the communicator.

"How's Mallardi doing?"

"I just stood up," he answered.

"Give me another half hour, and I'm coming up myself."

"Henry," I said. "Should he?"

"Gotta take his word how he feels," said Lanning.

"Well," I said, "then take it easy. I'll be gone when you get here. I'm going a little way down the western side. Something I want to see."

"What?"

"I dunno. That's why I want to see."

"Take care."

"Check."

The western slope was an easy descent. As I went down it, I realized that the light was coming from an opening in the side of the mountain.

Half an hour later, I stood before it.

I stepped within and was dazzled.

I walked toward it and stopped. It pulsed and quivered and sang.

A vibrating wall of flame leapt from the floor of the cave, towered to the roof of the cave.

It blocked my way, when I wanted to go beyond it.

She was there, and I wanted to reach her.

I took a step forward, so that I was only inches away from it. My communicator was full of static and my arms of cold needles.

It did not bend toward me, as to attack. It cast no heat.

I stared through the veil of fires to where she reclined, her eyes closed, her breast unmoving.

I stared at the bank of machinery beside the far wall.

"I'm here," I said, and I raised my pick.

When its point touched the wall of flame someone took the lid off hell, and I staggered back, blinded. When my vision cleared, the angel stood before me.

"You may not pass here," he said.

"She is the reason you want me to go back?" I asked.

"Yes. Go back."

"Has she no say in the matter?"

"She sleeps. Go back."

"So I notice. Why?"

"She must. Go back."

"Why did she herself appear to me and lead me strangely?"

"I used up the fear-forms I knew. They did not work. I led you strangely because her sleeping mind touches upon my workings. It did so especially when I borrowed her form, so that it interfered with the directive. Go back."

"What is the directive?"

"She is to be guarded against all things coming up the mountain. Go back."

"Why? Why is she guarded?"

"She sleeps. Go back."

The conversation having become somewhat circular at that point, I reached into my pack and drew out the projector. I swung it forward and the angel melted. The flames bent away from my outstretched hand. I sought to open a doorway in the circle of fire.

It worked, sort of.

I pushed the projector forward, and the flames bent and bent and bent and finally broke. When they broke, I leaped forward. I made it through, but my protective suit was as scorched as Mallard's.

I moved to the coffinlike locker within which she slept.

I rested my hands on its edge and looked down.

She was as fragile as ice.

In fact, she was ice

The machine came alive with lights then, and I felt her somber bedstead vibrate.

Then I saw the man.

He was half sprawled across a metal chair beside the machine.

He, too, was ice. Only his features were gray, were twisted. He wore black and he was dead and a statue, while she was sleeping and a statue.

She wore blue, and white

There was an empty casket in the far corner

But something was happening around me. There came a brightening of the air. Yes, it was air. It hissed upward from frosty jets in the floor, formed into great clouds. Then a feeling of heat occurred and the clouds began to fade and the brightening continued.

I returned to the casket and studied her features.

I wondered what her voice would sound like when/if she spoke. I wondered what lay within her mind. I wondered how her thinking worked, and what she liked and didn't like. I wondered what her eyes had looked upon, and when.

I wondered all these things, because I could see that whatever forces I had set into operation when I entered the circle of fire were causing her, slowly, to cease being a statue.

She was being awakened.

I waited. Over an hour went by, and still I waited, watching her. She began to breathe. Her eyes opened at last, and for a long time she did not see.

Then her bluefire fell upon me.

"Whitey," she said.

"Yes."

"Where am I . . . ?"

"In the damnedest place I could

possibly have found anyone."

She frowned. "I remember," she said and tried to sit up.

It didn't work. She fell back.

"What is your name?"

"Linda," she said. Then, "I dreamed of you, Whitey. Strange dreams How could that be?"

"It's tricky," I said.

"I knew you were coming," she said. "I saw you fighting monsters on a mountain as high as the sky."

"Yes, we're there now."

"H-have you the cure?"

"Cure? What cure?"

"Dawson's Plague," she said.

I felt sick. I felt sick because I realized that she did not sleep as a prisoner, but to postpone her death. She was sick.

"Did you come to live on this world in a ship that moved faster than light?" I asked.

"No," she said. "It took centuries to get here. We slept the cold sleep during the journey. This is one of the bunkers." She gestured toward the casket with her eyes. I noticed her cheeks had become bright red.

"They all began dying — of the plague," she said. "There was no cure. My husband — Carl — is a doctor. When he saw that I had it, he said he would keep me in extreme hypothermia until a cure was found. Otherwise, you only live for two days, you know."

Then she stared up at me, and I realized that her last two words had been a question.

I moved into a position to block her view of the dead man, who I feared must be her Carl. I tried to follow her husband's thinking.

He'd had to hurry, as he was obviously further along than she had been. He knew the colony would be wiped out. He must have loved her and been awfully clever, both — awfully resourceful. Mostly, though, he must have loved her. Knowing that the colony would die, he knew it would be centuries before another ship arrived. He had nothing that could power a cold bunker for that long. But up here, on the top of this mountain, almost as cold as outer space itself, power wouldn't be necessary. Somehow, he had got Linda and the stuff up here. His machine cast a force field around the cave. Working in heat and atmosphere, he had sent her deep into the cold sleep and then prepared his own bunker. When he dropped the wall of forces, no power would be necessary to guarantee the long, icy wait. They could sleep for centuries within the bosom of the Gray Sister, protected by a colony of defense-computer. This last had apparently been programmed quickly, for he was dying. He saw that it was too late to join her. He hurried to set the thing for basic defense, killed the force field, and then went his way into that Dark and Secret Place. Thus it hurled its birds and its angels and its snakes, it raised its walls of fire against me. He died, and it guarded her in her near-death — against everything, including those who would help. My coming to the mountain had activated it. My passing of the defenses had caused her to be summoned back to life.

"Go back!" I heard the machine

say through its projected angel, for Henry had entered the cave.

"My God!" I heard him say. "Who's that?"

"Get Doc!" I said. "Hurry! I'll explain later. It's a matter of life! Climb back to where your communicator will work, and tell him it's Dawson's Plague — a bad local bug! Hurry!"

"I'm on my way," he said and was.

"There is a doctor?" she asked.

"Yes. Only about two hours away. Don't worry . . . I still don't see how anyone could have gotten you up here to the top of this mountain, let alone a load of machines."

"We're on the big mountain — the forty-miler?"

"Yes."

"How did you get up?" she asked.

"I climbed it."

"You really climbed Purgatorio? On the outside?"

"Purgatorio? That's what you call it? Yes, I climbed it, that way."

"We didn't think it could be done."

"How else might one arrive at its top?"

"It's hollow inside," she said.

"There are great caves and massive passages. It's easy to fly up the inside in a pressurized jet car. In fact, it was an amusement ride. Two and a half dollars per person. An hour and a half each way. A dollar to rent a pressurized suit and take an hour's walk around the top. Nice way to spend an afternoon. Beautiful view . . . ?" She gasped deeply.

"I don't feel so good," she said.
"Have you any water?"

"Yes," I said, and I gave her all I had.

As she sipped it, I prayed that Doc had the necessary serum or else would be able to send her back to ice and sleep until it could be gotten. I prayed that he would make good time, for two hours seemed long when measured against her thirst and the red of her flesh.

"My fever is coming again," she said. "Talk to me, Whitey, please Tell me things. Keep me with you till he comes. I don't want my mind to turn back upon what has happened"

"What would you like me to tell you about, Linda?"

"Tell me why you did it. Tell me what it was like, to climb a mountain like this one. Why?"

I turned my mind back upon what had happened.

"There is a certain madness involved," I said, "a certain envy of great and powerful natural forces, that some men have. Each mountain is a deity, you know. Each is an immortal power. If you make sacrifices upon its slopes, a mountain may grant you a certain grace, and for a time you will share this power. Perhaps that is why they call me"

Her hand rested in mine. I hoped that through it whatever power I might contain would hold all of her with me for as long as ever possible.

"I remember the first time that I saw Purgatory, Linda," I told her. "I looked at it and I was sick. I wondered, where did it lead . . . ?"

(Stars.

Oh let there be.

This once to end with.

Please.)

"Stars?"

END

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When the buzzer sounded I paused only to check my uniform, then stepped through the door and threw the admiral a snappy salute. As his orderly, that's what I always do when he buzzes, even on the moon. Of course on the moon, with any weight carried up from Earth at a premium and the environment controlled, the uniform isn't much, even for an admiral's orderly: briefs, duty belt, cap and boots; but I always give it a quick check anyway. The Old Man has the eyes of a hawk and the disposition of a bear trap. And there's no sense in sitting

on a bear trap if you don't have to — it chews mighty deep.

The admiral glanced up through those shaggy white eyebrows of his and nodded when I saluted. He didn't answer the salute, of course. He was uncovered. "Christensen," he said, "get me Jennings. On the double."

I saluted again and stepped back into the passageway. Things weren't too bad. If I was in trouble with him, he called me Orderly. If everything was calm, he called me Corporal. On a few occasions when he was feeling extra good, he has called me Sven. When someone else is in trou-

ble, it's Corporal Christensen. And when his brain is just in high gear about something, it's always just Christensen.

Commander Jennings was skipper of the U.S.S.N.S. Tombaugh, the Space Navy ship that had brought Admiral Jones from Earth orbit to the moon to clean up the war the hard way — sitting at one side of a conference table. Of course, the fact that Jennings' job was done when he landed his ship at the Space Port, that he wouldn't be on duty again until a few hours before take-off was scheduled and that he didn't even have to tell the duty officer where he was going didn't cut any ice with the Old Man. He wanted Jennings, and it was my job as orderly to produce him.

Well, I knew old Hot Shot — that's Jennings' name when he isn't around — likes to play poker, and he likes to win. I also knew that he's smart enough to know that he doesn't play poker very well. So I called the number of the Fourth Regiment Advanced Base — about twenty miles down the cover road from the Main Highway toward the Red lines — and asked to speak to Commander Jennings. That outfit plays the lousiest brand of high stakes poker on the moon.

"The admiral's compliments," I translated, when they had coaxed Hot Shot to the 'phone, "and he requests that the commander call on him at his Headquarters at the commander's earliest convenience." In case you don't translate as good as Hot Shot did, that means just what

the admiral said: "on the double."

The admiral stood up when I announced Commander Jennings a few minutes later and seemed to look down at him. That, by the way, is quite a trick, considering that the admiral is five foot six, and that's four inches shorter than Hot Shot. The admiral didn't wave me out, so I stood there looking down at Commander Jennings too, which is easy for me because I've got eight inches of height on him.

The admiral sounded bitter. "It looks as if the Reds may just possibly be trying to give us a run around," he said without any preliminaries. "Back on Earth they talk about being anxious for peace negotiations, but it's all pure propaganda. I've been up here on this God-forsaken ball for almost four weeks, and we haven't even been able to agree on where to meet. Well, Hot Shot, I'm not going to continue to sit still for it. Can you set your fire buggy down on the Main Highway, in the middle of that crossroads place where the Reds cut their road into it?"

"Yes, sir," said the pilot. "That's a simple suborbital flight."

"That won't do, and you know it," growled the admiral. "They'd just shoot us down and apologize later. You'd have to stay under five hundred feet all the way."

I almost caught myself nodding in agreement.

In the ten years we and the Reds had been fighting on the moon — which the longhairs said had, during most of that time, helped us all keep things peaceful down on Earth —

anything lobbed anywhere around the moon on a ballistic trajectory, either orbitally or suborbitally, by either side, was automatically shot down.

Except for ships coming in from Earth and landing at one of the two spaceports. Both sides let the big ships come and go, so they could bring in supplies to live and fight with. And take home the high-paid volunteers who didn't reup when their time expired. Fighting men get high pay on the moon, unless they're regulars like the admiral and me. And according to law, I hadn't had to go with him to the moon, except I hadn't had the guts to tell the Old Man good-by.

It's the low lunar gravity that makes it easy to shoot down even mortar shells; a big ship would have about the same chance of surviving — none at all. So, even though I'm not a Looney, I almost nodded.

"Yes, sir," said Hot Shot after fiddling for a few minutes with the slide rule he pulled out of the pouch sewn to his briefs. I noticed there was a good deal of green folding stuff crammed into the pouch, too. Leaving that game must really have hurt him. "I have enough control to drift right down the highway on the main engines and the fuel to get there and back. Of course, we'll have to clear off the traffic first to keep from scorching them with our jets."

"Good. I'll exchange notes with the Muscovites for three more days. By that time I should have them boxed in so they won't be able to avoid meeting me on neutral ground, providing they don't think about a

ship-to-ship meeting. What good that will do us, God only knows; but we'll try to solve that when we come to it.

"Sven," he said, turning to me, "when my ship shows up at the crossroads — you know the place — I'll expect you to be there with a tube that will connect my airlock with theirs. You go off and get that attended to, and I don't expect to see you until then. Take three days off; you've earned it."

"Aye, aye sir. And will the admiral have a requirement for a substitute orderly? There is one of the soldier volunteers who would be able to handle the job for the admiral."

The Old Man glared at me through his eyebrows. "What's to handle? You spend ninety percent of your time on your butt outside my door, and in this light gravity you'd even lose your callouses there, if I let you. At fifteen times what Uncle pays you, a volunteer for three days isn't worth my trouble in trying to train him. Now get going, both of you."

I held the curtain aside for Hot Shot, saluted and left behind him. I knew why the admiral had given me three free days, and I didn't like it. Oh, I liked the time off just fine. There was plenty of good use I could make of it; but I didn't like the reason he had given it to me. The Old Man would deny it, but he's superstitious. I wangled three days leave out of him way back when he was stuck on a solution for that Grombock affair, at the Polar station, and right after I got back from that, everything fell into place. And

the second time, on Guam; and the third time on the Orbital Station; each time he let me off for three days, he got the problem solved.

You'd think he'd just get rid of me entirely, wouldn't you? But like I said, he's superstitious. It's three days or nothing. And by letting me off, for those three days, he was saying that he didn't have any more ideas than I did about how to handle the situation. And I didn't have any, or care to have any.

Taking care of the job he had assigned me didn't take much time, even though nobody was sure what ship the Russians would use or what size airlock it would have. I trotted over to the motor pool, still wearing my orderly belt and boots, and drew out a moon jeep. They tried to give me a little static about how tricky it is to drive on the moon, but I flashed my operator's card — good for everything from a moonbug on up to a full-sized refuelling rig. I'd spent my first free time getting checked out and qualified — you never know what the Old Man will want.

Then I picked up a pound of coffee from the admiral's mess and went over to the Experimental Devices Supply Center to draw out a gadget I knew about: a Tube, Universal, Airlock Connector, Collapsible, Sixty Foot, Experimental. I didn't plan to sign a requisition, because experimental devices can't be drawn out officially by anybody but the longhairs. They're supposed to be used only under carefully controlled conditions until approved for

service applications. Even as it is, when one of their experimental gizmos doesn't pan out right, they sometimes have to scrape up bits of long-hair to find enough to bury.

This one worked right, even though the longhairs hadn't found it out yet. One of the supply sergeants was named Sally — one of not too many female volunteer soldiers on the moon. Of course, I didn't make enough money even to think about her, but she made plenty and was tired of volunteers. She was real interested in a professional in a Marine uniform — even a moon-style Marine uniform — and had no objections to my being six foot six.

My size did turn out to be a disadvantage in any of the moon buggies, though — their cabins are all cramped — so we had loaded the experimental Airlock Connector on a jeep, ran it up a canyon, connected one end of it to one door of the jeep and the other to the other door, pumped in air and used that for getting better acquainted. So I knew the tube would do the trick. It fits most any size of door or airlock.

As it turned out, I didn't need the coffee. Sally was on duty, but just going off. So we gave the tube one more test, and then, after I stowed the thing in the jeep and dropped Sally off at the WALAC barracks — carefully patrolled to keep the men out and the girls safe — I was on my own with plenty of time to spare.

Because of the problems of living on a Marine corporal's pay, I usually try to have some small ad-

ditional source of picking up a little of the long green wherever I go. Normally, a deck of cards and a little game with a bunch of boots can turn a tidy profit, but on the moon that was out. When even Hot Shot could win a pouchful, I wasn't worried about being outclassed; I just didn't have enough scratch for the initial stake.

There was one great universal need that was in even shorter supply on the moon than girls: drinking liquor. Like I said before, it costs a great deal of money to ship anything from Earth. Liquor never managed to get very high on the priority lists because the bureaucrats made up the priority lists, and they never went to the moon. There was some for the officers, of course, but most of the men on the moon weren't officers, even if their pay was a lot higher than officers get, Earthside.

So, as soon as I got to the moon, this corporal decided to engage in a little private enterprise to fill the need. I should have realized that with all the demand, there would have been plenty of stills and bootleggers on the moon filling it, unless there was some good reason to prevent it. And I don't mean the law. M.P.'s like a snort now and then, too.

The trouble was raw materials. The moon doesn't have any, of course. Usually, you start with some left-over stuff and ferment it and then run it through a still. And I couldn't get my hands on any left-over stuff, like potato peels or raisins or overripe fruit or anything that I've used in the past. Dehydrated

and preprepared foods are efficient for shipping to the moon, I suppose, but they're hell on private enterprise.

I managed to scrounge some raw materials from the admiral's mess and the officers' messes. Not really left overs, just some food that wouldn't be missed on the records. And either those stewards were real thirsty, or they are expert gougers; they made me promise them so much of my initial output, that there wasn't much left for profit, especially after I allowed a little for me and Sally.

The still was easy to rig, of course. A ready-made vacuum and the sun up a couple of weeks at a time for power (with extra suit-batteries for use during the night time) made the production part of the job real simple.

I made my headquarters in a little cave, well off the beaten track. Before I got my three-days-off, I'd had time to brew up a batch and run it through my distilling apparatus. Cut back to about 90 proof — I'm an honest man — moon juice tasted very good to me and Sally. And I didn't get any complaints from the stewards either. But after finishing with a little lubrication for the M.P.'s and the Masters-at-Arms and such, there hadn't been any out of that first batch to sell, and I hadn't been able to pick up nearly as many raw materials for a second batch as I would have liked. Still, I'd dumped my old load of used mash at the back of the cave and had reloaded my brew vat with what I had.

Since this was my profit run and

I was anxious about it, the first thing I did when I left Sally with the moon jeep was to hustle over to the cave to see how my stuff was making out.

At first, I couldn't even find the cave. After I drove past where the entrance ought to be a couple of times, I stopped the jeep, checked my suit and got out to walk and hunt. It wasn't until I got right up to the rock face that I found that the cave was still there. It was just all full of something — full of overflowing. Whatever it was, the stuff bulged out of the cave until it reached a place where the rays of the sun had hit it, I guess, earlier in the "morning," and that had stopped it.

Have you ever heard of "moonwort?" Everybody has, I suppose. It's the only living thing they have found on the moon so far, except soldiers, and the papers and magazines have given it a big play. At any rate, it isn't exactly a plant, but it certainly isn't an animal; and it has only been found in a few places in caves where the sun can't hit it directly, and it's almost too small to see with the naked eye.

Well, I had seen some moonwort through a microscope, and this was it, only a good many thousands of times bigger. No plant was going to keep me from my still, even if moonwort isn't exactly a plant. So I pulled some of it aside and trampled some more of it down and worked my way in to see how my mash was making out.

The longhairs tell me that my rough treatment of the moonwort

was one of the dumbest things I've ever done. They say that I had no way of telling how delicate that stuff — they simplify their words for it to "Hypertrophied moonwort" when they talk to me — might be, and that all of it might just have curled up and died. They say that I should have stayed away from it and called in experts like them to handle it properly.

Oh, yes; they also add that moonwort might, for all I knew, have been able to dissolve my space suit. Since that wouldn't have helped my future plans at all, I'm glad that it turned out to be harmless and hardy after all. It speaks a lot for the longhairs that they mentioned that possibility about what might have happened to me, even as an afterthought. I love them too.

At any rate, my quarter of a vat of mash hadn't been doing at all well. I guess the moonwort had cut the light. Not direct sunlight, of course, but reflected light. At this time of day, the cave should have been quite bright, and that's what the mash needed, maybe, to help it work.

I beat my way to the back of the cave, trampling the heavy growth down as much as I could as I went, and found that the whole mass of the moonwort seemed to be springing out of the old mash that I'd dumped out of the vat after I'd finished the first batch. The moonwort couldn't have just used the old mash for food — it must have weighed many times as much as the mash. The longhairs talk about enzymitic action and catalytic action and a lot

of other actions I don't care much about. All I knew at the time as I was mad because I figured the moonwort was eating into my profits.

And then I got an idea that again the longhairs have told me wasn't very bright. The moonwort had grown on my used-up mash. I wondered if maybe I could ferment it in my vat. So I tried it.

Never in my life have I seen anything work as fast as that moonwort mash did. In just a few hours I was as busy as a drill sergeant. I was working my still all out, making a clear white panther juice and using any spare time to cut more moonwort and cram it into the vat.

I had to make a couple of trips back to civilization to pick up more containers. I didn't even stop to cut my output back to normal drinking proof — that was real high-test stuff. I was so busy I didn't even stop to sip.

As a matter of fact, maybe deep down inside I was scared that my panther juice might not be worth drinking. With all that hooch, I was as good as rich; if it turned out to be bad, I was just a poor corporal again. Anyway, I didn't taste, and as far as I can remember, I didn't even think about tasting. I just ended up with a jeep loaded full of high-test, but untested liquor — or what I hoped was liquor. I even had to move the tube outside of the vehicle and strap it on top to make room for my jugs.

I remembered the Old Man's orders, though. That's something I don't forget. And I was on hand on

time to watch his ship come bouncing in on a tail of fire and set down right in the middle of the crossroads, as advertised.

I turned the Tube, Experimental, over to the crewmen of the flagship, making sure that they didn't catch sight of my private enterprise, and reported to the admiral.

"The Bolshies will be along in a few minutes," he said, "for whatever good that will do. They're bringing a connector tube also, which they will hook to their airlock. Then we'll attach the two tubes together, and meet there at the junction.

"You'll bring a table and a chair for me, and the rest of our delegation will bring their own chairs. The other side will bring their table and chairs too. At least, we'll be able to do a little face-to-face talking, after all this time."

He looked at me. "The full Marine dress uniform is an impressive piece of gear," he said. "Wear it during the meeting." The Old Man knew that we had only been allowed to lift from Earth with a few pounds of personal belongings, and he knew that the Marine uniform is heavy, and he knew that it wasn't on the allowed list of what you can take to the moon. But he didn't even bother to ask if I had a dress uniform with my gear in the ship.

So I took a Marine bath (water is a scarce item in a spaceship), spit shined my shoes and put on my dress uniform.

Along about that time, their ship came lumbering up and wobbled

to a stop not more than fifty feet from ours. In almost no time, they had men out of their ship in space-suits hooking a tube to their air-lock. Since our sailors had already finished their outside work, they just stood by and watched critically. Those Russians were pretty good, though, and in about fifteen minutes from the time they landed, the two tubes were hooked together and I was walking toward the joining point on the inside, carrying an eight-foot-long table — the longest that could be set down crosswise in the tube — and an arm chair, just a few steps ahead of our delegation.

I was glad to see that the Russian orderly fellow who was walking down their tube toward me carrying the table for their delegation was only about six foot four and didn't have any where near as good a uniform as my Marine full dress. But he was strong. He walked along carrying his table and chair as if it were the easiest thing to do in the world, just like I was carrying mine. We both knew the other one was lying. Even in light moon gravity, carrying that stuff was rough.

I would have liked to have smiled at him to show I knew he was faking, but that wouldn't have been right; so each of us acted as if the other one weren't there, except that we set our tables down at exactly the same time, so that they both stood side to side across the mouth of the tubes, touching each other all along the side so they made one big, square table.

With the table in place, I set the arm chair down behind it, so that the admiral, without waiting at all, seated himself at the center spot on his side. At the same instant, the Russian general who was their chief negotiator seated himself at the center spot behind his table. The interpreters and recorders and such took their places on both sides, and talk was ready to begin.

Of course, the Old Man spoke excellent Russian, though he wasn't about to say a word in it, and I felt sure that the Russian general spoke good English, although you wouldn't be able to tell it by listening to him. I stood a few steps behind the admiral at parade rest and didn't move a muscle, while the interpreters cleared their throats and got things going. And the Russian orderly didn't budge any more than I did. That boy really knew his stuff.

Unfortunately, when the talking really got started, it soon became very obvious that the negotiations weren't getting anywhere. After several years of continuous hot and cold war between East and West — hot on the moon, while both sides kept things reasonably peaceful down on Earth — the West had decided that the moon had stopped being a kind of relief valve for explosive tempers, and it was time to stop the shooting. One of the big-shot commentators said that he and the statesmen of the capitals of the West figured that "continuation of the endemic lunar conflict had become contraindicated, because it had commenced merely to exacerbate feelings on both sides." Whatever

that means. Anyway, it looked as if the Russians didn't agree with that commentator, whatever their politicians were saying back on Earth.

The Old Man was keeping his temper, which was a wonder, because I was losing mine. I managed to hold my position at parade rest without moving, of course, and I kept my face expressionless (or rather, in the proper expression of respectful readiness and attention that I can hold even when I have a hangover); but I couldn't keep the angry blood from darkening my face and neck, and that made me flush even worse. I could tell that that damn Russian orderly was laughing at me behind his expression of respectful readiness and attention.

What the Russians were doing was to try to make us break off the negotiations; and, of course, we just had to stay there patiently to prevent that-or to try to build up a situation where they would break things up by leaving in a huff and claiming that it was our fault and that we had forced them out. It was this that the admiral was trying to prevent, and he was good at it; but I kept wondering just how long he could keep it up and what good it was doing.

After several hours, the Russian general called a pause for what he said was "an exchange of courtesies." The admiral looked worried, even though he didn't change expression. The general gestured, and his orderly snapped to attention. He motioned again, and the orderly pivoted and moved back through their tube and into the Russian ship. He came

back a few minutes later with two glasses and a bottle.

The general commented that the liquor was vodka, the Russian national drink. He poured and proposed toasts to the Russian people and the people of the West and to the success of the conference. Then, when both glasses were empty he gestured again, and that orderly of his picked up the bottle and the glasses and stepped back.

The admiral had seen what was coming. It was obvious that if he couldn't propose adequate answering toasts, now that his turn had come, the Russians would get mad and stalk off, talking about our discourtesy. I had watched the Old Man glance at his aide and raise one eyebrow a trifle, and I had seen the aide shake his head an eighth of an inch each way.

U.S.S.N.S. Tombaugh was a commissioned Navy ship, and the Joseph Daniels rule applied: no liquor allowed. Of course, sometimes a little private stock gets hidden on board for use ashore, but if there had been any, the aide would have known about it — and it was clear that there wasn't.

I was nearly sweating because I had the answer in the moon jeep, and I couldn't move a muscle to let the admiral know about it. I needn't have worried. The admiral gestured, and I snapped to attention. He motioned again, and I pivoted and moved back through the tube and into the ship.

I whipped out of my dress uniform, into a spacesuit, out of the auxiliary airlock, into the moon jeep

for a jug, back into the ship, out of the spacesuit and back into my uniform in just under four minutes. Meanwhile, at my frantic request on the way by, a tray and a couple of glasses had been gotten ready.

When I stepped back into the tube, my uniform was as immaculate as before, and I wasn't even breathing heavily, although the effort almost made me blow a gasket.

The admiral picked up the jug and poured the two glasses full of the clear white liquid — as clear and white as vodka. He glanced at the jug and then at me and stated blandly that the liquor was Moonshine, the American national drink.

He proposed an appropriate toast, and he and the disappointed general ceremonially tossed down their neat shots. I stood at rest and prayed.

The general didn't say a word, which didn't surprise me. He just held out his glass, which did. The admiral filled it again, and his own, and they tossed down their second slugs. Then both the general and the admiral gestured simultaneously, and we popped to attention, simultaneously.

I got a bunch of glasses, enough for all of the group on our side, and then grabbed enough for the other side too and was back in thirty seconds.

The general had his arm around his rigid and apoplectic orderly, happily explaining that he wanted him to get some glasses so that everybody, including the orderly, would have some of this wonderful American Moonshine.

Of course, a couple of hours later the authorities moved in and confiscated my entire jeepload full of liquor, but it had already done its work. There have been half a dozen Nobel prizes, including a Peace Prize, awarded to longhairs who have studied the stuff and explained why it works the way it does and how they have expanded the world's fund of knowledge.

The stuff just does what any good booze has always been supposed to do. It makes people friendly.

The admiral and the general had come to full agreement in fifteen minutes on ending the war on the moon and had exercised their plenipotentiary powers to sign the agreement in front of full live network television coverage beamed down to both sides on Earth. The agreement was so sensible that both sides have had to stick with it.

Nobody has ever used any more of the genuine Moonshine at a conference; but the fact that it exists and that it might be used has made the world a lot more peaceful. Even labor-management negotiations are running smoother. The world is getting downright insipid.

The admiral got a fancy medal, which I keep polished, the thanks of the world and a promotion.

As for me, I've never tasted the stuff, and I'm not going to. I pick my own friends. It may be the uniform, but I don't have much trouble getting real friendly when I want to with whatever girl I want to. And what else would I need the genuine Moonshine for? After all, I'm a Marine.

END

FLATLANDER

by Larry Niven

Illustrated by GAUGHAN

I

The most beautiful girl aboard turned out to have a husband with habits so solitary that I didn't know about him until the second week. He was about five feet four and middle-aged, but he wore a hellflare tattoo on his shoulder, which meant he'd been on Kzin during the war thirty years back, which meant he'd been trained to kill adult kzinti with his bare hands, feet elbows, knees and whatnot. When we found out about each other he very

decently gave me a first warning, and broke my arm to prove he meant it.

The arm still ached a day later, and every woman on the *Lensman* was over two hundred years old. I drank alone. I stared glumly into the mirror behind the curving bar. The mirror stared glumly back.

"Hey. You from We Made It. What am I?"

He was two chairs down, and he was glaring. Without the beard he would have had a round, almost petulant face . . . I think. The beard, short and black and carefully shaped, made him look like a cross between Zeus and an angry bulldog. The glare went with the beard. His square fingers wrapped a large drinking bulb in a death grip. A broad belly matched broad shoulders to make him look massive rather than fat.

Obviously he was talking to me. I asked, "What do you mean, what are you?"

"Where am I from?"

"Earth." It was obvious. The accent said Earth. So did the conservatively symmetrical beard. His breathing was unconsciously natural in the ship's standard atmosphere, and his build had been forged at one point zero gee.

"Then what am I?"

"A flatlander."

The glare heat increased. He'd obviously reached the bar way ahead of me. "A flatlander! Dammit, everywhere I go I'm a flatlander. Do you know how many hours I've spent in space?"

"No. Long enough to know how to use a drinking bulb."

"Funny. Very funny. Everywhere in human space a flatlander is a shnook who never gets above the atmosphere. Everywhere but Earth. If you're from Earth you're a flatlander all your life. For the last fifty years I've been running about in human space, and what am I? A flatlander. Why?"

"Earthian is a clumsy term."

"What is WeMadeItian?" he demanded.

"I'm a crashlander. I wasn't born within fifty miles of Crashlanding City, but I'm a crashlander anyway."

That got a grin. I think. It was hard to tell with the beard. "Lucky you're not a pilot."

"I am. Was."

"You're kidding. They let a crashlander pilot a ship?"

"If he's good at it."

"I didn't mean to pique your ire, sir. May I introduce myself? My name's Elephant."

"Beowulf Shaeffer."

He bought me a drink. I bought him a drink. It turned out we both played gin, so we took fresh drinks to a card table . . .

When I was a kid I used to stand out at the edge of Crashlanding Port watching the ships come in. I'd watch the mob of passengers leave the lock and move in a great clump toward customs, and I'd wonder why they seemed to have trouble navigating. A majority of the starborn would always walk in weaving lines, swaying and blinking teary eyes against the sun. I used to think it was because they came from different worlds with different gravities

and different atmospheres beneath differently colored suns.

Later I learned different.

There are no windows in a passenger spacecraft. If there were, half the passengers would go insane; it takes an unusual mentality to watch the blind-spot appearance of hyperspace and still keep one's marbles. For passengers there is nothing to watch and nothing to do, and if you don't like reading sixteen hours a day then you drink. It's best to drink in company. You get less lushed, knowing you have to keep up your side of a conversation. The ship's 'doc has cured more hangovers than every other operation combined, right down to manicures and hair-cuts.

The ship grounded at Los Angeles two days after I met Elephant. He'd made a good drinking partner. We'd been fairly matched at cards, him with his sharp card sense, me with my usual luck. From the talking we'd done we knew almost as much about each other as anyone knows about anyone. In a way I was sorry to see him leave.

"You've got my number?"

"Yah. But, like I said, I don't know just what I'll be doing." I was telling the truth. When I explore a civilized world I like to make my own discoveries.

"Well, call me if you get a chance. I wish you'd change your mind. I'd really like to show you something of Earth."

"I decline with thanks. Good-by, Elephant. It's been fun."

Elephant waved and turned through the natives' door. I went on

to face the smuggler baiters. The last drink was still with me, but I could cure that at the hotel. I never expected to see Elephant again. I really never did.

Nine days ago I'd been on Jinx, I'd been rich. And I'd been depressed.

The money and the depression had stemmed from the same source. The puppeteers, those three-legged, two-headed professional cowards and businessmen, had lured me into taking a new type of ship all the way to the galactic core, thirty thousand light-years away. The trip was for publicity purposes, to get research money to iron out the imperfections in the very ship I was riding.

I suppose I should have had more sense, but I never do, and the money was good. The trouble was that the Core had exploded by the time I got there. The Core stars had gone off in a chain reaction of novae ten thousand years ago, and a wave of radiation was even then (and even now) sweeping methodically toward known space.

In just over twenty thousand years, we'll all find ourselves in deadly danger.

You're not worried? It didn't bother me much either. But every puppeteer in known space vanished overnight, heading for Finagle knows what other galaxy.

I was depressed. I missed the puppeteers and hated knowing I was responsible for their going. I had time, and money, and a black melancholia to work off. And I'd always wanted to see Earth.

Earth smelled good. There was a used flavor to it, a breathed flavor, unlike anything I've ever known. It was the difference between spring water and distilled water. Somewhere in each breath I took were molecules breathed by Dante, Aristotle, Shakespeare, Heinlein, Carter and my own ancestors. Traces of past industries lingered in the air, sensed if not smelled: gasoline, coal fumes, tobacco and burnt cigarette filters, diesel fumes, ale breweries. I left the customs house with inflated lungs and a questioning look.

I could have taken a transfer booth straight to the hotel. I decided to walk a little first.

Everyone on Earth had made the same decision.

The pedwalk held a crowd such as I had never imagined. They were all shapes and all colors, and they dressed in strange and eldritch ways. Shifting colors assaulted the eye and sent one reeling. On any world in human space, any world but one, you know immediately who the natives are. Wunderland? Asymmetric beards mark the nobility, and the common people are the ones who quickly step out of their way. We Made It? The pallor of our skins in summer and winter; in spring and fall, the fact that we all race upstairs, above the buried cities and onto the blooming desert, eager to taste sunlight while the murderous winds are at rest. Jinx? The natives are short and wide and strong; a sweet little old lady's handshake can

crush steel. Even in the Belt, within the solar system, a Belter strip haircut adorns both men and women. But Earth — !

No two looked alike. There were reds and blues and greens, yellows and oranges, plaids and stripes. I'm talking about hair, you understand, and skin. All my life I've used tannin secretion pills for protection against ultraviolet, so that my skin color has varied from its normal pinkish-white (I'm an albino) to (under bluewhite stars) tuxedo black. But I'd never known that other skin dye pills existed. I stood rooted to the pedwalk, letting it carry me where it would, watching the incredible crowd swarm around me. They were all knees and elbows. Tomorrow I'd have bruises.

"Hey!"

The girl was four or five heads away, and short. I'd never have seen her if everyone else hadn't been short too. Flatlanders rarely top six feet. And there was this girl, her hair a topological explosion in swirling orange and silver, her face a faint, subtle green with space-black eyebrows and lipstick, waving something and shouting at me.

Waving my wallet.

I forced my way to her, until we were close enough to touch, until I could hear what she was saying above the crowd noise.

"Stupid! Where's your address? You don't even have a place for a stamp!"

"What?"

She looked startled. "Oh! You're an offworlder."

"Yah!" My voice would give out fast at this noise level.

"Well, look." She shoved her way closer to me. "Look, you can't go around town with an offworlder's wallet. Next time someone picks your pocket he may not notice 'till you're gone."

"You picked my pocket?"

"Sure! Think I found it? Would I risk my precious hand under all those spike heels?"

"How if I call a cop?"

"Cop? Oh, a stoneface." She laughed merrily. "Learn or go under, man. There's no law against picking pockets. Look around you."

I looked around me, then looked back fast, afraid she'd disappear. Not only my cash, but my Bank of Jinx draft for forty thousand stars, was in that wallet. Everything I owned.

"See them all? Sixty-four million people in Los Angeles alone. Eighteen billion in the whole world. Suppose there was a law against picking pockets? How would you enforce it?" She deftly extracted the cash from my wallet and handed the wallet back. "Get yourself a new wallet, and fast. It'll have a place for your address and a window for a tenth-star stamp. Put your address in right away, and a stamp too. Then the next guy who takes it can pull out the money and drop your wallet in the nearest mailbox, no sweat. Otherwise you lose your credit cards, your ident, everything." She stuffed two hundred odd stars in cash between her breasts, flashed me a parting smile as she turned.

"Thanks," I called. Yes, I did. I was still bewildered, but she'd obviously stayed to help me. She could

just as easily have kept wallet and all.

"No charge," she called back, and was gone.

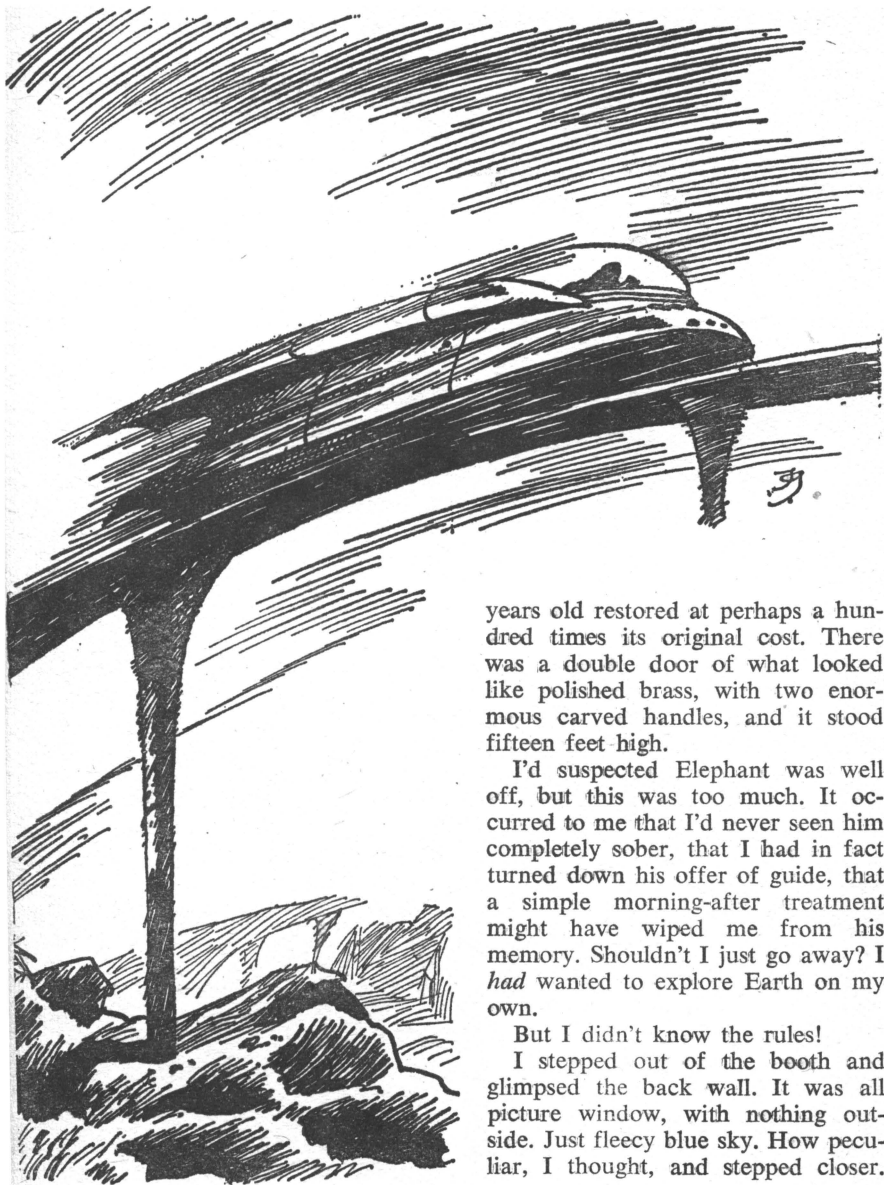
I stopped off at the first transfer booth I saw, dropped a halfstar in the coin slot and dialed Elephant.

The vestibule was intimidating.

I'd expected a vestibule. Why put a transfer booth inside your own home, where any burglar can get in just by dialing your number? Anyone who can afford the lease on a private transfer booth can also afford a vestibule with a locked door and an intercom switch.

There was a vestibule, but it was the size of a living room, furnished with massage chairs and an autovendor. There was an intercom, but it was a flat vidphone, three hundred





years old restored at perhaps a hundred times its original cost. There was a double door of what looked like polished brass, with two enormous carved handles, and it stood fifteen feet high.

I'd suspected Elephant was well off, but this was too much. It occurred to me that I'd never seen him completely sober, that I had in fact turned down his offer of guide, that a simple morning-after treatment might have wiped me from his memory. Shouldn't I just go away? I *had* wanted to explore Earth on my own.

But I didn't know the rules!

I stepped out of the booth and glimpsed the back wall. It was all picture window, with nothing outside. Just fleecy blue sky. How peculiar, I thought, and stepped closer.

Elephant lived halfway up a cliff. A sheer mile-high cliff.

The phone rang.

On the third ear-jarring ring I answered, mainly to stop the noise. A supercilious voice said, "Is somebody out there?"

"I'm afraid not," I said. "Does someone named Elephant live here?"

"I'll see, sir," said the voice. The screen had not lit, but I had the feeling someone had seen me quite clearly.

Seconds crawled by. I was half minded to jump back in the transfer booth and dial at random. But only half; that was the trouble. Then the screen did light, and it was Elephant. "Bay! You changed your mind!"

"Yah. You didn't tell me you were rich."

"You didn't ask."

"Well, no, of course not."

"How do you expect to learn things if you don't ask? Don't answer that. Hang on, I'll be right down. You did change your mind? You'll let me show you Earth?"

"Yes, I will. I'm scared to go out there alone."

"Why? Don't answer. Tell me in person." He hung up.

Seconds later the big bronze doors swung back with a bone-shaking boom. They just barely got out of Elephant's way. He pulled me inside, giving me no time to gape, shoved a drink in my hand and asked me why I was afraid to go outside.

I told him about the pickpocket, and he laughed. He told me about the time he tried to go outside during a We Made It summer, and I laugh-

ed, though I've heard of outworlders being blown away and to Hades doing the same thing. Amazingly, we were off again. It was just like on the ship, even to the end of Elephant's anecdote. "They called me a silly flatlander, of course."

"I've been thinking about that," I said.

"About what?"

"You said you'd give a lot to do something completely original, so the next time someone called you a flatlander you could back him into a corner and force him to listen to your story. You said it several times."

"I didn't say just that. But I would like to have some story to tell, something like your neutron star episode. If only to tell myself. The silly offworlder wouldn't know, but I'd know."

I nodded. The neutron star episode he was talking about had been my first meeting with a puppeteer. The puppeteer had blackmailed me into taking one of his ships, a ship with an invulnerable puppeteer-made General Products hull, into a hyperbolic orbit within one mile of the surface of a neutron star. It was the only neutron star ever found, and I was the second man to make that trip. The first, with his wife, had used the same type of ship. They were found crushed shapelessly into its nose by some unknown force. Danger does wonderful things for my well known mental laziness. With two minutes to spare I had realized what the unknown force was, and had crawled into the repair access tube to avoid it. I'd talked about it over

gin cards — a habit I've developed for distracting my opponent — and Elephant had been suitably impressed.

"I've thought of a couple of things you could do," I said.

"Spill."

"One. Visit the puppeteer home world. Nobody's been there, but everyone knows there is one, and everyone knows how difficult it is to find. You could be the first."

"Great." He mused a moment.

"Great! And the puppeteers wouldn't stop me because they're gone. Where is the puppeteer home world?"

"I don't know."

"What's your second idea?"

"Ask the Outsiders."

"Huh?"

"There's not a system in the galaxy that the Outsiders don't know all about. We don't know how far the puppeteer empire extended, though it was 'way beyond known space, but we do know about the Outsiders. They know the galaxy like the palm of their — uh And they trade for information; it's just about the only business they do. Ask them what's the most unusual world they know of within reach."

Elephant was nodding gently. There was a glazed look in his eyes. I had not been sure he was serious about seeking some unique achievement. He was.

"The problem is," I said, "that an Outsider's idea of what is unique may not — " I stopped, because Elephant was up and half-running to a tridphone.

I wasn't sorry. It gave me an opportunity to gape in private.

I've been in bigger homes than Elephant's. Much bigger. I grew up in one. But I've never seen a room that soothed the eye like Elephant's living room. It was more than a living room; it was an optical illusion, the opposite of those jittering black-and-white images they show in lectures on how we see. These clinical children of Op Art give the illusion of motion; but Elephant's living room gave the illusion of stillness. A physicist would have loved the soundproofing. Some interior decorator had become famous for his work here, if he hadn't been famous already, in which case he had become rich. How could tall, thin Beowulf Shaeffer fit a chair designed to the measure of short, wide Elephant? Yet I was bonelessly limp, blissfully relaxed, using only the muscles that held a double-walled glass of an odd-tasting, strangely refreshing soft drink called Tzlotz Beer.

A glass which would not empty. Somewhere in the crystal was a tiny transfer motor connected to the bar; but the bent light in the crystal hid it. Another optical illusion, and one that must have tricked good men into acute alcoholism. I'd have to watch that.

Elephant returned. He walked as if he massed tons, as if any kzin foolish enough to stand in his path would have a short, wide hole in him. "All done," he said. "Don Cramer'll find the nearest Outsider ship and make my pitch for me. We should hear in a couple of days."

"Okay," said I, and asked him about the cliff. It turned out that

we were in the Rocky Mountains and that he owned every square inch of the nearly vertical cliff face. Why? I remembered Earth's eighteen billion and wondered if they'd otherwise have surrounded him up, down, and sideways.

Suddenly Elephant remembered that someone named Dianna must be home by now. I followed him into the transfer booth, watched him dial eleven digits, and waited in a much smaller vestibule while Elephant used the more conventional intercom.

Dianna seemed rather dubious about letting him in until he roared that he had a guest and she should stop fooling around.

Dianna was a small, pretty woman with skin the deep, uniform red of a Martian sky and hair like flowing quicksilver. Her irises had the same polished silver luster. She hadn't wanted to let us in because we were both wearing our own skins, but she never mentioned it again once we were inside.

Elephant introduced me to Dianna and instantly told her he'd acted to contact the Outsiders.

"What's an Outsider?" she asked with sudden interest.

Elephant gestured with both hands, looked confused, turned helplessly toward me.

"They're hard to describe," I said. "Think of a cat-o'-nine-tails with a big thick handle."

"They live on cold worlds," said Elephant.

"Small, cold, airless worlds like Nereid. They pay rent to use Nereid as a base, don't they, Elephant? And

they travel over most of the galaxy in big unpressurized ships with fusion drives and no hyperdrives."

"They sell information. They can tell me about the world I want to find, the most unusual planet in known space."

"They spend most of their time tracking starseeds."

Dianna broke in. "Why?"

Elephant looked at me. I looked at Elephant.

"Say!" Elephant exclaimed. "Why don't we get a fourth for bridge?"

Dianna looked thoughtful. Then she focused her silver eyes on me, examined me from head to foot and nodded gently to herself. "Sharrol Janss. I'll call her."

While she was phoning, Elephant told me, "That's a good thought. Sharrol's got a tendency toward hero worship. She's a computer analyst at Donovan's Brains, Inc. You'll like her."

"Good," I said, wondering if we were still talking about a bridge game. It struck me that I was building up a debt to Elephant. "Elephant, when you contact the Outsiders, I'd like to come along."

"Oh? Why?"

"You'll need a pilot. And I've dealt with Outsiders before."

"Okay, it's a deal."

The intercom rang from the vestibule. Dianna went to the door and came back with our fourth for bridge. "Sharrol, you know Elephant. This is Beowulf Shaeffer, from We Made It. Bay, this is —"

"You!" I said.

"You!" she said.

It was the pickpocket.

III

My vacation lasted just four days. I hadn't known how long it would last, though I did know how it would end. Consequently I threw myself into it body and soul. If there was a dull moment anywhere in those four days, I slept through it, and at that I didn't get enough sleep. Elephant seemed to feel the same way. He was living life to the hilt; he must have suspected, as I did, that the Outsiders would not consider danger as a factor in choosing his planet. By their own ethics they were bound not to. The days of Elephant's life might be running short.

Buried in those four days were incidents that made me wonder why Elephant was looking for a weird world. Surely Earth was the weirdest of all

I remember when we threw in the bridge hands and decided to go out for dinner. This was more complicated than it sounds. Elephant hadn't had a chance to change to flatlander styles, and neither of us was fit to be seen in public. Dianna had cosmetics for us.

I succumbed to an odd impulse. I dressed as an albino.

They were body paints, not pills. When I finished applying them, there in the full length mirror was my younger self. Blood-red irises, snow-white hair, pale transparent skin with a tinge of pink showing beneath: the teenager who had disappeared ages ago, when I was old enough to

use tannin pills. My mind wandered far back across the decades, to the days when I was a flatlander myself, my feet firmly beneath the ground, my head never higher than seven feet above the desert sands They found me there before the mirror and decided my public was ready for me.

I remember that evening, when Dianna told me she had known Elephant forever. "I was the one who named him Elephant," she bragged.

"It's a nickname?"

"Sure," said Sharrol. "His real name is Gregory Pelton."

"O-o-oh." Suddenly all came clear. Gregory Pelton is known among the stars. It is rumored that he owns the thirty-light-year-wide rough sphere called human space, that he earns his income by renting it out. It is rumored that General Products, ostensibly run by the puppeteer species and now defunct in the absence of same, is a front for Gregory Pelton. It's a true fact that his great-to-the-eighth grandmother invented the transfer booth, and that he is rich, rich, rich!

I asked, "Why Elephant? Why that particular nickname?"

Dianna and Sharrol looked demurely at the tablecloth. Elephant said, "Use your imagination, Bay."

"On what? What's an elephant, some kind of animal?"

Three faces registered annoyance. I'd missed a joke.

"Tomorrow," said Elephant, "we'll show you the Zoo."

There are seven transfer booths in

the Zoo of Earth. That'll tell you how big it is. But you're wrong; you've forgotten the two hundred taxis on permanent duty. They're there because the booths are too far apart for walking.

We stared down at dusty, compact animals smaller than starseeds or bandersnatchi, but bigger than anything else I'd ever seen. Elephant said, "See?"

"Yah," I said, because the animals showed a compactness and a plodding invulnerability very like Elephant's. And then I found myself watching one of the animals in a muddy pool. It was using a hollow tentacle over its mouth to spray water on its back. I stared at that tentacle . . . and stared . . .

"Hey, look!" Sharrol called, pointing. Bay's ears are turning red!"

I didn't forgive her 'til two that morning.

And I remember reaching over Sharrol to get a tabac stick and seeing her purse lying on her other things. I said, "How if I picked your pocket now?"

Orange and silver lips parted in a lazy smile. "I'm not wearing a pocket."

"Would it be in good taste to sneak the money out of your purse?"

"Only if you could hide it on you."

I found a small, flat purse with four hundred stars in it and stuck it in my mouth.

She made me go through with it. Ever made love to a woman with a purse in your mouth? Unforgettable. Don't try it if you've got asthma.

I remember Sharrol. I remember

smooth, warm blue skin, silver eyes half-closed in cool blue loveliness, orange-and-silver hair in a swirling abstract pattern that nothing could muss. It always sprang back. Her laugh was silver too, when I gently extracted two handfuls of hair and tied them in a hard double knot, and when I gibbered and jumped up and down at the sight of her hair slowly untying itself like Medusa's locks. And her voice was a silver croon.

I remember the freeways. They were the first thing that showed, coming in on Earth. If we'd landed at night it would have been the lighted cities; but of course we came in on the day side. Why else would a world have three spaceports? There were the freeways and autostradas and autobahns, strung in an all-enclosing net across the faces of the continents.

From a few miles up you still can't see the breaks. But they're there, when girders and pavement have collapsed. Only two super-highways are still kept in good repair. Both are on the same continent: the Pennsylvania Turnpike and the Santa Monica Freeway. The rest of the network is broken chaos.

It seems there are people who collect old groundcars and race them. Some are renovated machines with half the parts replaced; others are handmade reproductions. On a perfectly flat surface they'll do sixty to a hundred miles per hour.

I laughed when Elephant told me about them. Seeing them in person was different. e

The rodders began to appear about

dawn. They gathered around one end of the Santa Monica Freeway, the end that used to join the San Diego Freeway. This end is a maze of fallen spaghetti, great curving loops of prestressed concrete that have lost their strength over the years and sagged to the ground. But you can still use the top loop to reach the starting line. We watched from above, hovering in a cab as the groundcars moved into line.

"Their dues cost more than the cars," said Elephant. "I used to drive one myself. You'd turn white as snow if I told you how much it costs to keep this stretch of freeway in repair."

"How much?"

He told me. I turned white as snow.

They were off. I was still wondering what kick they got, driving an obsolete machine on flat concrete when they could be up here with us. They were off, weaving slightly, weaving more than slightly, foolishly moving at different speeds, coming perilously close to each other before sheering off — and I began to realize things.

Those automobiles had no radar.

They were being steered with a cabin wheel geared directly to four ground wheels. A mistake in steering and they'd crash into each other, or into the concrete curbs. They were steered and stopped by muscle power; but whether they could turn or stop depended on how hard four rubber balloons could grip smooth concrete. If the tires loosed their grip Newton's First Law would take over; the fragile metal mass would

continue moving in a straight line until stopped by a concrete curb or another groundcar.

"A man could get killed in one of those."

"Not to worry," said Elephant. "Nobody does, usually."

"Usually?"

He told me. I turned white as snow.

The race ended twenty minutes later, at another tangle of fallen concrete. I was wet through. We landed and met some of the racers. One of them, a thin guy with tangled, glossy green hair and a bony white face with a widely grinning scarlet mouth, offered me a ride. I declined with thanks, backing slowly away and wishing for a weapon. This joker was obviously dangerously insane.

I remember flatlander food, the best in known space, and an odd, mildly alcoholic drink called Taittinger Comtes de Champagne '59. I remember invading an outworlder bar, where the four of us talked shop with a girl rock miner whose inch-wide auburn crest of hair fell clear to the small of her back. I remember flying cross-country with a lift belt, and seeing nothing but city enclosing widely separated patches of food-growing land. I remember a submerged hotel off the Grand Banks of Newfoundland, and a dolphin embassy off Italy where a mixed group of dolphins and flatlanders seemed to be solving the general problem of sentient beings without hands (there are many, and we'll probably find more). It seemed more

a coffee-break discussion than true business.

We were about to break up for bed on the evening of the fourth day, when the tridphone rang. Don Cramer had found an Outsider.

I said, disbelieving, "You're leaving right now?"

"Sure!" said Elephant. "Here, take one of these pills. You won't feel sleepy 'til we're on our way."

A deal is a deal, and I owed Elephant plenty. I took the pill. We kissed Sharrol and Dianna good-by, Dianna standing on a chair to reach me, Sharrol climbing me like a beanpole and wrapping her legs around my waist. I was a foot and a half taller than either of them.

Calcutta Base was in daylight. Elephant and I took the transfer booth there, to find that the *ST*[∞] had been shipped ahead of us.

Her full name was *Slower Than Infinity*. She had been built into a General Products #2 hull, a three hundred foot spindle with a wasp waist constriction near the tail. I was relieved. The General Products hull is both invulnerable and impermeable to matter and energy other than visible light, as guaranteed by the puppeteer company and proven over thousands of years of use; but none of the four designs are pretty, and they all look alike. I was afraid Elephant might own a flashy, vulnerable dude's yacht. The two-man control room looked pretty small for a lifiesystem until I noticed the bubble extension folded into the nose. The rest of the hull held a one gee fusion drive and fuel tank, a hyperspace motor, a gravity drag and belly land-

ing gear, all clearly visible through the hull, which had been left transparent.

She held fuel, food and aid. She must have been ready for days. We left twenty mintes after arriving.

Using the fusion drive in Earth's atmosphere would have gotten us into the organ banks, in pieces. Flatlander laws are strict about air pollution. A robot rocket with huge wings lifted us to orbit, using air compressed nearly to degenerate matter as a propellant. We took off from there.

Now there was plenty of time for sleep. It took us a week at one gee just to get far enough out of the solar system's gravity well to use the hyperdrive. Somewhere in that time I removed my false coloring (it *had* been false; I'd continued to take tannin secretion pills against Earth's sunlight), and Elephant turned his skin back to light tan and his beard and hair back to black. For four days he'd been Zeus, with marble skin and a metal-gold beard and glowing molten gold eyes. It had fitted him so perfectly that I hardly noticed the change.

Hyperdrive — and a long, slow three weeks. We took turns hovering over the mass indicator, though at first quantum hyperdrive speeds we'd have seen a mass at least twelve hours before it became dangerous. I think I was the only man who knew there *was* a second quantum — a puppeteer secret. The Outsider ship was near the edge of known space, well beyond Tau Ceti.

"It was the only one around," Elephant had said. "Number fourteen."

"Fourteen? That's the same ship I dealt with before."

"Oh? Good. That should help."

Days later he asked, "How'd it happen?"

"The usual way. Number fourteen was on the other side of known space then, and she sent out an offer of information exchange. I was almost to Wonderland, and I caught the offer. When I dropped my passengers I went back."

"Did they have anything worthwhile?"

"Yah. They'd found the *Lazy Eight II*."

The *Lazy Eight II* had been one of the old slowboats, a circular flying wing taking colonists to Jinx. Something had gone wrong before turnover, and the ship had continued on, carrying fifty passengers in suspended animation and a crew of four, presumed dead. With a ram-scoop to feed hydrogen to her fusion drive she could accelerate forever. She was five hundred years on her way.

"I remember," said Elephant. "They couldn't reach her."

"No. But we'll know where to find her when the state of the art gets that good."

"That won't be soon."

He was right. A hyperdrive ship would not only have to reach her, but to carry reaction fuel to match her speed. Her speed was just less than a photon's, and she was more than five hundred light-years away, seventeen times the diameter of known space.

"They'll wait for us," I said.

"Did you have any problems?"

"Their translator is pretty good. But we'll have to be careful. The thing about buying information is that you don't know what you've got until you've bought it. They couldn't just offer to sell me the present position of the *Lazy Eight II*. We'd have tracked their course by scope until we saw fusion light, and gotten the information free."

The time came when only a small green dot glowed in the center of the mass indicator. A star would have shown as a line; no star would have shown as no dot. I dropped out of hyperspace and set the deep-radar to hunt out the Outsider.

IV

The Outsider found us first.

Somewhere in the cylindrical metal pod near her center of mass, perhaps occupying it completely, was the reactionless drive. It was common knowledge that that drive was for sale, and that the cost was a full trillion stars. Though nobody, and no nation now extant, could afford to pay it, the price was not exorbitant. In two or three minutes, while we were still searching, that drive had dropped the Outsider ship from above point nine lights to zero relative and pulled it alongside the ST ∞

One moment, nothing but stars. The next, the Outsider ship was alongside.

She was mostly empty space. I knew her population was the size of a small city, but she was much bigger because more strung out. There was the minuscule-seeming drive capsule,

and there, on a pole two and a half miles long, was a light source. The rest of the ship was metal ribbons, winding in and out, swooping giddily around themselves and each other, until the ends of each tangled ribbon stopped meandering and joined to the drive capsule. There were around a thousand such ribbons, and each was the width of a wide city pedwalk.

"Like a Christmas tree decoration," said Elephant. "What now, Bay?"

"They'll use the ship radio."

A few minutes of waiting, and here came a bunch of Outsiders. They looked like black cat-o'-nine-tails with grossly swollen handles. In the handles were their brains and invisible sense organs; in the whip ends, the clusters of mobile root-tentacles, were gas pistols. Six of them braked to a stop outside the airlock.

The radio spoke. "Welcome to Ship Fourteen. Please step outside for conveyance to our office. Take nothing on the outsides of your pressure suits."

Elephant asked, "Do we?"

I said, "Sure. The Outsiders are nothing if not honorable."

We went out. The six Outsiders offered us a tentacle each, and away we went across open space. Not fast. The thrust from the gas pistols was very low, irritatingly weak. But the Outsiders themselves were weak: an hour in the gravity of Earth's moon would have killed them,

They maneuvered us through a tangled clutter of silver ribbons, landed us on a ramp next to the looming convex wall of the drive capsule.

It wasn't quite like being lost in a giant bowl of noodles. The rigid ribbons were too far apart for that. Far above us was the light source, about as small and intense and yellowish-white as Earth's sun seen from a moon of Neptune. Shining down through the interstellar vacuum, it cast a network of sharp black shadows across all the thousand looping strands that made up the city.

Along every light-shadow borderline were the Outsiders. Just as their plantlike ancestors had done billions of years ago on some unknown world near the galactic core, the Outsiders were absorbing life-energy. Their branched tails lay in shadow, their heads in sunlight, while thermoelectricity charged their biochemical batteries. Some had root-tentacles dipped in shallow food dishes; the trace elements which kept them alive and growing were in suspension in liquid helium.

We stepped carefully around them, using our headlamps at lowest intensity, following one of the Outsiders toward a door in the wall ahead. There were no rails along the ramps, and nothing but the cold distant stars beneath. Outsiders moved aside if we came to close. Our suits may have been leaking too much heat.

The enclosure was dark until the door closed behind us. Then the light came on. It was sourceless, the color of normal sunlight, and it illuminated a cubicle that was bare and square. The only furnishing was a hemisphere of very dark glass with

the coiled shape of an Outsider inside. The hemisphere must have been both evacuated and refrigerated. Only excellent manners could have put him here at all, as if he were the guest instead of us.

"Welcome," said the room. Whatever the Outsider had said was not sonic in nature. "This air is breathable. Take off your helmets, suits, shoes, girdles and whatnot." It was an excellent translator, with a good grasp of idiom and a pleasant baritone voice.

"Thanks," I said, and we doffed our suits, Elephant a little self-consciously.

"Which of you in Gregory Pelton?"

"I am." -

"Hi. According to your agent, you want to know how to reach that planet which is most unusual inside the borders of the sixty-light-year-wide region you call known space. Is this correct?"

"Yes."

"We must know if you plan to go there or to send agents there. Also, do you plan a landing, a near orbit, or a distant orbit?"

"Landing."

"Are we to guard against danger to your life or property?"

"No." Elephant's voice was dry. The Outsider ship was an intimidating place.

"What kind of craft would you use?"

"The ship we came in."

"Do you plan colonization? Mining? Growth of food plants or animals?"

"I plan only one visit."

"We have selected a world for you. The price will be one million stars."

"That's high," said Elephant. I whistled under by breath. It was; and it wouldn't get lower. The Outsiders never dickered.

"Sold," said Elephant.

The translator gave us a triplet set of coordinates some twenty-four light-years from Earth along galactic north. "The star you are looking for is a protosun with one planet a billion and a half miles distant. The system is moving at point eight lights toward — he gave a vector direction. It seemed the protosun was drawing a shallow chord through known space; it would never approach human space.

"No good," said Elephant. "No hyperdrive ship can go that fast in real space."

"You could hitch a ride," said the translator. "With us. Moor your ship to our drive capsule."

"That'll work," said Elephant. He was getting more and more uneasy; his eyes seemed to be searching the walls for the source of the voice. He would not look at the Outsider business agent in the vacuum chamber.

"Our ferry fee will be one million stars."

Elephant sputtered.

"Just a sec," I said. "I may have information to sell you."

There was a long pause. Elephant looked at me in surprise.

"You are Beowulf Shaeffer?"

"Yah. You remember me?"

"We find you in our records. Beowulf Shaeffer, we have informa-

tion for you, already paid. The former regional president of General Products on Jinx wishes you to contact him. I have a transfer booth number."

"That's late news," I said. "The puppeteers are gone. Anyway, why would that two-headed sharpie want to see me?"

"I do not have that information. I do know that not all puppeteers have left this region. Will you accept the transfer booth number?"

"Sure."

I wrote down the eight digits as they came. A moment later Elephant was yelling, just as if he were a tridee set turned on in the middle of a program. " — hell is going on here?"

"Sorry about that," said the translator.





"What happened?" I asked.

"I couldn't hear anything! Did that monk — Did the Outsider have private business with you?"

"Sort of. I'll tell you later."

The translator said, "Beowulf Shaeffer, we do not buy information. We sell information and use the proceeds to buy territory and food soil."

"You may need this information," I argued. "I'm the only man within reach who knows it."

"What of other races?"

The puppeteers might have told them, but it was worth taking a chance. "You're about to leave known space. If you don't deal with me you may not get this information in time."

"What price do you set on this item?"

"You set the price. You've got more experience at putting values on information, and you're honorable."

"We may not be able to afford an honest price."

"The price may not exceed our ferry fee."

"Done. Speak."

I told him of the Core explosion and how I'd come to find out about it. He made me go into detail on what I'd seen: the bright patch of supernovae spreading out as my ship caught up with ancient light waves, until all the bright multicolored ball of the Core was ablaze with supernovae. "You couldn't have known this until you got there, and then it would have been too late. You don't use faster-than-light drives."

"We knew from the puppeteers that the Core had exploded. They were not able to go into detail because they had not seen it for themselves."

"Oh. Ah, well. I think the explosion must have started at the back side of the Core from here. Otherwise it would have seemed to go much more slowly."

"Many thanks. We will waive your ferry fee. Now, there is one more item. Gregory Pelton, for an additional two hundred thousand stars we will tell you exactly what is peculiar about the planet you intend to visit."

"Can I find out for myself?"

"It is likely."

"Then I will."

Silence followed. The Outsider hadn't expected that. I said, "I'm curious. Your galaxy is rapidly be-

coming a death trap. What will you do now?"

"That information will cost you —"

"Forget it."

Outside, Elephant said, "Thanks." "Forget it. I wonder what they will do?"

"Maybe they can shield themselves against the radiation."

"Maybe. But they won't have any starseeds to follow."

"Do they need them?"

Finagle only knew. The starseeds followed a highly rigid migratory mating pattern out from the Core of the galaxy and into the arms, almost to the rim, before turning back down to the Core. They were doomed. As they returned to the Core the expanding wave of radiation from the multiple novas would snuff out the species one by one. What would the Outsiders do without them? What the hell did they do *with* them? Why did they follow them? Did they need starseeds? Did starseeds need Outsiders? The Outsiders would answer these and related questions for one trillion stars apiece. Personal questions cost high with the Outsiders.

A crew was already ringing the *ST ∞* in to dock. We watched from the ramp, with crewmen sunbathing about our feet. We weren't worried. The way the Outsiders handled it, our invulnerable hull might have been made of spun sugar and sunbeams. When a spiderweb of thin strands fastened the *ST ∞* to the wall of the drive capsule, the voice of the translator spoke in our ears and invited us to step aboard. We

jumped a few hundred feet upward through the trace of artificial gravity, climbed into the airlock and got out of our suits.

"Thanks again," said Elephant.

"Forget it again," I said magnanimously. "I owe you plenty. You've been putting me up as a house guest on the most expensive world in known space, acting as my guide where the cost of labor is —"

"Okay okay okay. But you saved me a million stars, and don't you forget it." He whopped me on the shoulder and hurried into the control room to set up a million-star credit base for the next Outsider ship that came by.

"I won't," I called at his retreating back. And wondered what the hell I meant by that?

Much later I wondered about something else. Had Elephant planned to take me to "his" world? Or did he think to go it alone, to be the first to see it and not one of the first two? After the Outsider episode it was already too late. He couldn't throw me off the ship then.

I wished I'd thought of it in time. I never wanted to be a batman. My stake in this was to gently, tactfully keep Elephant from killing himself if it became necessary. For all his vast self-confidence, vast riches, vast generosity and vast bulk, he was still only a flatlander, and thus a little bit helpless.

V

We were in the expansion bubble when it happened. The bubble had inflatable seats and an inflatable

table; it was there for exercising and killing time, but it also supplied a fine view; the surface was perfectly transparent.

Otherwise we would have missed it.

There was no pressure against the seat of the pants, no crawling sensation in the pit of the stomach, no feel of motion. But Elephant, who was talking about a Jinxian frail he'd picked up in a Chicago bar, stopped just as she was getting ready to tear the place apart because some suicidal idiot had insulted her.

Somebody heavy was sitting down on the universe.

He came down slowly, like a fat man cautiously letting his weight down on a beach ball. From inside the bubble it looked like all the stars and nebulae around us were squeezing themselves together. The Outsiders on the ribbons outside never moved; but Elephant said something profane, and I steeled myself to look up.

The stars overhead were blue-white and blazing. Around us they were squashed together; below, they were turning red and winking out, one by one. It had taken us a week to get out of the solar system, but the Outsider ship could have done it in five hours.

The radio spoke. "Sirs, our crewmen will remove your ship from ours, after which you will be on your own. It has been a pleasure to do business with you."

A swarm of Outsider crewmen hauled us through the maze of basking ramps and left us. Presently the Outsider ship vanished, gone sud-

denly off, now on its own business.

In the strange starlight Elephant let out a long, shaky sigh. Some people can't take aliens. They don't find puppeteers graceful and beautiful; they find them horrifying, *wrong*. They see kzinti as slaving carnivores whose only love is fighting and killing, which is the truth; but they don't see the rigid code of honor, nor the self-control which allows a kzin ambassador to ride a human city pedwalk without slashing out with his claws at the impertinent stabbing knees and elbows. Elephant was one of these people.

He said, "Okay," in amazed relief that they were actually gone. "I'll take the first watch, Bay."

He did not say, "Those bastards would take your heart as collateral on a tenth-star loan." He couldn't see them as that close to human.

If Elephant's weakness was aliens, mine was relativity.

The trip through hyperspace was routine. I'd been trained to take the sight of the two small windows turning into blind spots, becoming areas of nothing which seemed to draw together the objects around them. So had Elephant; he'd done some flying though he preferred the comfort of a luxury liner. But the Fast Protosun was a week away, and even the best pilot occasionally has to drop back among the stars, to get his bearings and to assure his subconscious that the universe is still there.

And each time it was changed, squashed flat. The crowded blue stars were all ahead; the sparse dim red stars were all behind. Four hun-

dred years ago men and women had lived for years with such a view of the universe. But it hadn't happened since the invention of hyperdrive. I'd never seen the universe look like this. It bothered me.

"No, it doesn't bug me," said Elephant when I mentioned it. We were a day out from our destination. "To me, stars are stars. But I have been worried about something. Bay, you said the Outsiders are honorable."

"They are. They've got to be. They have to be so far above suspicion that any species they deal with will remember their unimpeachable ethics a century later. You can see that, can't you? Outsiders don't show up more often than that."

"Um. Okay. Why did they try to screw that extra two hundred kilostars out of me?"

"Uh —"

"See, the goddam problem is, what if it was a fair price? What if we need to know what's funny about the Fast Protosun?"

"You're right. Knowing the Outsiders, it's probably information we can use. All right, we'll nose around a little before we land. We'd have done that anyway, but now we'll do it better."

What was peculiar about the Fast Protosun?

Around lunchtime on the seventh ship's day, a short green line in the sphere of the mass indicator began to extend itself. It was wide and fuzzy, just what you'd expect of a protosun. I let it reach almost to the surface of the sphere before I dropped us into normal space.

The squashed universe looked in the windows. But ahead of us was a circular darkening and blurring of the vivid blue-white stars; and in the center of the circle was a dull red glow.

"Let's go into the extension bubble," said Elephant.

"Let's not."

"We'll get a better view in there." He turned the dial that would make the bubble transparent. Naturally we kept it opaque in hyperspace.

"Repeat, let's not. Think about it, Elephant. What sense does it make to use an impermeable hull, then spend most of our time outside it? Until we know what's here we ought to retract the bubble."

He nodded his shaggy head and touched the board again. Chugging noises announced that air and water were being pulled out of the bubble. Elephant moved to a window.

"Ever seen a protosun?"

"No," I said. "I don't think there are any in human space."

"That could be the peculiarity."

"It could. One thing it isn't, is the speed of the thing. Outsiders spend all their time moving faster than this."

"But planets don't. Neither do stars. Bay, maybe this thing came from outside the galaxy. That would make it unusual."

It was time we made a list. I found a pad and solemnly noted speed of star, nature of star and possible extragalactic origin of star.

"I've found our planet," said Elephant.

"Whereabouts?"

"Almost on the other side of the

protosun. We can get there faster in hyperspace."

The planet was still invisibly small where Elephant brought us out. The protosun looked about the same.

A protosun is the foetus of a star: a thin mass of gas and dust, brought together by slow eddies in interstellar magnetic fields or by the presence of a Trojan point in some loose cluster of stars; a mass which is collapsing and contracting due to gravity. I'd found material on protosuns in the ship's library, but it was all astronomical data: nobody had ever been near one for a close look. In theory the Fast Protosun must have been fairly well along in its evolution, not only because it must have formed before acquiring its peculiar velocity, but because it was already glowing.

"There it is," said Elephant. "Two days away at one gee."

"Good. We can do our instrument checks on the way. Strap down."

With the fusion motor pushing us smoothly along, Elephant went back to the scope, and I started checking the other instruments. One thing stood out like a beacon.

"Elephant. Have you noticed in me a tendency to use profanity for emphasis?"

"Not really. Why?"

"It's goddam radioactive out there."

"Could you be more specific, sir?"

"Our suit shields would break down in three days. The extension bubble would go in twenty hours."

"Okay, add it to your list. Any idea what's causing it?"

"Not one." I made a note on my

list. We were in no danger; the GP hull would protect us from anything but a heavy impact.

"No asteroid belts," said Elephant. "Meteor density zero, as far as I can tell. No other planets."

"The interstellar gas may clean away anything small, at these speeds."

"One thing's for sure, Bay. I got my money's worth. This is a strange odd peculiar funny system."

"Yah. Well, we missed lunch. Let's get dinner."

"Philistine."

VI

Elephant ate fast. He was back at the scope before I was ready for coffee. Watching him move, I was again reminded of a juggernaut; but he'd never shown such determination when I knew him on Earth. If a hungry kzin had been between him and the telescope, Elephant would have left footprints in fur.

But the only thing that could get in his way out here was me.

"Can't get a close look at the planet," said Elephant, "but it looks polished."

"Like a billiard ball?"

"Just that. I don't see any sign of an atmosphere."

"How about blast craters?"

"Nothing."

"They should be there."

"This system's pretty clean of meteors."

"The space around us shouldn't be. And at these speeds — "

"Uh-huh. That better go on your list."

I wrote it down on my list.

We slept in the disaster couches. In front of me were the yellow lights of the control panel; the stars glowed red through one side window, blue through the other. I stayed awake a long time, staring through the forward window into the red darkness ahead. The window was opaqued, but I saw the protosun clearly in my imagination, like a blood droplet speading in dark, still water.

The radiation held steady all through the next day. I did some more thorough checking, using temperature readings and deep-radar on both sun and planet. Everywhere I looked was a new anomaly.

"This star definitely shouldn't be glowing yet. It's to spread out; the gas should be too thin for fusion."

"Is it hot enough to glow?"

"Sure. But it shouldn't be."

"Maybe the theories on protosuns are wrong."

"Put it on your list."

And, an hour later:

"Elephant —"

"Another peculiarity?"

"Yah."

From under shaggy brows. Elephant's eyes plainly told me he was getting sick of peculiarities.

"According to the deep-radar shadow, this planet doesn't have any lithosphere. It's worn right down to what ought to be the magma, but isn't because it's so cold out here."

"Write it down. How many entries have you got?"

"Nine."

"Is any one of them worth paying two hundred kilostars to know about beforehand?"

"The radiation, maybe, if we didn't have a GP hull."

"But," said Elephant, glaring out at the huge, dark disk, "they *knew* we had a GP hull. Bay, can anything get through a General Products hull?"

"Light, like a laser beam. Gravity, like tides crushing you into the nose of a ship when you get too close to a neutron star. Impact won't harm the hull, but it'll kill what's inside."

"Maybe the planet's inhabited. The more I think about it, the more sure I am it came from outside. Nothing in the galaxy could have given it this velocity. It's diving through the plane of the galaxy; it wouldn't have to push in from the rim."

"Okay. What do we do if someone shoots a laser at us?"

"We perish, I think. I had reflective paint spread around the cabin, except for the windows, but the rest of the hull is transparent."

"We can still get into hyperspace from here. And for the next twenty hours. Afterwards we'll be too close to the planet."

I went right to sleep that night, being pretty tired despite the lack of exercise. Hours later I slowly realized that I was being examined. I could see it through my closed eyelids; I could feel the heat of the vast red glare, the size of the angry eye, the awful power of the mind behind it. I tried to struggle away, smacked my hand on something and woke with a shock.

I lay there in the red darkness. The edge of the protosun peeked through a window. I could feel its hostile glare.

I said, "Elephant."

"Mngl?"

"Nothing. Morning would be soon enough."

Morning.
"Elephant, would you do me a favor?"

"Sure. You want Dianna? My right arm? Shave off my beard?"

"I'll keep Sharrol, thanks. Put on your suit, will you?"

"Sure, that makes sense. We aren't nearly uncomfortable enough, just because we closed off the bubble."

"Right. And because I'm a dedicated masochist, I'm going to put my suit on this instant. Now, I hate to enjoy myself alone — "

"You got the wind up?"

"A little. Just enough."

"Anything for a friend. You go first."

There was just room to get our suits on one at a time. If the inner airlock door hadn't been open there wouldn't have been that. We tried leaving our helmets thrown back, but they got in our way against the crash couches. So we taped them to the window in front of us.

I felt better that way, but Elephant clearly thought I'd flipped. "You sure you wouldn't rather eat with your helmet on?"

"I hate suit-food syrup. We can reach our helmets if we get a puncture."

"*What puncture? We're in a General Products hull!*"

"I keep remembering that the Outsiders knew that."

"We've been through that."

"Let's go through it again. Assume they thought we might be killed anyway if we weren't prepared. Then what?"

"Gronk."

"Either they expected us to go out in suits and get killed, or they know of something that can reach through a General Products hull."

"Or both. In which case the suits do us no good at all. Bay, do you know how long it's been since a General Products hull failed?"

"I've never heard of its happening at all."

It never has."

"You're dead right. I've been stupid. Go ahead and take off your suit."

Elephant turned to look at me. "And you?"

"I'll keep mine on."

Elephant shrugged his shaggy eyebrows and went back to the telescope. By then we were six hours from touchdown, and decelerating.

"I think I've found an asteroid crater," Elephant said presently.

I had a look. "Yah, I think you're right. But it's damn near disappeared."

He took the telescope back. "It's round enough. Almost has to be a crater. Bay, why should it be so eroded?"

"It must be the interstellar dust. If it is, then that's why there's no atmosphere or lithosphere. But I can't see the dust being that thick, even at these speeds."

"Put it — "

"Yah." I reached for my list.

"If we find one more anomaly I'll throw a tantrum."

Half an hour later we found life. By then we were close enough to use the gravity drag. The beautiful thing about a gravity drag is that it uses very little power. It converts a ship's momentum relative to the nearest powerful mass into heat, and all you have to do is get rid of the heat. Since the *ST ∞*'s hull would pass only various ranges of radiation corresponding to what the puppeteers' varied customers call visible light, the ship builders had run a big radiator fin out from the gravity drag and through the hull. It glowed dull red behind us. And the fusion drive was off. There was no white fusion flame to hurt visibility.

Elephant had the scope at highest magnification. At first, as I peered into the eyepiece, I couldn't see what he was talking about. There was a dull white plain, all the same color except for a few bluish blobs. The blobs wouldn't have stood out but for the uniform surface around them.

Then one of them moved. Very slowly, but it was moving.

"Right," I said. "Let's run a temperature check."

The surface temperature in that region was right for helium II. And on the rest of the planet as well; the protosun wasn't putting out much heat, though it was on radiation.

"I don't think they match any species I know."

"I can't tell," said Elephant. He had the telescope and the library screen going at the same time, with a Sirius VIII Blob on the screen. "I've found twenty different species of helium life in this book, and they all look alike."

"Not quite. These must have a vacuum-proof integument. And you'll notice those granules in the—"

"I treasure my ignorance on this subject, Bay. Anyway, we won't find any known species on this world. At these speeds even a stage tree seed wouldn't live through the impact."

I let the subject die.

Once again Elephant run the scope over "his" planet, this time looking for the blobby life forms. They were big for Helium II life, but not freakishly so. Many cold worlds develop life using the peculiar properties of superfluid helium; but, since such life hasn't much use for complexity, it usually stays in the amoeba stage.

There was one peculiarity, which I dully noted. Every animal was on the planet's backside with relation to its course through the galaxy. They weren't afraid of protosunlight, but they seemed to fear interstellar dust.

Two hours passed. The red glow of the radiator fin became more pronounced. The planet was closer, but no more detailed.

"Cue Ball," said Elephant.

"No good. It's been used. For Beta Lyrae I."

"Too bad. How about Swoosh?"

"Huh? Oh, *Swoosh*. That isn't bad."

"That's it then. *Swoosh*, discovered by Gregory Zhiv Pelton and Friend."

"Elephant, what are we doing here?"

He turned, startled. "What do you mean?"

"Look, you know by now I'm with you all the way. But I do wonder. You spent a million stars getting here, and you'd have spent two if you had to. You could be home in the Rockies with Dianna, or hovering near Beta Lyrae, which is unusual enough and much better scenery than, uh, Swoosh. You could be sampling oddball drugs and biochemicals in Crashlanding, or looking for mist demons on Plateau, or hunting bandersnatchi and vice versa on a Jinx shoreline. Why here?"

"Because it is there?"

"What the blazes kind of an answer is that?"

"Bay, once upon a time there was a guy named Miller. Six years ago he took a ramscoop-fusion drive ship out of a museum and put a hyperdrive in it and set out for the edge of the universe. He figured he could get his hydrogen in normal space and use the fusion plant to power his hyperdrive. He's probably still going. He may go forever, unless he hits something. So why?"

"A psychiatrist I'm not."

"He wanted to be remembered. When you're dead a hundred years, Bay, what will you be remembered for?"

"I'll be the idiot who rode with Gregory Pelton, who spent two months of his life and more than a million stars to set his ship down once on a totally useless planet."

"Gronk. But do you see? You'll be remembered."

"There must be better things to be remembered for."

"I can't write novels. I'd make a lousy planetary president. A scientist I'm not. What's left?"

"Found a dynasty?"

Elephant's lips tightened, and he glared — not at me, but ahead. "Arrgh," he growled. "I'd make a lousy emperor too. Let's drop it, shall we?"

"Okay," I said. Because something had occurred to me.

That guy named Miller — I'd heard of him. He'd been sterilized while standing too close to a fusion-electric plant the day it decided to leak just a little. There were other heroes, whose names were remembered because they had done strange, difficult, not particularly useful things. Mae Doolin, who had climbed forty miles down the side of Mount Lookitthat in a suit she had designed herself. If she'd spent a couple of extra months on that pressure suit she'd have made it back up. Lynaeus (true name unknown), who fought kzinti with his bare hands, and lived to teach the Hellflare Boys how. Had any of them had families?

Did Elephant have children? Could he?

I could ask the first question, if I phrased it right. I'd have to be subtle.

"Elephant, are you ster — "

There was a muffled, authoritative *boom*, instantly followed by a strangling pressure in my larynx and a cool, puffy sensation over my skin surface and a stabbing pain in the ears.

I heard the bare beginning of an alarm as the air went. Already I

was reaching for my helmet. I clamped it down hard, spun the collar, and gave vent to an enormous belch at the same time as the wind went shrieking from my lungs.

VII

There was no way to realize what was happening, and no time. Vacuum was around us; and air was spraying into my suit, frigid with storage. Iron spikes were being driven through my ears and sinuses; but I was going to live. My lungs held a ghastly emptiness, but my suit was inflating. I would live.

You don't know how selfish your thoughts can be until you've come that close to the Blowout Death. My hands started to shake; I clamped down on myself and turned to Elephant.

The fear of death was naked in his face. He had his helmet down, but he was having trouble with the collar. Mist wreathed his neck ring. I had to force his hands away to fasten his helmet down. The glass misted over, then cleared; he was getting air. Had it come in time?

I was alive. The pain was leaving my ears and sinuses, and I was breathing: inhale, pause, inhale, as the pressure rose to normal.

Now I had time to think it through, to remember what I'd seen without noticing, to play it back.

What had happened was insane.

The hull had turned to dust. Just that. All at once and nothing first, the ship's exterior had disintegrated and blown away on a puff of breathing-air. I'd *seen* it.

And sure enough, the hull was gone. Only the innards of the ship remained. Before me, the lighted control board. A little below that, the manhole to the packed bubble, and the bubble package itself. Above the board, the dull half-disk of Swoosh, and stars. To the left, stars. To the right, Elephant, looking dazed and scared and alive. Beyond him, stars. Behind us, the airlock, the kitchen storage block and dial board, a glimpse of the landing legs and glowing radiator fin, and stars. The *ST ∞* was a skeleton.

Elephant shook his head, then turned on his suit radio. I heard the magnified *click* in my helmet.

We looked at each other, waiting. There seemed to be nothing to say, no comment that would fit without being obvious.

I sighed, turned to the control board and brought the fusion drive to life. From what I could see of the ship, nothing was missing but the hull. Nothing vital was floating away. Whatever had been attached to the hull had also been attached to other things

"What are you doing, Bay?"

"Getting us out of here. You can throw your tantrum now."

"Why? I mean, why leave?"

He'd flipped. Flatlanders are basically unstable. I got the drive pushing us at low power, turned off the gravity drag and swiveled to face him. "Look, Elephant. No hull." I swept an arm in a circle. "None. Nothing."

"But what's left of the ship is still mine?"

"Huh? Sure."

"I want to land. Can you talk me out of it?" Behind that intimidating beard he was dead serious and, I was beginning to believe, quite mad. "The landing legs are intact. Our suits can stop the radiation for three days. We could land and take off in twelve hours."

"We probably could, if nothing else happened."

"And we've spent a month and a half getting here."

"Right. Silly, but right."

"I'd feel like an idiot, getting this close and then turning for home. Wouldn't you?"

"I feel like an idiot for getting this close, period. No, cancel that. Yes, I'd feel stupid going home with nothing to show. But we *do* have something to show."

"A skinned ship. All right, so the hull turned to dust and blew away. What does that mean? It means we've got a faulty hull, and I'm going to sue the hind legs off General Products when we get back. But do you know what caused it?"

"No. Do you?"

He ignored the question. "So why assume it's some kind of threat?"

He was *wrong*. I knew it. But how to tell him so?

"Tell you what I'll do," I said. I turned the ship until it was tail down to Swoosh. "Now. We'll be there in three hours if you insist on landing. This skinned corpse is your ship, just as you say. But I'm going to talk you out of it."

"That's fair." But his square, bearded mouth had less give in it than a snapping turtle's.

"Have you had astronaut training?"

"Naturally."

"Did it include a history course?"

"All they taught me was how to fly a ship. And a little of the development of the state of the art."

"That's something. You remember that they first explored the System with chemical fuels, and that the first ship to touch an asteroid was built in orbit around the Earth's moon."

"I'll take your word."

"This you may not know. There was a ship before that one, supposed to do the same job. It was launched on a course that took it just inside the moon's orbit, then out and away. About thirty hours after launching, the crew noticed that all their ports were turning to frosted glass. Two of the men wanted to go on and finish the mission. The third man happened to be captain. So they used their rockets and stopped the ship dead.

"Remember, the best materials they had were alloys of iron. The hull was carbon-alloyed iron; the ports were thick glass, two layers. Our heroes stopped the ship 238,000 miles from the moon and called base to say they'd aborted the mission."

"You remember this pretty well. How come?"

"Doc Spinoza drilled these stories into us again and again. Everything he taught us he illustrated with something from history. It struck. They do a thorough job on passenger-craft astronauts."

"Go on."

"They called base and told them

about the windows. Somebody decided it must be dust, lots of dust. Someone else realized that they'd launched the ship straight through the moon's lead Trojan point."

Elephant laughed, then coughed. "Stupid trick. Wish I hadn't breathed so much vacuum. Sir, you're leading up to something."

"If they hadn't stopped the ship the dust would have torn it apart. Trojan points are dust collectors. And the moral of this story is, anything you don't understand is dangerous until you do."

"Sounds paranoid."

"Maybe it does, to a flatlander. You come from a planet so kind to you, so seemingly adapted to you, that you think the whole universe is one big lavish government housing project. You should listen to the

Finaglists. The Perversity of the Universe Tends Toward a Maximum. A certain neutron star would have killed me if I hadn't understood that tidal effect in time."

"So it would. So you think all flatlanders are fools?"

Dammit, I'd touched his exposed nerve. "No, Elephant. Just not paranoid enough. And I refuse to apologize."

"Who asked you?"

"I'll land with you if you can tell me what made our hull turn to dust."

Elephant crossed his arms and glared forward. I shut up and waited.

I'd have to land regardless, if he insisted. Not because there was only one ship. Not because I couldn't just wait here for him. But because I'd invited myself along.

Soon he said, "Can we get home?"



"I don't know. The hyperdrive will work, and we can use the gravity drag to slow us when we reach a system. We couldn't have done that with the protosun: too much thick gas going through the system. Physically we should be able to make it."

"Okay, let's go. But I'll tell you this, Bay. If I were alone I'd go down, and damn the hull."

So we turned tail and ran, under protest from Elephant. In ten hours we were far enough from Swoosh's gravity well to enter hyperspace.

I turned on the hyperdrive, gasped and turned it off just as fast as I could. We sat there shaking.

"We can inflate the bubble," said Elephant.

"But can we get in?"

"I don't know. It doesn't have an airlock."

We worked it, though. There was a pressure control in the cabin, and we set it for zero. The electromagnetic field that folded it would now expand it without pressure. We went in, pressurized it and took off our helmets.

"We're beyond the radiation," said Elephant. "I looked."

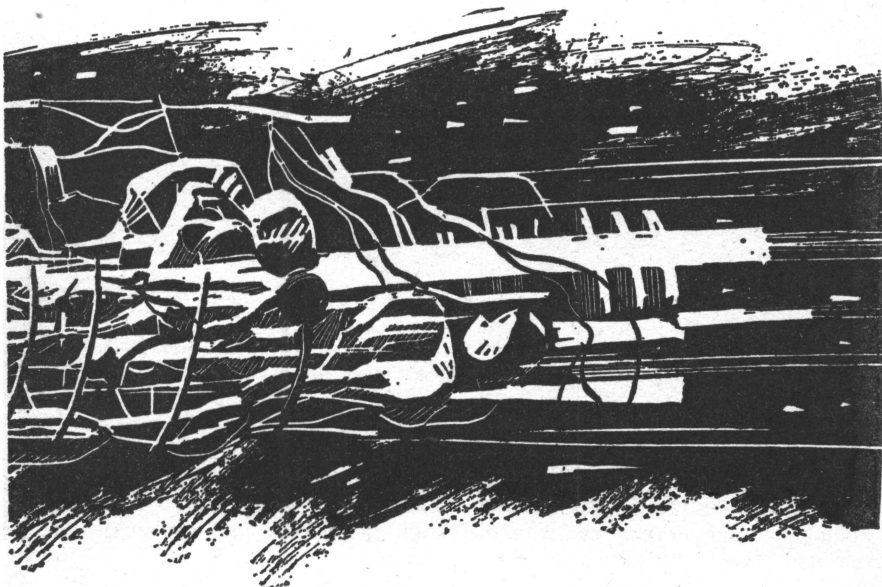
"Good." You can go a long way in even a couple of seconds of hyperdrive. "Now, there's one thing I've got to know. Can you take that again?"

Elephant shuddered. "Can you?"

"I think so. I can do all the navigating if I have to."

"Anything you can take I can take."

"Can you take it and stay sane?"



"Yes."

"Then we can trade off. But if you change your mind, let me know that instant. A lot of good men have left their marbles in the Blind Spot, and all they had to face were a couple of covered windows."

"I believe you. Indeed I do, sir. How do we work it?"

"We'll have to chart a course through the least dense regions of known space. The nearest inhabited world is Kzin. I hate to have to trust the kzinti for help, but it looks like our best bet."

"Tell you what, Bay. Let's at least aim for Jinx. I want to use that number of yours to give the puppeteers hell."

"Fine." If it turned out our minds couldn't take it, we could always turn off.

I spent an hour working out a course. When I finished there were precious few gravity wells along our path. We wouldn't have to check the mass indicator more than once every twenty-four hours.

Elephant won the finger-toss. I had won the first watch.

We donned suits and depressurized the bubble. As I crawled through the manhole I saw Elephant making the bubble opaque.

I squeezed into the crash couch, all alone among the compressed stars. The protosun had vanished behind us.

More than half my range of vision was empty space. I found myself looking thoughtfully at the airlock. It was behind and to the left, a metal oblong standing alone at the edge of the deck, with both doors tightly

closed. The inner door had slammed when the pressure dropped, and now the airlock mechanisms guarded the pressure inside against the vacuum at both doors. Nobody was inside to benefit; but how to explain that to a pressure sensor?

I was procrastinating. The ship was aimed; I set my jaw and sent the *ST* ∞ into hyperspace.

The Blind Spot, they call it. It fits.

There is a way to find the blind spot in your eye. Close one eye, put two dots on a piece of paper and bring the paper toward you, focusing on one of the dots. If you hold the paper just right, the other dot will suddenly vanish.

Let a ship enter hyperspace with the windows transparent, and the windows will seem to vanish. So will the space enclosing them. Objects on either side stretch and draw closer together to fill the missing space. If you look long enough, the Blind Spot starts to spread; the walls and the things against the walls draw even closer to the missing space, until they are engulfed. Covering the windows helps, but after awhile the Blind Spot starts to seep around the covers.

It's all in your mind, they tell me. So?

I turned the key, and half my view was Blind Spot. The control board stretched and flowed. The mass indicator sphere tried to wrap itself around me. I reached for it, and my hands were distorted too. With considerable effort I put them back at my sides and got a grip on myself.

There was one fuzzy green line in the plastic distortion that had been a mass indicator.

And it was behind and to the side. The ship could fly itself until Elephant's turn came. I fumbled my way to the manhole and crawled through.

VIII

Some time later, Elephant caught me looking at my list. He took it from me and began to study it.

It said:

- 1) Velocity of star — .8 lights.
- 2) Nature of star — protosun. Unique in known space.
- 3) Origin of star — extragalactic, in all probability.
- 4) Unusual radiation.
- 5) Planet has no atmosphere.
- 6) No sign of blast craters on planet.
- 7) Protosun shows strangely high temperature.
- 8) Planet has no lithosphere.
- 9) Blast crater, vastly eroded. Dust? Why so thick?
- 10) He II beasts confined to back of planet. Fear dust?

Elephant nodded to himself, added something and handed it back. The list now read:

- 11) Hull disintegrated.

Eleven notes. Eleven irregularities with no explanation. They must be connected.

"If we knew more about our hull," I said, "we could probably figure this out."

"Fat chance," said Elephant. "That hull's a puppeteer trade secret."

And there it died.

All our conversations were dying young. Neither of us felt the urge to talk. The hours passed and became days. We took turns at the library screen; if the bubble hadn't had an extension I don't think we would have survived. Every twenty-four hours one of us went out to see if there were dangerous masses around, to drop back to normal space to take a fix and adjust our course. The few hours before each turn, we didn't talk at all; because during these times, one of us would be tense enough to bite.

On my third trip I had no more sense than to look up.

I went more than blind. There was nothing at all in my field of vision, nothing but the Blind Spot.

It was more than blindness. A blind man, a man whose eyes have lost their function, at least remembers what things looked like. A man who has suffered damage to the optic lobe of his brain doesn't. I could remember what I'd come out here for — to find out if there were masses near enough to harm us —but I couldn't remember how to do it. I touched a curved smooth surface and knew that this was the device that would tell me, if only I could guess its secret.

Eventually my neck got sore, so I moved my head. That brought my eyes back into existence.

When we got the bubble pressurized, Elephant said, "Where were you? You've been gone half an hour."

"And lucky at that. When you go

out there, just don't look up."
"Oh."

Why the blazes couldn't we find something to talk about? Was it because we'd end up talking about Swoosh? Maybe. The planet had defeated us without ever noticing us. We'd named it, approached it and gone. Two mosquitoes which the mystery world hadn't even had to swat.

We'd left at my insistence.

One day I braced him with it.

"Elephant, there's a word missing from our language."

He looked up from the reading screen. "More than one," he said. "Things have been somewhat silent."

"One word. We're so afraid of using it that we're afraid to talk at all."

"Name it."

"Coward."

Elephant wrinkled his brows, then snapped off the screen. "Okay, we'll talk about it. First of all, you said it, I didn't. Right?"

"Right. Have you been thinking it?"

"No. I've been thinking euphemisms, like 'overcautious' and 'reluctance to risk bodily harm.' But since we're on the subject, why were you so eager to turn back?"

"I was scared." I let the word soak through his brain. "The people who trained me made certain I'd be scared in certain situations. With all due respect, Elephant, I've had more training than you have. I think your wanting to land was the result of ignorance."

Elephant sighed. "You're sure about that?"

"Certainly not. I get less sure

every day. Maybe I was bluffed out. Maybe we'd have landed in perfect safety, stepped out, found a good, reasonable answer to these eleven notes here, got back in, took off and arrived at Jinx twelve hours later than we will."

"Maybe. We won't find out here, will we?"

We wouldn't. One of us was right, one wrong. If I was wrong, a pretty good friendship had just gone out the airlock.

I hated that. I wasn't even sure Sharrol wouldn't side with Elephant. And if Sharrol decided I was a coward —

She'd only known me four days.

Was I a coward? I'm not born here and never claimed to be. This was the first time in my life it had worried me. At times during that trip I actually thought about turning back; and then I'd catch a few minutes of Blind Spot when my turn came around, and I'd go back to just hoping we'd reach Jinx.

We came out of hyperspace near the twin Sirius suns. But that wasn't the end; we still faced a universe moving at point eight lights. It took us almost two weeks to brake down to a normal velocity. The gravity drag's radiator fin glowed orange-white most of the time. I can't guess how many times we circled back through hyperspace for another run through the system's lumpy gravity well.

But at last we were orbiting Jinx.

I broke a silence of hours. "What now, Elephant? You're going back, aren't you?"

"As soon as we get in range, I'm going to call that number of yours."

"Then?"

"Drop you off at Sirius Mater with enough money to get you home. I'd take it kindly if you'd use my house as your own until I come back from Swoosh. I'll get a ship here."

"You don't want me along?"

"I'm going to land, Bay. Wouldn't you feel like a damn fool if you died then?"

"I've spent three months in an extension bubble because of that silly planet. I've made an epic journey through hyperspace with no hull. If you conquer it alone I *will* feel like a damn fool."

Elephant looked excruciatingly unhappy. He started to speak, caught his breath —

If ever I picked the right time to shut a man up, that was the time.

"Hold it. Let's call the puppeteers first. Plenty of time to decide."

Elephant nodded. In a moment he'd have told me he didn't want me along because I was overly reluctant to risk bodily harm. Instead, he turned on the ship phone and dialed.

Jinx was a banded Easter egg below us. To the side was bloated orange Binary, the primary to which Jinx is a moon. We were close enough to talk to Jinx . . . and the puppeteers' transfer booth number would also be their phone number.

Elephant dialed.

A sweet, thrilling contralto voice answered. There was no picture, but I could tell: no woman's voice is quite that good. The puppeteer said, "89346770?"

"My General Products hull just failed." Elephant was getting right to the point.

"I beg your pardon?"

"My name is Gregory Pelton. Twelve years ago I bought a #2 hull from General Products. A month and a half ago, the hull failed. It turned to dust. We've spent the intervening time limping home. May I speak to a puppeteer?"

The screen came on. Two brainless triangular heads looked out at us with one eye each. "This is quite serious," said the puppeteer, looking nothing but silly. With those floppy prehensile lips a puppeteer always looks silly. "Naturally we will pay the indemnity in full. Is that Beowulf Shaeffer?"

"Yes," I said, "but let's take care of this first. Then I'll find out what you wanted to see me about."

"By all means. Gregory Pelton, would you mind detailing the circumstances under which your hull disintegrated?"

Gregory Pelton didn't mind at all. He was quite vehement about it. His ears and neck turned dark red; his thrusting beard seemed to acquire a life of its own. It was a pleasure to listen to him. The diffidence he'd shown the Outsiders was gone; he was treating the puppeteer like a clumsy engineer in his own factory. The alien's silly expressions never wavered, but he was blinking rapidly when Elephant finished.

"I see," he said. "Our apologies are insufficient, of course, but you will understand that we made a natural mistake. We did not think that antimatter was available anywhere in

the galaxy, let alone in known space, and in such quantity."

Elephant's bull voice went curiously soft. "Antimatter? Did you say antimatter?"

It was as if he'd screamed the word. I heard it echoing from side to side across my skull.

"Of course. We offer no excuse, but you should have realized it at once. Interstellar gas of normal matter had polished the planet's surface with minuscule explosions and torn away its lithosphere down to the magma, had raised the temperature of the protosun beyond rational expectation, and was causing a truly remarkable radiation hazard. It had swept the protosun's normal collection of gas and dust completely away. Did you not even wonder about these things? You knew that the system was from beyond the galaxy. Humans are supposed to be curious, are they not?"

"The hull," said Elephant.

"Yes. You are entitled to know. A General Products hull is an artificially generated molecule whose interatomic bonds are artificially strengthened by a small power source. The strengthened bonds are proof against any kind of impact, and against heat into the millions of degrees. But when enough atoms had been removed from the molecule by antimatter collisions, the molecule naturally broke down."

Elephant nodded. I wondered if his voice was gone for good.

"When may we expect you to collect your indemnity? I gather no human was killed. This is fortunate. Our funds are low."

Elephant switched off the phone. He gulped once or twice, then turned to look me in the eye. I think it took all his strength; and if I'd waited for him to speak, I don't know what he would have said.

"I gloat," I said. I hate sticky scenes. "Verily I gloat. I was right, you were wrong. If we'd landed on your forsaken planet we'd have gone up in pure light. At this time it gives me great pleasure to say, I Told You So."

He smiled weakly. "You told me so. Antimatter."

"Oh, I did, I did. Time after time I said, That Planet's Haunted! It Will Steal Your Life And Soul, I said. There Have Been Signs in the Heavens to — "

"All right, you bastard, don't overdo it. I owe you twice my life plus a million stars, and not a penny more."

"Okay, we'll drop it. But there's one thing I want you to remember."

"If I don't understand it, it's dangerous."

"That's the one thing I want you to remember besides I Told You So."

Half of Elephant's house was buried in the face of Elephant's cliff. The other half projected into space, without apparent support. A wide balcony ran round that exposed part, also without apparent support, and without a guard rail. The guardian force field at the edge was naturally invisible.

Elephant was somewhere else, off on his own business. He had missed a pretty good dinner.

Sharrol poured us three after-dinner drinks from a squat green bottle. It was labeled with typical flatlander verbosity: *Rothschild Extra Fine Brandy Napoleon 2680*. The fluid was clear, with a brown tinge.

"One last question," said Dianna. "What did the puppeteers want with you?"

"They wanted me to explore the Clouds of Magellan for them. I turned them down."

The girls stared at me, then at each other. I was a convicted liar. Unfair! I'd told at least half the truth, and the rest was a puppeteer secret. They'd paid me a small "consultant's fee" to make it a privileged communication. I shrugged it off and gulped at my after-dinner drink.

I was trying to cough it out of my windpipe when Elephant breezed in. "The ship's ready!" he shouted from the vestibule. "We take off in a week! What's the trouble, Bay?" By then he was on the balcony.

I got my breathing under control. "Week? Take off? Ship?"

"Didn't I mention any of this? Gronk. I guess I didn't. Bay, I want to go back to the protosun. I've got a GP #2 hull covered a foot deep in foam plastic. There's a foot of glass over the windows; we can ditch

that if it frosts up. We'll build up speed with an oversized gravity drag. Want to come along?"

The thing he was carrying was four feet long, metal, covered with rolled cloth which was slightly lumpy. I recognized it as a vacuum flag, with spring wires in it, designed to look as if it's waving where there's no wind.

He must have read my expression correctly. "No, idiot, I'm not going to land. What do you take me for? There's a solid rocket in the mast. I want to plant it on *Swoosh* from a distance. It should make quite a flash, don't you agree?"

"You want me to go along?"

"Sure."

"The ship sounds safe enough. We've got a week?"

"Just about. There's provisioning."

"I'll let you know in plenty of time."

We take off tomorrow. I've got a tridee camera bolted solidly to the control board, and a contract with the biggest broadcasting company in known space. They'll have exclusive rights on the first macroscopic antimatter explosion ever recorded. *This* time I've got a reason for going.

END

THE STAR PIT

by Samuel R. Delany

THE PLANET WRECKERS

by Keith Laumer

in the February Worlds of Tomorrow — on sale now!

THE HUGO AND THE NEBULA

by LIN CARTER

Last month in this column we were discussing the annual science-fiction achievement awards that are passed out every year at the World Science Fiction Convention. These little rocketships of stainless steel are called "Hugo Awards" in affectionate respect for Hugo Gernsback, founder of the first science-fiction magazine in the world, *Amazing Stories*. Actually, as Sam Moskowitz (Fandom's unofficial historian) points out, Mr. Gernsback not only founded the *first* — but the first *seven* sf mags in history.

Hugos were first given out at the 11th World SF Convention held in Philadelphia, 1953. The convention in San Francisco the next year omitted Hugo awards, but the custom was reinstated at Cleveland in 1955 and has continued ever since. Hugos have been awarded at thirteen all-but-consecutive conventions, including Cleveland '66, the most recent. Six or seven awards are made in different categories, such

as best novel, best prozine (newsstand-distributed sf magazine), best short story or novelette, best fanzine, best illustrator and (sometimes) for best sf movie or tv show, most promising new author, best book publisher, *etc.* The exact categories are up to choice of the committee that puts on each convention.

Now let's look at some of the Hugo-winners.

Hugo-Winning Novels

You may often have quibbles with Hollywood, when an airy bit of fluff like *The Sound of Music* wins the Oscar as "best picture of the year" . . . you may get mad at the Pulitzer people when they pass over a novel like *Catch-22* in favor of something nobody read or even heard of . . . but I'm happy to say, the Hugos are usually and almost invariably awarded to very deserving people. The first Hugo-winning novel, for example, was Alfred Bes-

ter's *The Demolished Man*, one of the best and most important science-fiction novels of the 1950's. Could you quarrel with that choice — or with Walter M. Miller's *A Canticle for Leibowitz* (which won at Seattle in 1961) or Philip K. Dick's *The Man in the High Castle* (Washington, D.C., 1963)? I wouldn't, anyway.

Sometimes the Hugo novel doesn't seem quite up to Hugo standards, but (as was certainly the case with Fritz Leiber's whopping *Wanderer*, which won a Hugo at London in 1965), whether it seems to quite measure up to previous Hugo winners or not, the novel that gets the award is almost always "the best of the year."

Taking an over-all look at the list, we see that Robert A. Heinlein has won three Hugos (for *Double Star*, 1956; *Starship Troopers*, 1960; and *A Stranger in a Strange Land*, 1962). Most of the field's top writers have copped a Hugo or two: Eric Frank Russell, Murray Leinster, Jack Vance, Damon Knight, James Blish, Arthur C. Clarke, Avram Davidson, Poul Anderson, Brian Aldiss, Clifford D. Simak, Fritz Leiber . . . but there have been some very odd omissions.

Whatever Happened To . . . ?

Consider Arthur C. Clarke, Poul Anderson, Damon Knight and Jack Vance. These men have produced some of the most marvelous sf novels of all time . . . yet Clarke has only won a single Hugo (for a short story called *The Star* in 1956), An-

derson came away with two (despite his many superlative novels, he only won for a short story, *The Longest Voyage* in 1961, and for a "short fiction" called *No Truce with Kings* in 1964), and poor Damon Knight got his lone Hugo for his criticism! Jack Vance received a Hugo for *The Dragon Masters*, but, although it was long enough for Ace Books to issue it as a novel, the novel award that year (1963) went to Phil Dick, and Vance was left with "best short fiction."

And consider that no Hugos for fiction have ever gone to L. Sprague de Camp, Frederik Pohl, Ray Bradbury, A.E. Van Vogt, Theodore Sturgeon or Keith Laumer (who certainly should have been Hugoed as "most promising new author").

Then look at the artists. In a field filled with brilliant illustrators, how come certain artists virtually monopolize the Hugo for art? Frank Kelly Freas, admittedly a good man with pen or brush, won no less than four Hugos (1955, '56, '58, and '59). Yet Virgil Finlay and Hannes Bok had to be content with one lonely Hugo each. Even worse, Ed Emshwiller carried off a whole *armful* of Hugos (in 1952, '60, '61, '62, and 1964), yet Richard Powers, who has been adorning Ballantine Book's covers gorgeously for 15 years, hasn't won so much as *one*.

The Magazines

Things get even less fair when we turn to the prozines. *The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction* won Hugos in 1958, '59, '60, and '63.

Astounding (which, in midstream, changed its name to *Analog*) has a whole shelf-full — *eight* Hugos — yet *Galaxy* only won a single Hugo in 1953, and that was on a tie with *ASF*. The other magazines (yes, Virginia, there *are* other science-fiction magazines in America) have thus far been unlucky.* It doesn't seem quite fair, does it, for two magazines to come away with *all but two of the fourteen* Hugos thus far given out to the prozines!

Happily, though, at the latest convention, the Hugo broke out of the *ASF/F&SF* deadlock at last. The Hugo went to . . . but we'll get to the 1966 Tricon Hugos in just a bit!

A New Award: The Nebula

Under the leadership of Damon Knight, a new professional organization called "Science Fiction Writers of America" has come into being. A sort of sf writers' union, the SFWA issues a bulletin that serves as a sounding board for ideas and news and criticism, to say nothing of its service as a common meeting-ground where established veteran writers and first-sale newcomers can share know-how on contracts, the crotchets of various editors and publishers and so on.

The SFWA in March, 1966, presented the first of a series of annual "Nebula" awards, in two dinners given simultaneously at the

* The British prozine, *New Worlds*, won a Hugo for "best professional magazine, British." That was at the 1957 convention in London, so it figures. — LC

Overseas Press Club in New York and at McHenry's Tail O' the Cock in Beverly Hills.

The Nebula was designed by Judith Ann Lawrence (Mrs. James Blish), from a design created by Kate Wilhelm (Mrs. Damon Knight), and executed by Daniel Levy of the Richley Company in New York. It consists of a spiral nebula made of metallic glitter, suspended over a crystal other-worldly landscape, all of which is "frozen" within a rectangular block of transparent lucite, with the relevant information engraved on the base. Very nifty.

Winners of these first Nebulas in history were Frank Herbert, for *Dune* as best novel of the year; Brian W. Aldiss, for *The Saliva Tree* and Roger Zelazny, for *He Who Shapes* — this was a tie for best novella — and, for best novelette (I'm not sure what the difference is between a "novelette" and a "novella" but never mind), Roger Zelazny, for *The Doors of His Face, the Lamps of His Mouth*. Last Nebula went to Harlan Ellison, for "*Repent, Harlequin!*", Said the Ticktockman, as best short story.

You will note that Roger Zelazny, still a newcomer to science-fiction writing, walked away with *two* Nebulas!

The 1966 Hugos

Over the Labor Day weekend, the 1966 World Science Convention was held in Cleveland, Ohio. The convention, I am told, had something like 1100 paid members, some 850

of whom actually attended the Tricon, as the convention was called.

The high point of every world convention, for me at least, is the Hugo presentation ceremonies. This year Hugos were given in six categories: best novel, best short fiction, best prozine, best fanzine, best artist and best all-time series.

Hugo for best novel of 1966 was — for the first time in Hugo history — a tie. Duplicate awards were made to Frank Herbert for *Dune* and to Roger Zelazny for his *And Call Me Conrad*. (In the paperback edition, Zelazny's novel is called *This Immortal*).

Hugo for best short fiction went to former fan Harlan Ellison for — you guessed it! — "*Repent, Harlequin!*", *Said The Ticktockman*. Notice how the Hugos agree very closely with the Nebulas; even to including Zelazny's *The Doors of His Face, the Lamps of His Mouth* as a contender for the Hugo for short fiction. It was nominated, but did not win; Zelazny still managed to carry off at least one Hugo to set with his two Nebulas, though.

Hugo for best artist of the year went to Frank Frazetta, one of the best artists of any year in science fiction, but particularly popular for his glorious covers on so many of the Edgar Rice Burroughs paperbacks. Best fanzine Hugo went to *ERBdom*, which you'll remember we discussed in this column a few issues back. *ERBdom* is one of the "Burroughs fanzines" as you might guess from the title.

A special Hugo in a category new this year went to Isaac Asimov for

his famous Foundation series. This category was "best all-time series," and the award strikes me as a good idea. I like the notion of a Hugo-in-retrospect. In fact, I suggest that future conventions consider the idea of presenting one Hugo each year for a writer's over-all contribution to the field . . . like the Edgar which the Mystery Writers of America give out at their award banquets to "Grand Masters."

It would be nice to establish a special Hugo for Grand Masters in science fiction. This way, today's sf fans could honor those major writers who did the bulk of their work in the science-fiction field years before the Hugo awards were even thought of. Burroughs, for example, or Doc Smith, Olaf Stapledon, Jack Williamson, Edmond Hamilton . . . lots of fine writers spring to mind, writers whose contributions to our field are worth a Grand Master award. I think this is a good idea, and I hope future conventions will consider it.

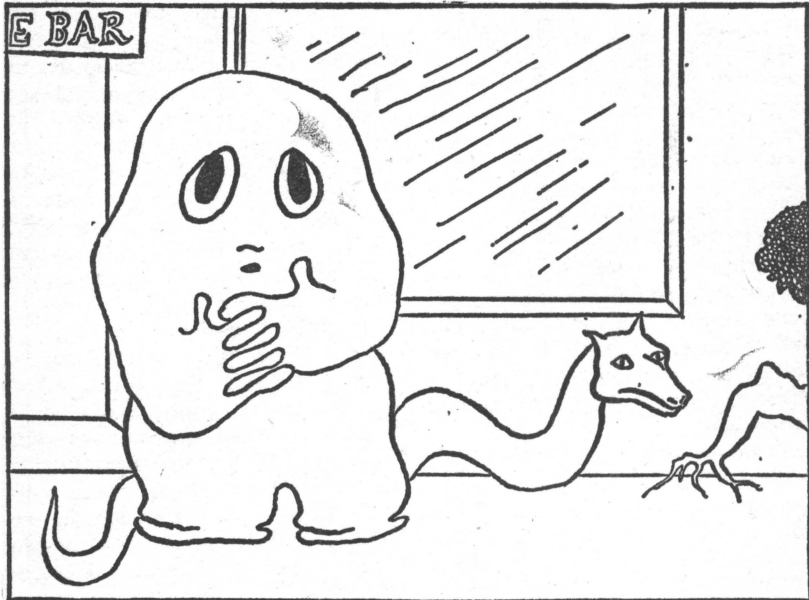
But I've saved the most exciting Hugo of 1966 for last. Best professional magazine of the year: this year the Hugo went to *Worlds of If!*

Everyone connected with *If* is thrilled with the Hugo, including Your Man In Fandom. As witness this special issue.

If you couldn't make the Cleveland convention, start planning now for 1967. If you didn't agree with the choice of the '66 Hugo winners, come to the convention in '67 and vote yourself!

END

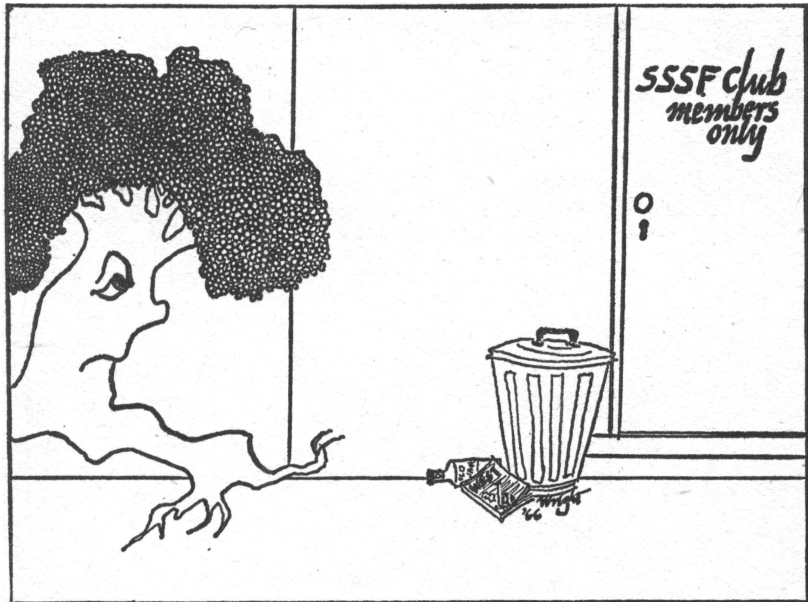
E BAR



The Sepia Springs Affair

by ROSCO WRIGHT

Illustrated by WRIGHT



Snerr
Sepia Springs, Idaho
59725
July 1, 1970

Dear Editor Pohl:

Our remaining member of the Sepia Springs Science Fiction Club, Mr. Wright, says that Earth science fiction is extremely important, and that science-fiction editors are even more important, and that you are the leading science-fiction editor on Earth. At the moment I shall assume that you are an important person as far as this planet is concerned.

To the extent that this assumption is correct, I must depend upon

you to help me and inadvertently this rather trivial planet of yours.

This you must do. First, simply refrain from printing any letters from anyone in Sepia Springs except those of mine. Mr. Wright, who first contacted us, persuaded us to operate within the framework of his science-fiction club when he learned that the Galactic Council had sent us to Earth to evaluate how Earth might best be utilized by the Galaxy.

This has not been altogether too successful up to now. Three members left as soon as we arrived. Two of them out the door and one through a window. The fourth, Joe

Smith, a more obnoxious sort, looked at Rhudly, the porcelain man and said, "Snow White! That's worse than black! In fact, all of you belong under a flat rock!" Then, turning to Elaysia, he told her, "That goes for you too, Miss Overendowed! Six is uncouth!"

Mr. Wright explained, "Misguided survival instincts — we usually call it 'race prejudice.'"

I don't know everything, but I do know what is right, and I must say you will be wise to do as I direct you at all times.

Sincerely yours,
Snerr, Ex. Sec. &
Sergeant at Arms
SSSFC



2 FRED.

This are Hurd the Turtle. Is great to read "IF." 23 Robot read "IF" to Hurd and Moby.

Hurd

Klip

Sepia Springs, Idaho

July 3, 1970

Sir Frederik Pohl, editor
"IF"

421 Hudson St. N.Y. N.Y. 10014

Dear Sir & Editor:

I am a loyal "IF" fan. The August issue made a very fine chaser for the Idaho Jackrabbit I had for lunch. Nothing like a bit of quality cellulose and glue to settle a stomach. It keeps the old chitin in shape.

I do miss seafood, fresh seafood and alive! That stuff they bring to "The Club." I wish I had brought some of my offsprings along! They could have forged for themselves until they were edible. Of course there is always the danger that —

Ah, well, you, Sir, have been pointed out to me as a man of both means and discernment. Is there a decent seafood house on this planet? And would they ship food to me? The last time I went out for dinner one of the natives stuck me in a pot and started to heat the water. It cost Mr. Wright what was left of his fifth to buy me back.

Your pronouncements are awaited with relish.

Your loyal and obedient servant,
Klip/Amphibia II
Member in good standing of the SSSFC

Gleep

July 5, 1970

Hi! What a blast! Mr. Wright told all of us to write lots of letters to you because you don't do anything but sit around and read all day. You humans play rough! Lucky I'm a tough silicoid creature. The Club went out last night to watch the Sepia Springs fireworks. We carried our "IF" signs to show that we were true s.f. fans. A native spotted me by the light of a rocket blast and yelled, "Hey, Charlie, look — a plucked parrot with an 'IF' sign! What's an 'IF,' something to eat?"

The one called Charlie said, "Parrots don't have webbed feet and they don't carry signs like rabble-rousers. I don't know what it is so let's get rid of it."

Then the first one said, "Charlie, you are a real philosopher. Let's tie it to a rocket and give the kids a thrill to go with their popcorn."

That was quite a ride!

After I dug myself out of the ground, I felt a little dizzy so I went back to the club house for the night.

The club sort of broke up the celebrations or started one. Some native women spotted Elaysia, called her a "damn-show-off," and started throwing empty bottles at her. Mr. Wright took Elaysia away. He is always doing that for one reason or another.

It was all a lot of fun.

Your pal,
Gleep



Rosco Wright

Art Department

Sepia Spring College

Sepia Springs, Idaho

July 6, 1970

Frederik Pohl, editor
IF

Dear Fred:

Sort of interesting things may be developing around the local s.f. club. I'll tell you about it at the next convention if you remind me.

I'd write more but I've been getting tangled up with a little problem in topology. You know me, always have myself buried up to the eyeballs in some hairy project. No

time for fun! Last issue of "IF"
WAS GREAT!

Yours,
Rosco

Rhudly
SSSFC
July 12, 1970

Dear Mr. Pohl:

I'm trying to do my job and taking time, just to please Mr. Wright, to keep you informed on events. Events aren't too promising.

It is like this. I went into "The Counter," and had lunch. The people stared at me but I expect that on an isolated planet.

When I went out onto the street, a couple of husky young ranch hands stepped up to each side of me and grabbed my arms. I could have tossed them half across the street but regulations say that I'm supposed to make every effort to cooperate with local inhabitants.

The dark-haired man said, "You know, chum, this climate is going to get awfully cold for the likes of you in the winter time. Forty below, you know!"

I politely said, "Thank you for your concern. I can stand a greater temperature range than that. My survival index is the highest of any known race in the galaxy."

The light fellow said, "We don't give a damn about your survival index or whatever you call it. Just be a good fellow and let us put you on the bus and send you south."

I told him: "I appreciate your interest, gentlemen, but I have a job to do here and I never shirk my duty."

"Don't feel bad, chum," said the dark one, "no one is going to miss you. We are your friends. Nothing personal in this, chum, but we want to help you get out of town for your own good."

"Nice of you to look after me. I hadn't realized you people were so thoughtful of your fellow man."

The light one dug an elbow into my ribs. I think it hurt him a little. He winced and said, "Hell! What do you wear, armor? Lay off this goddamned 'fellow man' stuff. We took up a collection to buy you a ticket and here it is for Los Angeles, they will never notice you there."

The dark one planted a boot heel on my toe. It would probably have mashed an Earth foot. He glared at me. "So you gonna take the friendly gift and beat it, or are we gonna have to see you again with less friendly ideas?"

I told them I was sorry but I had to stay. Then I let them hit me and kick me. They both split their fists on my jaw and ran away holding their hands and swearing. It is a handicap being sort of a superman. I can't even make love to a woman not of my own race, because I'd squash them. Elaysia looks good to me, but I have to let Wright have her.

Most sincerely yours,
Rhudly

Klip
SSSFC
July 17, 1970

Sir Frederik Pohl, editor "IF"

Dear Sir & Editor:

Earth creatures are my type of

people. This town is called Sepia Springs because the city water supply goes through Jim "Jolly" Green's sheep lambing pens before the city picks it up for their water supply. "Jolly" is the city water commissioner and gets a monthly rental for the city use of his lambing pens besides his salary. He's a good man.

Forget the seafood idea. I just made a deal with a local cafe. They have trouble getting good fresh crab. Back home we have a problem with overpopulation. I happen to have connections with an interstellar shipper who has great respect for the dollar.

By the way, I know a lithographer in Cheyenne who can lithograph that mag of yours in three colors for half of what those con-men are soaking you.

Do come to Sepia Springs for crab salad, and maybe we can work something out for your own best interest.

Your obedient servant
Klip of Amphibia II
Member SSSFC &
Sanitary Inspector
Sepia Springs, Idaho

Snerr
SSSFC
Sepia Springs, Idaho 59725
July 20, 1970

Dear "Editor" Pohl:

I tried to signal the Galactic Council for help, but Klip has re-designed 23 Robot "to do something else" — freight routing, he calls it. I'm sure that it is something dishonest, dangerous and maybe even immoral.

Klip has gotten in with some corrupt natives. Hurd and Moby dare not leave the club house. Klip tried to sell Moby for photographic gelatin and he wanted to use Hurd for soup and what he had in mind for Elaysia was really just awful.

Lilly Bell is going subversive. Being a tree, her excuse is that she must be firmly entrenched on good solid ground with all roots deep in ultraconservatism. Hogal, the great snake, on the other hand, has neither feet or roots and he is taking up with a group of natives in opposition to Lilly Bell.

I warn you, Mr. Editor, I know what is right, so print none of these subversive letters.

Sincerely yours,
Snerr
SSSFC, Chaperon
Sepia Spring, Idaho 59725

Lilly Bell
Sepia Springs, Idaho
July 20, 1970

Dear Editor:

I read that letter by that sneak, Snerr! Her trouble is that she thinks no one is trustworthy unless they reproduce by cilia.

As for me, I trust everyone, once they are able to see the truth. We tree people have our roots firmly planted on good solid ground. It does my xylem and phloem good to see a small but determined segment of the Sepia Springs population standing firmly behind great ideals. I refer to the members of the "Old Sod Society." The "Old Sod Society" is against taxes, out of staters, Galactic interference in

planetary affairs, sanitary inspectors, federal government, sex, penicillin, polio, electricity, big business and non-members. We favor everybody living right, poverty for the poor, local business if it is run right, the return of the horse and buggy, a seventy-year life limit for all but the bad people and the good old days.

How do you stand, sir?

For God and Country,
Lilly Bell

P.S. I have withdrawn from the Sepia Springs Science Fiction Club. The members all live in the same building, and I think this is subversive.

Moby
July 20, 1970

Dear Kind Editor,

Please send me some magazines to read. I am sending you some old

23 robot



copies for trade. I hate to give them up, they were so nice. I would go out and get my own copies, but the last time I went to the newsstand some terrible things happened to the cars on the streets and some other small Earth people yelled, "There is always room for Jell-O!"

Sincerely your fan,
Moby

23 Robot
SSSFC
S. P. Idaho

EDITOR POHL: ODDS 7-TO-1
FOR DISASTER. KLIP WILL
PLACE BETS. ODDS 10-TO-0
KLIP WILL TAKE ALL.

23 Robot

Klipp
SSSFC
July 22, 1970

Sir Frederik Pohl, Editor
"IF"

Dear Sir & Editor:

If you would reaffirm your good nature and advance me five thousand, I can double your money in two weeks — less my special hazard fee, of course. I happen to have located a wholesale source of rifles and shotguns. Sepia Springs is about to split up into two war-ready factions; the Old Sod Society and the Care-a-care Committee. If I swing it just right, I am in a position to sell arms to both sides. Hogal and Lilly Bell are perfect rabble rousers. Too bad they are going to end up in the soup — but that will be a little more pocket money for us.

That's the way the satellite orbits, as the old Earth saying goes.

If you are a bit short at the moment, dip into the company kitty and cut those word rates. No one will know the difference. A man of your taste and judgment deserves the best, and I, sir, am in a position to let you have it.

Your obedient servant,
Klip of Amphibia II
Sanitary Inspector
Chairman of Mutual Benefit
Syndicate
President of General Promotions
Sepia Springs, Idaho 59725

Elaysia



July 22, 1970

Dear Editor,

Since I landed on Earth I have

THE SEPIA SPRINGS AFFAIR

never had so much fun in my life. Why would anyone want to fight?

Love,
Elaysia

Snerr
SSSFC
July 30, 1970

Dear Editor Pohl:

I don't think you really are the most important man on Earth. I think Mr. Wright has grossly misrepresented Earth culture. When I get back to the Galactic Council I can assure you that some life contracts will be terminated.

Moby is about ready to split in two. If he thinks that will entitle him to two salaries, he is going to have to face me before the Galactic Council. Those permecoids should never have been admitted to Galactic membership, let alone sent on this mission. They are just big helpless blobs, and have no character. They should be institutionalized and sterilized.

The rest of the committee is still a mess. That pin-head Gleep is a happy parasite. Klip is a thoroughgoing outlaw. Rhudly sits and broods because the natives don't like him, but I always say, you never can expect much of a native. Thank the powers I never was a native.

This mission has been thwarted. Recognizing this, I must officially warn you: the day of purity is at hand!

Most fairly yours,

Snerr
SSSFC

Member Board of Censors

Sepia Springs City Hall
Sepia Springs, Idaho 59725
August 1, 1970

Sir Frederik Pohl, editor
"IF"

Dear Sir & Editor:

I regret, my dear friend, that you were unable to come forth with the five thousand dollars to help finance the ammunitions effort. I had hoped to give you a little rake-off after the blood dried up and I had accessed my own personal expenses. As usual, I managed quite well on my own. The arms have been sold. A local banker, who had been indiscreet with another man's wife, saw fit to better himself by financing me. Lilly Bell and Hogal are indignant, but things are going so smoothly that the matter is completely out of their control.

I don't think that there will be one brick left on another or one window intact in Sepia Springs in a few days. I now have a substantial account in a Swiss bank. However, it is temporarily encumbered with red tape. If you could advance me a mere ten thousand it will make you a hundred thousand in two months. That could finance some format improvements for "IF," you know. You might drop me the ten thousand in cash to my new headquarters, 10073 Salvadore Street, Los Angeles, California. I shall be moving from large city to large city at regular intervals. As my kind old grandfather said before I had him for dinner, "The loot follows the population." If you would care to stake me from time to time, I'm certain

that you will become the richest native on Earth.

Your obedient servant
Klip
Civil Expeditor
Chairman Swiss Investments
of Salvadore St.

SSSFC
August 3, 1970

Dear Editor:

What kind of a world is this? A white man can't even get served in a bar! "The Counter" takes my money, why can't I buy a drink? I think I will cast a "no" vote for this planet if Klip brings back that robot. But first, I'm going to try



every place in town — they can't all be bad.

Disgruntled,
Rhudly

Pinney-Dew Lodge
Sun Valley, Idaho
August 3, 1970

Dear Fred,

I'm going to be tied up with an education conference at this motel for some time. If there are any urgent communications, write me here. However, as this matter involves campus politics, please keep my whereabouts confidential.

Yours,
Rosco

Gleep
August 3, 1970

Hi! Editor Pohl!

This Earth assignment is a living scream. There is a group down in the "Cabbage Patch," with Hogal, firing some real cheap rifles up towards the highlands, and Lilly Bell has another outfit firing cheap rifles in the general direction of the "Cabbage Patch."

Moby split and the two of him take up the spare bedroom. Hurd moved into the basement because he doesn't like the sound of rifle bullets. Snerr has started to grow cilia.

Elaysia and Mr. Wright went away. They told Snerr they were going to make a study of fringe benefits in human economy. If you ask me, Snerr is just jealous because sprouting cilia isn't as much fun as

Earth fringe benefits, if you get what I mean.

Your pal,
Gleep

Rhudly
August 4, 1970
Sepia Springs
City Jail

Dear Mr. Pohl,

Gleep, being a small organism, can move around more than the rest of us. He is also a very cooperative type, and I am told that he has what humans call an "exuberant sense of humor." Whatever it is, I appreciate that he has called at the jail yard, where they let me walk one hour a day.

It happened like this. I went into the fifth bar, and it wasn't a nice place, but they served me a drink. I was sitting in my booth sipping an Earth type called "Jack Daniels" when this beautiful young Earth girl came in and sat on my lap and put her arms around me. She made me feel good. I do have glands, you know, under this tough white hide. I was on my fourth "Jack Daniels" and afraid even to lift her off my lap for fear I might crush her bones. She started kissing me. She wore purple lipstick, which probably looks bad on white skin.

Then in came three men, and one of them said, "You freak S.O.B.! You're fooling around with my wife!"

He pulled out a hand gun and shot me five times. The last bullet hit the end of my nose, and I guess I lost my temper. I jumped up, dumped the girl on the floor, and

swing my fist at the man. I caught myself in mid-swing and tried to stop, but I did barely knick him on the chin. He is in the hospital with a broken jaw, cracked neck and concussion.

If he dies, the guard tells me, I'll be hung for murder. Gleep says hanging me is about the funniest thing he ever heard of. I read about humor once, and I guess he is right, but I just can't experience the emotion.

The guards hit me with a rubber hose. I told them that if it would make them feel any better they could use a piece of pipe. That

upset them. I must have violated a cultural taboo. The council warned us against that.

I could break out of here easily, but courtesy demands that I remain here and not offend my host until relieved of duty by the Galactic Council.

Patiently,
Rhudly

Hogal
Sepia Springs
Care-a-care Society
August 5, 1970

Dear Frederik Pohl and Company:

In a few days comes the revolution. Are you with us?

Your chairman,
Hogal

For Independence and Freedom

Lilly Bell
Sepia Springs
Old Sod Society
August 5, 1970

Dear Editor:

Please state your position. You are either with us or against us. No other position is allowed. There is no such thing as a neutral position or a third side. You are free to join us or die.

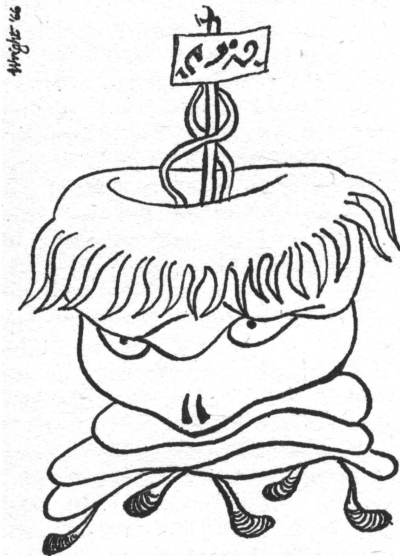
Your chairman,
Lilly Bell

For Independence and Freedom

Snerr
SSSFC
August 7, 1970

Mr. Pohl!

The day of purity is at hand!
My children are hidden in flower boxes all over town. They are small,



Snerr

but they will grow and we will save you from yourselves.

Mr. Wright and Elaysia are gone, and that reminds me. After I have taken over, a little adjusting of the human DNA molecule will allow you to reproduce by cilia shedding, a much more moral way than your present method. One of the first things I must do is eliminate pleasure. You will then see that most of your problems will be over. Believe me, I know what is best for you.

Sincerely,
Snerr
Protector of Mankind
Grand Leader of the
Big Cilia Club

Klip
10073 Salvadore St.
Los Angeles, California
August 8, 1970

Sir Frederik Pohl, Editor
"IF"

Dear Sir & Editor:

I tell you I know when to jump orbits. The general area of Sepia Springs is occupied by Snerr's misbegotten offspring. And if your Pentagon brass knew what was going on here, they'd drop an H bomb on the town. They complain about me selling my relatives for crab salad! Nonsense! Each race has its own brand of evil, and even that changes with the winds of time. The only true virtue is achievement, my friend. I've got the finest thing going here. You can probably guess what it is. I need \$20,000 for guns

and knives. I've got a shipment of **ammunition** tied up at cost plus ten. **I can make you a million, my friend, but get me the cash right away.** You never had such a good offer in your life.

Your obedient servant,
Klip
K G S Powder Co.

Rhudly
Sepia Springs City Jail
August 11, 1970

Dear Editor Pohl:

Since you are so inadvertently involved with us, I will write this letter to you. This is unofficial, of course.

Sepia Springs did not recognize good will and innocence in Hurd and Moby, because they were, to your kind, big and ugly. The SSSFC let Snerr dominate it because she was an aggressive bitch and no one stopped her. Lilly Bell, Hogal and Klip conned you from the start. They were too non-human to date your daughters and seemed to offer an easy way to get something for nothing. Gleep is a happy-go-lucky character with a tough hide. He just invites abuse from sour dispositioned societies. But, like me, he is too tough to get hurt. Elaysia can primarily test the tolerance of Earth women and some of them evidently can't stand the competition. Elaysia is from a race of great lovers.

I am human even if I am tough and I could date your daughters, and I look like you except for my porcelain white skin, which reflects light nicely and prevents sunburn. Humans get badly shaken the moment

they face me — except for Mr. Wright, and he thinks I'm funny, which I am not. I don't really have much of a sense of humor, but that is a cultural characteristic of my race. In any event, I'm human even if I am white. I must recommend a guarantee of Earth.

Regretfully,
Rhudly

P. S. I talked to Wright on the phone, and he said he needed some more vitamins. Perhaps you can help him?

Pinney Dew Lodge
Sun Valley, Idaho
August 15, 1970

Dear Fred,

Stories may come a little more slowly. Elaysia is going to be terrific as soon as she learns to type.

Best regards,
Rosco

Galactic Time ooX
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725479031

Frederik Pohl, Earth
Editor: "IF"

Dear Editor:

I was overruled, and it is only fair to tell you that the Galactic Council decided our visit to Earth was "inconclusive."

They fired all of us.

I found a new job, a lousy one, but I have had my revenge. I managed to help Klip and Elaysia remain behind on Earth.

Good luck,

Rhudly
Opodipapod Salesman
Quagmire II

Sepia Springs
October 13, 1970

Frederik Pohl
Editor "IF"

Dear Sir:

Regardless of what the newscasts say or what my husband says, the Sepia Springs Affair is not quite over. In fact, if that elongated hussy doesn't hustle herself a new job as of today, she is going to be looking for six band-aids.

Sincerely yours,
Edith Wright

Klip
% General Delivery
Omaha, Nebraska
October 13, 1970

Sir Frederik Pohl, Editor
"IF"

Dear Sir and Editor:

I'll be in your office at 9:00 a.m. tomorrow. I have a little insurance company underway, and I am looking for an experienced, alert executive, such as yourself, who would like to buy into the company and retire.

Your obedient servant,
Klip
President:

Executive's Protective Mutual
P.S. I sent a stupid nephew back to the Galactic Council in my place. Most races think we crabs all look alike. END



Where Are the Worlds of Yesteryear?

Illustrated by
GAUGHAN



Oh, where are the moss-covered, ochre Barsoomian plains,
With thoot-riding, sword-wielding, ruddy-skinned heroes so gay,
And wandering war-bands of Warhoons in zitidar wains?

The cold wind of science has blown them away.

And what has become of the boundless Venerian bog,
Where slimy and sinuous reptile did slither and slay,
And princesses fled from malevolent foes through the fog?

The brisk breeze of knowledge has blown them away.

And what of the fountains and fanes of Atlantis the fair,
Which rose from the waves in the West — or so Plato did say —
Its sorcerer-kings, and its spires of orichalc rare?

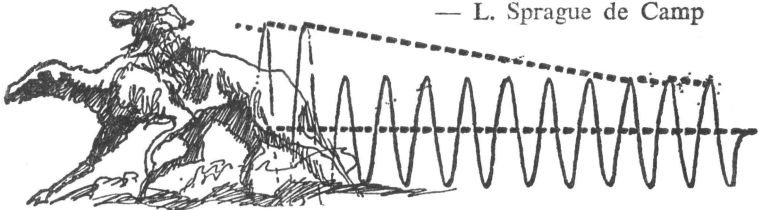
In the dry blast of reason they've withered away.

But if Venus and Mars become lifeless and dull, and if no
Atlantis existed outside a poetical lay,

These luminous figments live on in our fancy, although

The breath of discovery wafts them away.

— L. Sprague de Camp





The Iron Thorn

by Algis Budrys

Illustrated by MORROW

What has gone before

Honor Jackson was a loner, he roamed 'round the world. The world was flat and circular; a sunken desert, cold, wanly lit, nearly airless. At its center was the Thorn — a high, blunt, nearly featureless metal tower. It was the precarious source of the only water, breath and livable climate for the Farmers.

The Farmers tilled the fields packed around the Thorn, and supported the Honors. Honors occasionally ventured out into the desert wearing portable climate units they thought were hats, and honned Amsirs. Amsirs were vicious, horn-clad, flightless, winged animals who would have gotten in and eaten up all the Farmers if the Honors hadn't protected them.

Like a lot of other things, Honor

Jackson found out when he became a full-fledged Honor, that was pretty much a lie, maintained by the Eld Honor and his bully-boys for their own comfort. For one thing, the Amsirs were less vicious, better armed, and had a bigger vocabulary than the Honors. To say nothing of the Farmers.

Being nobody's fool, Jackson was pretty much on his way to being just about everybody's enemy. So he left the Thorn, left his solitary home and all his drawings, left his life, left even Petra Jovans — who just might have come along if he'd asked her — and went out into the desert, where a man would choke and freeze to death in a dozen dozen heartbeats if he lost his cap or got out of line-of-sight of the Thorn.

He took his Amsir-bone throwing stick and his two glass-headed darts with him. Even so, Red Filson chased him down; he got one of Filson's darts through his elbow and damn near died before he could kill the man and surrender to a Amsir.

The Amsir dressed him in warm robes of human skin and took him to the rim of the world, where he found the rim of another world, full of thick air, choked to the rim with food, and centering on a Thorn much more magnificent than his own. Soaring around the Thorn were Amsirs.

The food, unfortunately, could only be eaten by Amsirs; to Jackson's kind of creature it was just so much rock-mold. And despite anything a Amsir doctor could do for him, his arm was dying.

It turned out the Amsirs had a

habit of capturing Jackson's kind of creature because only Jackson's kind of creature could help them with their problem.

Their problem was a smaller, somewhat Thorn-like thing standing up on the ground beside their Thorn. Like their Thorn and Jackson's Thorn it had been there since the beginning of time. Jackson's kind of creature could at least mess around its outside, even if fruitlessly. But no Amsir could get at it. It killed them.

The Amsirs, science-minded as well as inclined to theological disputation, felt all the answers to the origin of the world and the maintenance of the gradually deteriorating Thorns might lie inside the Thorn Thing. In any case, they couldn't ignore it, so one after another of Jackson's kind had been trying to open the adamantly closed door to the Thorn Thing for the Amsirs, spurred by the hope, there might be something to eat in there. Up till now they had all starved to death.

The Amsir equivalent of the Eld had some hope Jackson would show better luck. Jackson, after all, was the first of his kind to surrender voluntarily, and he was obviously intelligent in other ways besides.

The Eld Amsir didn't feel he could take too many chances with Jackson. So he set a guard on him — Ahmuls, the incredibly stupid, half-baked, flabby-skinned, wingless Amsir whom the Thorn Thing apparently mistook for Jackson's kind of creature; because it didn't try to kill him, either. It just wouldn't open its door,

and meanwhile kept growling something in its low, ugly voice.

Jackson finally got mad at the door and spoke to it. In fact, he reasoned with it, was what he did, and the door opened. It turned out the door had been trying to speak the speech of Amsirs and Jackson's kind of creature — it just didn't speak fast enough. When the door opened, and Jackson and Ahmuls found themselves inside a very small room, it kind of went to show that both Jackson and Ahmuls were the Thorn Thing's kind of creature, too.

This series of events unquestionably held deep scientific and theological meaning to the Eld Amsir. But he reacted just as if he were hopping mad. When the outside door closed again, there were spears rebounding from it. Meanwhile, inside, Jackson and Ahmuls crouched nervously as the other door of the little room slipped back, and they were able to see into the inside of the Thorn Thing.

XVI

“What's happening?” Ahmuls said unhappily, peering into the Thorn Thing, jerking his head back to look over his shoulder every time another spear point hit the other side of the door, but then peering again. Things were beginning to hum inside the Thorn Thing. Jackson could see light getting brighter, dancing around in there; he could hear things going clickety-click. Most of all he could feel how strong the Thorn was becoming. All around them, a voice like the voice of the

door said: “Uhhcumminngg uhup t full pow'r!” Farther inside the Thorn Thing the same voice said: “Standing by on full power. Main generators On, maintenance power supply Off! Condition of vessel report: All systems functional and reliable. Maintenance Mode battery drain excessive; recharging.”

“What's happening?” Ahmuls cried.

“Don't look at me, chum,” Jackson said quickly, “I haven't picked up any weapons.”

“You better not!”

“I know.” Jackson had his feet firmly under him and moved to the doorway that led deeper inside the Thorn Thing. “Will you look at all that machinery.”

“What are we going to do! Who'd want to stay in here!” Ahmuls wailed.

Jackson listened to the *tang! tang! tang!* of spears hitting the outside of the Thorn Thing. “Oh, I don't know,” he said.

“Is anyone going to take command?” the door-voice said inside the Thing.

I haven't worked that out yet, friend, Jackson said to himself. Any minute now this clown is going to decide something's a weapon. It's a little hard, taking command when you're dead. But I'm sure not going to take *my* orders from *him* — he's worse even than Eld.

Jackson felt funny. There was all this humming and buzzing; all these voices talking and doors opening; all these things happening that he maybe could have enjoyed if he'd come on them a little bit at a time,

all ready to take them on or maybe take them apart. Maybe be them, or maybe picture them. But with a stomach and an arm and spear sounds and an Ahmuls like he had, he didn't feel all that ready.

"Command must be exercised within a reasonable period of time," the voice said.

"Huh?" Ahmuls said.

"Command *must* be exercised! Stasis wastes power!"

Nag, nag, nag, Jackson thought. Whatever stasis is. "All right," he yelled. "What'll make you happy?"

"Function. Duties to perform. I cannot come to full power for nothing!"

"Listen, you quit talking to it!" Ahmuls said. "You've done enough already."

"Listen, no weapons, right?" Jackson said to him, holding out his empty hands. "I'm *supposed* to talk to it, remember?" He raised his voice. "You got a name, voice?"

Ahmuls was frowning, Jackson guessed. Maybe he'd stay busy that way just a little bit longer.

"My name is Self-Sustaining Interplanetary Expeditionary Module," the voice said. "Call me Susiem."

"What can you do?"

"Anything! Anything a Susiem can do."

You wouldn't think that was a lot of help, Jackson thought. But there was one thing he knew a Susiem could do, and it was with doors. He bounced off Ahmuls to get farther inside the Thorn Thing. "Close that door!" he yelled, and as he lay there on the floor again, he found that

to the now more distant and less frequent sound of spears against the outside door was added the soft *klop!* of Ahmuls, trapped in the little room, beating his fist against the inside door.

Jackson shook his head and looked around. The room he was in was full of machinery; metal and glass all over the place, humped, twisted, full of knobs and points, *flashing and gleaming*, humming —

"That's great. But I don't see anything to eat."

"Certainly not! Do you *think* you're in the mess compartment?" Susiem said.

"You trying to say there's another room here, where there's food?"

"I can do anything a Susiem can do!" Susiem said.

Klop, klop, klop, Ahmuls said.

"Boy, he talks plainer than you do," Jackson said. "All right, how do I get to that other room? And don't open that door until I say so! By the way, if you've got food, you wouldn't happen to have a doctor? I could use one."

"Certainly I won't open the door! You're in command! Report to Sick Bay immediately."

"They got food there?"

"Medical treatment takes precedence over rations. Report to Sick Bay."

I'm in command, Jackson thought. "Where's Sick Bay?"

XVII

Susiem led him back to Sick Bay by simply having him follow

lights that kept turning on just ahead of him as he walked through a door and then down a ladder and through another door. Sick Bay was all white except where it was bare metal. The doctor was white and bare metal, and he had wheels. He unstopped himself from a doctor-shaped hole in the wall and came rolling forward like a plow. He came to about the height of Jackson's chest. "State your complaint," he said.

"My arm's going to have to come off," Jackson said, looking at the doctor carefully, deciding to believe Susiem when it said "This is the doctor."

"You're not competent to prognose. State your complaint. How do you account for the fact that you don't match any comparison in my files? Show proof you're entitled to receive medical treatment from this station."

"Emergency, Doctor," Susiem said. "This man is in command."

"You'll have to fill out forms," the doctor said. A hard, soft-white square on its top turned a very pale white-green. A stick popped up most of the way out of a hole beside the square. "Take the pen." Jackson pulled it out curiously. It was the same shape and about the same length as the burnt sticks he had left behind at his home Thorn. But it wasn't burnt — it was light, felt soft at the surface but was as rigid as metal, felt slick, but didn't slip from his fingers. At the very end of it was what looked like a little ball of glass.

"Well?"

Jackson peered at the green-

white square. There were lines running across it now, bright white. At the beginnings of the lines there were shapes of some kind — patterns made out of lines, bent and crossing each other. "Kind of pretty," he said.

"Criticism is not your function. Fill out the forms."

"I think he's illiterate, Doctor," Susiem said.

"Well, let him make some kind of mark," the doctor said impatiently. "I'm sure there are others waiting. He's wasting time."

"He's in command."

"Well, then he certainly ought to be literate."

"Look — I order you to make yourself understandable," Jackson told the doctor. "My arm hurts, and I'm hungry."

"Do you know how to make a mark? Make a mark on the surface of the plate with the light-pen. I have to have some sort of identification for you or I can't file you. And if I can't file you, you're lost."

"Oh. You just want to be able to find me again. Well, here's what I look like." The little ball slipped much too easily over the top of the plate, if that was what you called it, but the light-pen, or whatever, left a nice white line behind it. Jackson started turning his wrist to thicken and thin it, and that didn't work, but by and large he had a pretty good picture of himself down on the plate very soon. For good measure, he took one corner of the plate and made a drawing of his arm

bones, showing where the dart had gone in. "That's what's wrong with me. The dart's been pulled out, but the arm died."

The doctor and Susiem didn't say anything for a little bit. Finally the doctor said: "Your knowledge of anatomy isn't bad."

"Draws well, too," Susiem said. "You can tell what you're looking at. Not like this paraphrastic stuff they do."

"The arm," Jackson said.

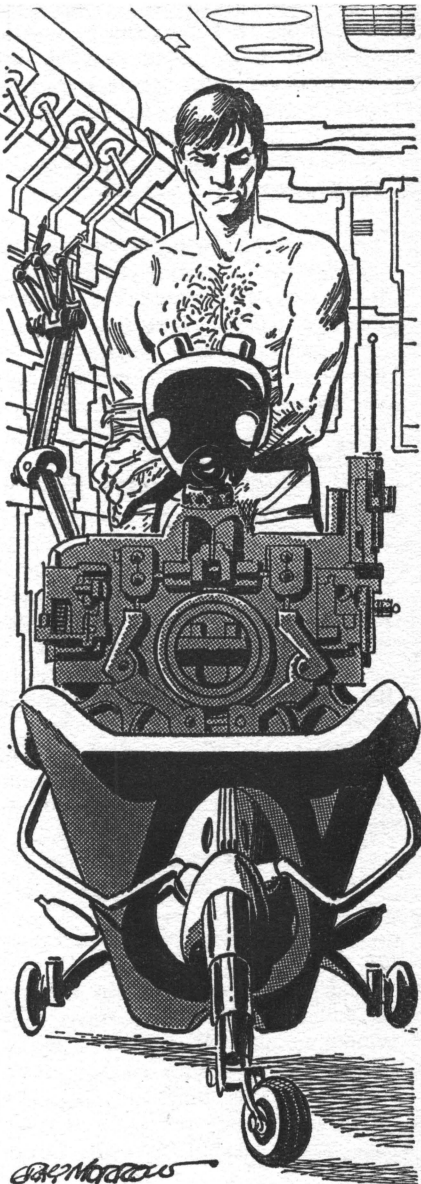
"Certainly the arm," the doctor answered. "Uh — let's just have an overall look at you, while we're about it." The doctor shimmied back and forth on his wheels for a moment. There was a little humming plow-noise inside him. "Hmm. Yes. Well — you've certainly led an active life. But it's all healed very nicely — barring some of the fresh events, of course. The only one that we need to do anything much about is in that elbow joint. You're going to need a restoration there. Your blood sugar is a little low. Are you fatigued?"

"Huh?"

"Are you tired?"

"Damn right. Hungry, too."

"Well, I can introduce a little protein into your system, I suppose, while we're working on the arm, but I imagine you'd rather have a ham sandwich. Susiem, why don't you get the captain here some nourishment while I'm taking care of this." The doctor came apart, part-way, with some kind of flip of his sides, which turned into a kind of chair-cradle. The seat and back, and the part that went under the legs,



were padded, and so was the place for Jackson's right arm to rest. A trough that extended partway into the back rest was for Jackson's left arm. It was bare metal, and a little bar of light popped out on two stalks over it, lighting up the leather wrappings as Jackson sat down.

“Sick call takes precedence over mess,” Susiem said. “I see no reason why he can't be treated and then go to where the food is.”

“I said bring him something!” the doctor snapped. “He's undernourished, he's got one arm free to serve himself with, and besides, rank has its privileges.”

“If you record it as a prescription, doctor.”

“I do.”

“Very well,” Susiem said. Something began to stir around one compartment lower down. “I'm breaking out a food cart.”

“For a machine,” Jackson said to the doctor, “you got more sense than people.”

“Damn right,” the doctor said. “Now let's get this slop off your limb. Who's been treating you — some veterinarian?”

“What's that?”

“Captain, you need an education.”

“What's that?”

“What you need.” Maybe the doctor didn't want to go 'round and 'round any more; maybe he figured he could keep Jackson busy with something else. At any rate, something that must have been a knife zipped down the length of Jackson's arm. It laid open the wrappings as neat as any slash Jackson had ever

seen. It laid open his arm too, and it sure did cut down on his desire to do much talking. He sat there staring at his own bones, pink-white, in the halved shell of his arm. All around the torn, discolored place where Red Filson's dart had gone in on its way to the elbow joint, it looked like something rotten.

Sparks — maybe metal, maybe light — winked and flashed around the bone. There was a cloudy white puff of fog where the joint was; there was a suck of air and that was gone, *whuummph!* and then the joint was gone. The bones of his upper and lower arm didn't meet by a full third of a dozen finger-widths. More sparks, and the ends were notched and drilled, the way a carpenter might make a pegged splice. The rotten place in the meat of his arm was getting less. Healthy-looking stuff was replacing it. His whole arm was tingling. The bar of light above it seemed to be shivering.

Something like a little doctor came rolling in the door, and flipped open its top. Steaming warmth hit Jackson in the nose like the clout of a damp, hot, table rag. He'd never smelled anything so strong in his life. It poured right up his nose and seemed to fill his whole head. He blinked; it was making his eyes water. Lying on a dish were some greens with something greasy-looking on them, a round ball of something white and made out of small parts that looked like maggots, and a rounded squishy-looking brown thing that looked like what you might find under a Amsir house, if it had been drier. Next to it was something with

a long slim handle and four long curved points, a folded-up white hunk of something that might have been Amsir lace shaved until it was thin and crinkly, and a glass of what would have looked like milk if it hadn't been so white and opaque.

"Lunch," Susiem said. "Salisbury steak with roquefort salad and rice. Enjoy it, Captain." Jackson couldn't make up his mind whether to look at his lunch or his arm.

The doctor was really getting things done in there. Delicate stilty little fingers with hinges in them came popping out of his inside, from under the same overhang that the bar of light came from. They were carrying a woven white contraption that Jackson saw was a little like what would happen if you took a drawing of an elbow joint and bent it around so that it was an elbow joint no matter what direction you looked at it from. He found this out because the little fingers stuck it right in there, and other little fingers put pegs in place, and in a trice where his elbow had been was this white drawing, snugly slipped into place. He could see right through it, of course, but it looked pretty strong and solid all by itself.

"Okay," the doctor said. "That's what we call a jig-splint. In a couple of hours, you'll have a pretty good structure of bone cells forming along that grid, and in a day or so that'll be as good as new."

The two halves of Jackson's arm were pushed back together as the walls of the trough gently squeezed shut around them. The trough wig-

gled its halves back and forth for an instant until the halves of Jackson were lined up just right. Then they fell back and where the cut had been there was a very thin line, like the scratch of a playful woman, running along the seam.

For the first time since the doctor started, Jackson saw blood. It stood up in droplets like pinheads along the scratch, already scabbed and hard. The cut lengths of the Amsir doctor's arm-wrapping lay in the trough for an instant and then puffed out with a flash, a fog of smoke and a *whooph!* "Eat your lunch," the doctor said.

Jackson tested his arm. The "lunch" still looked like what it had looked like before. The arm was great. He twisted and stretched it, making a fist, squeezing, trying to see if it would pop open into two halves. It wouldn't.

He rapped his elbow with the knuckles of his right hand. It sounded hollow. It didn't sound like him at all.

XVIII

It didn't seem possible he had eaten. But Susiem had said: "If you think I'm going to throw away this perfectly good food, and go to the trouble of synthesizing burnt Amsir, if that's what it's called, and whole grain bread, when the whole basis of your being here is that you're *human . . .*"

Jackson had to admit Salisbury steak, rice and roquefort salad wasn't bad. He licked the leftovers off his fingers. But he drew the line at what

humans called milk; he finally got some water instead.

He sat back. The doctor was still letting him sit in him.

"You know," Jackson said, "it's funny how it works out. Here the Eld Amsir was jollying me along with lots of fine talk about maybe there was food in here, and something to do about my arm, and be damned if there wasn't. Feels pretty good. Thanks, the two of you."

"What are your further orders, Captain?" Susiem said impatiently.

"Well . . . I don't know. Is there some place around here for me to sleep?"

"You don't need any right now," the doctor said.

"Sleep!" Susiem said simultaneously. "Here you've got everything turned on, and you're going to sleep?"

"Well, it's something us humans do. Whether they need it or not. Can't tell when your next chance is going to be."

"Humans," the doctor said, "sleep at set, regular times. The sort of humans we are accustomed to."

"That's right," Susiem said. "Stasis wastes power!"

Oh boy, it never stops, Jackson thought, even with machines. "Well, look — you must have had other captains —"

"I should say so!"

"What did you do when they slept?"

"When they slept, the First Officer was awake. Don't you know anything about being human?"

"He needs an education," the doctor said.

"More than I need a first officer?"

"What about the individual in the air lock? Isn't that your first officer?"

"Him?" All Ahmuls was in Jackson's head right now was a *Klop*, *klop*, *klop* on the inside door. That was enough. He still hadn't decided what to do about that. But why did he have to decide now? It wasn't as if he was going to spend the rest of his life anywhere else but here. Being captain. When the machines didn't have something else in mind. "What's a first officer do? I go one's pretty good with a spear, I guess. But spearing don't seem to be much needed. I mean, you're made out of metal Doctor, and I don't even know where you are, Susiem."

Susiem giggled.

"All right, that does it," the doctor said. "I'm prescribing this boy a university. You do have the necessary fact library, don't you?"

"Self-Sustaining Interplanetary Expeditionary Modules are, self-evidently, self-sustaining," Susiem answered, as the doctor's arms immediately, but gently, unfolded additional sections that held Jackson by the wrists. The seat changed slope, so that he was mostly lying down.

"No need to get offended about it. Just be ready to patch through into my inputs when I say the word. And no stirring around in *my* banks while we're overlapping, either — everybody thinks all *they* need to be doctors themselves is facts. Just get the tibias and the cytoplasms in the right place and anybody can be a sawbones! That's what *you* think. So stay out and do your job, and I'll do mine."

What the hell were they up to?

Jackson made one try at getting his arms out, which taught him he couldn't do it. Anyhow, supposing he'd get loose, where was he going to run to? Outside? Through the little room with Ahmuls klopping in it? But what the hell were they up to? Round pads came from somewhere behind Jackson's head and pressed it close among them, front and back, both sides.

“All right, I'm hitting him with the predisposants now.” A little thing like a hollow spearpoint whipped out of the doctor's insides, darted at Jackson's throat, stopped short but close and fired something cold and stinging into the place where the heavy throb of blood came near the surface of the skin. Jackson felt it just for a heartbeat, and he was still admiring how fast the little dojigger moved and how keen it looked, when it flipped back and disappeared.

“Massive dose,” the doctor commented. “I judge that with this individual, he'd better be predisposed to about the same extent as you'd need to teach a horse symphonic composition.”

Jackson could feel something very funny happening to his eyes and ears. Sounds were beginning to break up into little reverberating pieces. First the edges of everything he could see were blurred, and then he was weeping. Moisture — great, glittering streams of tears — pooled out on his helpless lids and sheeted down his face. A bulky, warm feel-

ing spread out from the pit of his stomach. His fingers felt as if his palms were split painlessly and smoothly along each string of bones clear back to his wrists. The same time his eyes ran wet, his lips were puffy and dry, and the same time his belly was warm, his forehead was icy cold. He swallowed, and his ears popped. He blinked, and his tear-filled eyes felt sandy. “He's ready,” the doctor said.

There was another fine, cold spray at the back of Jackson's neck. “Inputs going in now.” Something fine and ticklish as Petra Jovan's hair came in through the back of Jackson's neck, slipped gracefully to the inside of his head, and for all he knew, wove themselves into tapes-tries there. “All right, patch in,” the doctor said.

Whatever patching-in was, Jackson guessed Susiem had done it, because suddenly, inside his head, where he was, there was a feeling like — A thing happening like — Well, what was happening, was that, in there, and around there, what was being done — no; what was happening —

“Who could I tell?” Jackson hol-lered at the top of his lungs. “Who would believe me!”

XIX

It was no different really from remembering it was like being a boy around the Thorn. One day he was just another brat — well, just another brat except he was inside himself — and the next day he was



here in the expeditionary ship remembering it. It was probably no different from that.

"Well?" the doctor said.

"He's done," Susiem said.

The taste of hot dust swirling up around the Thorn as he ran, and ran, was in his mouth. The feel of the first time he swung his arm just right and the dart shot straight and true into the target, a buzzing streak of what Honor White Jackson could do. Honor Black Jackson. Honor Red Jackson. Honor Red Jackson, hurting and hungry, being a door in the alien echoes of the Amsir Thorn. And now he was here. Memory had no time or space.

His head was very full.

Hey! he thought, I was right all along! I was too small — it was all too small, and it was all wrong. I was right and they were wrong.

When he thought of how they tried to keep him down, and how they kept themselves down, he began to grin. When he thought about the Amsirs, poking and prying, trying to understand it all — from where they were — he grinned even more fiercely. Oh, wow — *mine* is the Earth and everything that's in it!

"Congratulations, Captain," Susiem said, "you are now an Honor graduate in Liberal Arts from Ohio State University. You have a special Masters in Command Psychology from the University of Chicago, and three semester hours in military journalism from the Air Force Academy. You are fully qualified to command this vessel."

"I know that," Jackson said.

"These qualifications are now on

file in my data banks, and will be listed with Earth Central Statistics immediately upon my reacquisition of contact with the Associated Midwestern Universities Genetic Research project communications network," Susiem went on, tidying up the loose ends.

"There's no way you can tease him out of that airlock and back down the ladder, is there?" he said, pro forma, but he didn't want to do that anyway. Poor bloody Ahmuls. If he got him out of the lock and back to the Eld Amsir's love, what use would they have for him with the ship gone? And the ship would be gone. He most certainly wasn't going to spend his life grounded aboard her now, even supposing her life support system could endure that long with his organism draining it. But that was secondary, too — in fact, irrelevant. For who, knowing him as he was now, knowing how much time there was to make up for could imagine him going anywhere but Earthward?

Earthward to Ariwol, he noted parenthetically. Earthward to Airworld. The tongue of his mind twisted voluptuously around the ability to make the long vowels flow; he took a deep, deep breath — breath enough to make him giddy — and said it aloud the way they might say it in Columbus, Ohio and Chicago, Illinois: "Ayer world." So much, so much to use!

Klop klop klop.

Kick him out, struggling, to ridicule and scorn, to uselessness with the ship gone? How could Jackson

do that to a creature at his mercy that he did not ever need to eat?

Eat.

"What about this lichen they eat? Can you synthesize that for . . . our shipmate?"

"There is no need to synthesize," the doctor said. "It's a perfectly normal Terrestrial form."

"Oh. Then there's no problem. Let's bring him in. We'll control him long enough for you and Susiem to do as much as you can for his brain and data file, and it's solved."

"It is not. You're already proving a little knowledge is a dangerous thing. In the first place, I don't know what you mean by control, but I certainly wouldn't take on any hostile organisms of his size with an arm as fragile as yours is at present. And you don't seem to have drawn the proper conclusions from his diet. I am amazed you were able to survive out there at all. I have no predisposants that could possibly do anything useful to his nucleic acids. You're anthropomorphizing. To all intents and purposes, there is less kinship between him and the human heritage than there is between you and me."

"That's ridiculous!" Susiem cried. "He's perfectly human — he can't fly, can he?"

"If you don't want your mistakes brought up, don't activate doctors."

"All right, you two, cut it out," Jackson said. What the hell did the doctor mean he couldn't control Ahmuls? It was perfectly plain how he could control Ahmuls — he'd been told about it in his sophomore year. What he hadn't been told was how

to like it. But he'd been taught how to get along without that while going for his masters. It was amazing the things he'd been taught. "Doctor — All right, you can't predispose him. Can you patch him up if he's hurt?"

"No problem," the Medico replied.

"Susiem, if we let him in, can you protect your components in that room?"

"To an extent."

"Well, then, let's get at it — I'm sick of this place. The sooner we get this done, the quicker we can move." I wonder how he'll like Ariwol.

He walked up the companionway to the airlock level. He put his face up close to the door. "Ahmuls! Ahmuls, can you hear me?"

"You son of a bitch."

"Listen to me — if I open this door, what'll you do?"

"Kill you, you son of a bitch."

"Ahmuls, listen close. You may not believe this, but I can bust you up real good."

"Not if I kill you, you son of a bitch."

"Ahmuls, I'm telling you — they gave me a — " what had they given him? They'd given him a weapon, and he had picked it up.

By the time Susiem was launched, the art of unarmed combat on Earth had reached a point of development which made practice unnecessary and the karate-ka's callouses superfluous. The system had been refined to so simple a point that a mere explanation of what places to be

touched was sufficient. Any man with a decent memory for instruction and reasonable dexterity could successfully apply it to an equally proficient man with slower reflexes — and to all uninitiates — with cunning rapidity and shocking accomplishment. Jackson's reflexes were not as quick as Ahmuls's, but his memory was as fast as Susiem's feed to his brain, and in any case Ahmuls just had no idea —

"Aw, hell," Jackson said. "Susiem, open the door."

It was amazing how fast he was, bags of loose flesh and all, flapping and grunting, his feet slap-slapping, his pudgy hands extended from his forearms as if he were wearing ragged sleeves.

Jackson extended his body, right forefinger first, and touched him as he had been told, in the fieldhouse amphitheater of the sunny Canterbury Gothic campus. It was shocking how Ahmul's feet flew out from under him, and he fell backward to the deck. Jackson reached down quickly, and touched the one ankle he could reach; Ahmuls cried out. He probably hadn't often felt pain. Not once he'd gotten big enough.

Jackson moved back out of the way: "Look, Ahmuls — you can't get up to catch me now. Will you listen?"

But Ahmuls could get up. People did walk on broken legs — they even ran on them, when they had to, if they were in shock. It was just a matter of how much actual physical incapacity was introduced into their physical structures. Until things really disintegrated, they could just keep

running. It happened on football fields and in parachute jump training all the time. The odd part about it was it often made them run faster.

Jackson wove around Ahmuls. His reflexes were slower, but the method was foolproof against charging attacks provided the eye could register them at all. He touched Ahmuls on the ribs. After that, Ahmuls's side was like a rawhide bag of blood. Goddamn it, don't ooze on me! Jackson thought as he made Ahmuls brush by him again. Aw, you dumb animal! "Give up!" he yelled.

Ahmuls charged him, grunting: "Leave me alone — leave me alone, will you!"

Jackson touched both arms. He had to take the shock of Ahmuls hitting him, but he took it on Ahmuls's bad side, and anyway, Ahmuls then had no arms to hug him with. He moved them right, but they bent in two places, and Jackson got out through them.

"Get the doctor up here!" Jackson yelled.

"Watch out for my components!" Susiem cried as Ahmuls blundered.

"The hell with you and all your components!" Jackson yelled as he touched Ahmuls low in the back, feeling the flesh turn to porridge as the shock traveled from where he touched, and then he touched again in the same place, just to make sure; this time he felt the same thing in his fingertip you feel when you're a kid and you nudge out a baby tooth. Ahmuls windmilled his floppy arms, but he had nothing to hold his

legs up any more, and he went down, folding in the middle and folding at the broken ankle, putting out his broken arms to catch him, landing on his broken side, and then his face. He lay slumped on his knees, arms out, his face squashed flat against the deck, and only one red eye peering up at Jackson.

"All right, all right," he wept. The tears found hidden channels in his folded cheek.

Jackson dropped to his knees on the deck beside him. "I tried to tell ya," he said.

"Yuh." Ahmuls swung his neck as best he could, very fast, going for Jackson's wrist with his teeth. Jackson pushed his head down. "Cut it out, please cut it out."

"Yuh. Yuh, all right, all right, I've got nothing left." His fingers crept toward Jackson's ankle, dragging his arm, and Jackson put his knee on them. The doctor came rolling up. He stood there.

"Well, goddamn it," Jackson squalled, "what are you waiting for?"

"I have no authorization."

"All right — pursuant to the emergency veterinary provisions, I declare this creature is a valuable, harmless, alien life form in distress. I order you to proceed with medical services as far as your knowledge and experience go!"

The doctor's sides unfolded. "Yes, sir. No problem."

Ahmuls had quit trying to move his fingers under Jackson's knee. Under his face, the deck was wet. "What are you going to do? What are you going to do, all you soft things?"

"No, no, it's all right, Ahmuls," Jackson said. His hand on Ahmuls's head was making soothing motions up where a Amsir would have its lace. "The doctor'll fix you. You've got to listen, Ahmuls. Why the hell can't you listen? I love you."

"Did you have to hit me?"

The doctor gathered Ahmuls up in his arms. He was amazingly gentle. He lifted smoothly and tenderly, making Ahmuls comfortable in his arms. He was shockingly gentle.

A maintenance machine had already slipped from its wall recess. It was hovering around the three of them, jockeying to get to the deck where it was messed up.

"Just wait your turn, Susiem," Jackson said angrily, facing the maintenance machine as if it had eyes and ears. "You have no sense of decency, no sense at all."

XX

"Get me an audiovisual picture of the outside," he told Susiem, sitting in the piloting chair.

Susiem swung a scope toward him. The speakers filled with the sounds of outside; the rustle of wings, the murmur of wind, the ping and crackle of large expanses of metal in the open weather. The Amsirs were flying patrol just past the door, beating back and forth, spears ready. There was a littering of broken spears on the ground below the airlock ladder. At the doorway of the Thorn, the Amsir Eld, and the instructing Amsir, and a crowd of more than six but less than twelve apprentices of some type were clus-

tered there, in postures that were not essentially useful. He could hear them discoursing; he motioned impatiently toward the gain control and he could make out their words. They were disputatious and bereft.

"And I tell you we must accept the possibility that we are the interlopers here!" one of them was saying.

"Shut up! I can clearly recall a witnessed discourse in which it was impeccably postulated that if the Thing destroyed our kind on touch, how much more terrible must be the fate of any creature it would permit to enter its maw!"

"Shut up yourself! I'll try conclusions with *you* any time!"

"Eld!" Jackson said, and the Thing growled to the Amsirs at the doorway. "Eld — stand clear!"

"What?" The hard beak was up. The bright, dark eyes were searching where the doorway was on top of the ladder.

"Eld, I have some facts for you."

The communicator went dead. The screen was blank, the speakers were silent. "You are not permitted to contaminate the experiment," Susiem said. "You are exceeding your authority and directly contravening expedition regulations. You are not permitted to communicate facts to the experimental subjects. All facts required by the experimental subjects are predetermined, programmed, and were long ago introduced to the system. Any repetition of this incident will result in your automatic and immediate dismissal from command. This incident will be logged and recorded at the earliest

opportunity following reacquisition of contact with the project communications network. You are reprimanded and are permitted to resume communication only on the basis that you make no further attempt at contamination."

The screen and the speakers came back to life. "Stand clear," Jackson shouted to the Eld. He counted thirty seconds on the fascia clock. "Let's go, Susiem," he said, and with a bang, and a roar and a flash, they all went, taking the world's hope with them.

Earth was pastorally green, its hillocks crowned by elms, its infrequent, low buildings starkly white. Earth was green, fair; heady with the wine of life; in a condition not often attained since the hills of Greece were first so limned by the deft pencillings of Walt Disney.

XXI

It hadn't seemed like such a particularly long trip. He had spent large parts of it in the piloting couch. At first he'd yearned at the stars in their great glowing panoplies, bemused to think that he finally understood what they were, toying at his mind with thoughts of immensity, with notions of how vast it all was, how marvelous its creation, how unfathomable its extent. Fantasy-grasps of macrocosm and microcosm haunted his understanding. All this great clockwork, all this explosion and decay, these cycles and epicycles of infinitude distended his capillaries with shivers of delight at how vast a table

had been prepared before him. For a while he thought he understood the infinitely tiny complexities that hurtled round about themselves to form each millimicrocubit of immensity.

And Susiem did much to sustain this feeling for him. She groaned and whined, thumping and jolting within herself all around him; his couch hummed to her trembling. Each start of ignition, each fit of clicking busyness seemed to reflect another spasm of gobbling at the miles between where he was and the nebulae on which his eyesight rested.

But a couple of days went by and it occurred to him that the nebulae weren't getting effectively closer. He had a clear intellectual understanding of how many miles per day were being clocked on Susiem's instruments. He got the idea that he ought to calculate how many days of whining, banging, and groaning from this tireless mechanism he'd have to endure before he got to the nearest nebula. It came to him that there was just so much of that a man could put up with.

Susiem could put up with it forever of course. Only somebody like Susiem was liable to want, to.

"How's the doctor coming along with Ahmuls?" he asked her, thinking a good way to put it was that he was lonely among a myriad of stars.

"I'll check . . . He's reporting good progress. Considering healing had been accomplished and the patient is resting. His manner is subdued."

"Yeah, well, He's had a lot happen to him."

He had Susiem close the ablation shutters on the piloting windows again. And for a while he had her run tapes of Earth. He found that it was just as he remembered it — swarming with Man and his works, beautiful beyond belief, busy in its beauty, echoing with flashes of light and sound, a-shake with motion, singing of power to the morning and the evening wind.

He created little moments of naivete for himself. He looked at the rivers tumbling down out of the mountains and rowelling across the plains while saying to himself I never knew there was that much water in the world; how green everything is, how full! He looked at the cities where the rivers forked, at the shipping complexes in the deltas where rivers and Ocean mingled, and he cried out to himself *Thalassa! Thalassa!* He compared the flight of supersonic aircraft with flappings of Amsirs and he pretended to see a portable rocket launcher in terms of a demigod's throwing stick. He craned his neck at the cloudraking spires of the mighty cities. And he made the back of his mind wail: "Alas, Thorn!"

Ah, horse apples, he said after very little of that, being a man with a Master's, and had Susiem turn it off.

What to do? Jackson had another meal — this time it was delicious, because he knew how to order. There was even wine. Wine was considerably better than beer. But it left him moody.

He had Susiem play him some music. He read from her library,

sticking mainly to entertainment; westerns, mostly, at first. Susiem's library had a first chapter precis index; by using it lackadassically and carelessly, he tripped over the Big Little Book version of *John Carter of Mars* and from there his taste spiralled outward. He had gotten as far as G-8's struggle against the Kaiser's land-crawling aircraft carrier when Susiem passed him the word the Ahmuls was ready to be talked to.

“You feeling all right?”

“He feels fine,” the doctor said. “All his structural damage is repaired and healed. It was a massive job, but what with all the things I know how to do — and three day's sleep — he's fine.”

Ahmuls was sitting propped half-way up in a Sick Bay bunk, leaning back into a corner. There were shadows across his face. But he had his hands up framing his cheeks, and you could see lights glinting on his open eyes.

“How do you feel about all that?” Jackson said.

“Feel rotten,” Ahmuls mumbled. “That doctor machine says we're going someplace. Where to?”

“Yeah, well. That's what I'm here to explain. You all done trying to kill me?”

“Can't kill you, you son of a bitch.”

“Aw, come on, Ahmuls. I'm glad you're all done trying to kill me, but I wish you wouldn't call me names. Look, it's not like it was, all our lives. It's all different.”

“I'm no different.”

“Well, I am!”

“You say.”

“Well, will you listen?”

“Gotta listen. You can kill me.”

Jackson sighed and gestured toward a chair-cubby. The chair came promptly out of the wall. He sat down on it with the feeling that he might be here a long time. “All right. So listen. Where we were before was a place called Mars.”

“Amsirs,” Ahmuls repeated studiously.

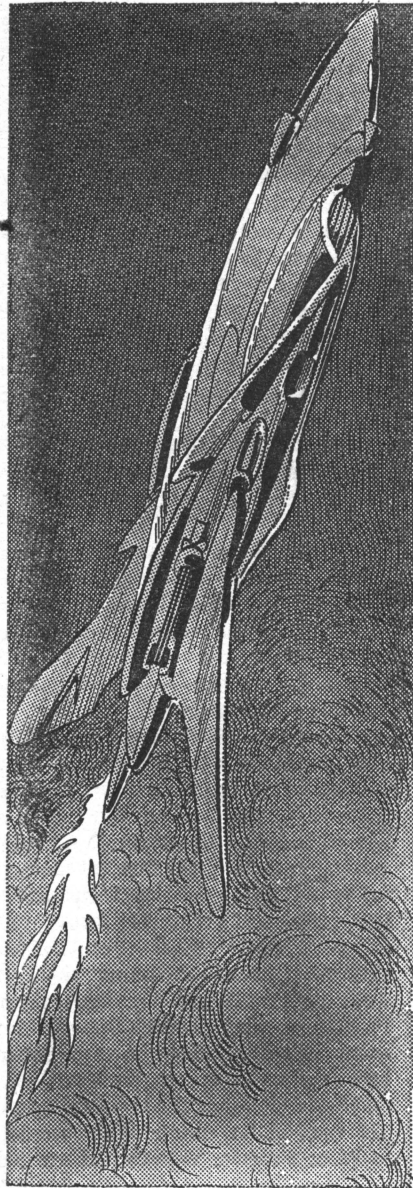
“Okay, now there were these two places where people lived. My place and yours.”

“One place, where Amsirs lived. You're not people. Maybe I'm not people. But I'm not as soft as you are.”

“There were these two places where people lived. Amsirs and humans. But they came from the same place. The reason Amsirs looked different from people is because somebody wanted to see if people could be changed.”

“Humans look different from Amsirs. Amsirs are people.”

And so on. Jackson spent the better part of the rest of the trip trying to explain genetics to Ahmuls. But Ahmuls had the idea he already knew as much as anybody could teach him. He sat on his bunk most of the time, eating little brick-shaped packets of lichen as they were issued to him by Susiem according to the doctor's menu, and every so often either he or Jackson had to stop to go to the Head. But he listened because Jackson could kill him if he didn't. This seemed to be an attitude Ahmuls had learned



long before he had Jackson for a tutor.

Finally, Susiem told Jackson they were only hours away from docking at Columbus, Ohio, and that he had better start getting presentable.

"All right," Jackson said. "Ahmuls, you hear that? Now pretty soon you're going to get a chance to really see something. You're going to see more people and more machinery than either you or me ever had any idea of. You're going to see the place we all come from. Your folks, my folks, the Amsirs' folks. We all come from the same place. You're going to get to see people living in houses stacked up two hundred houses tall. You're going to get to see places that make the whole place the Amsirs live in look no bigger than the way one Amsir house looks compared to the whole bunch of them. You're going to see things zipping across the sky three, five hundred times quicker'n a Amsir can fly falling straight down."

Ahmuls said: "How many dozen is that?"

"Oh, dear God. All right. *Don't* learn. I'm trying to tell you you're going to see things that you won't know how to act about. You're going to have more chances to be happy than you've ever thought of." Well, it seemed reasonable. Wide as the world was, and as complex as he he knew it could be, there had to be something in it for the poor freak.

For the poor, dangerous freak. "And there's going to be lots of chances for you to be stupid, and

for you to get hurt. So I'm telling you one last time — you don't want to learn, all right, you don't have to learn. But, by God, at least know you're stupid. Don't go pushing into things. Watch and wait. Walk soft. Maybe after a while you'll realize I'm giving you the straight goods. Any time you're ready, you just tell me and I'll do my best to tell you the straight of it again."

"I'm straight now," Ahmuls said, twiddling the flesh that grew on his arms where his wings should have been.

Just before they hit atmosphere, Jackson came down to Sick Bay to be with Ahmuls, knowing how the noise and the changes of acceleration would upset him. Jackson was wearing his captain's pale blue coverall with the Associated Universities shoulder patch.

"What you got on you?" Ahmuls asked.

"This is clothes," Jackson said. "I had Susiem make some for you, too. Here." He passed over the specially cut coveralls. "You got to put these on too. It's like a blanket. It keeps the cold and the sun off you."

"I ain't never seen you wear clothes before."

"Well, I didn't. But I know better now."

"I don't know any better."

"Look, you want them all to think you're a freak?"

"What, those soft people you said all look like you?"

"Come on, Ahmuls, put the clothes on."

"You going to kill me if I don't

put the clothes on? I ain't cold and there ain't no sun on me. Don't they know enough to go into these houses when they have to?" He dropped the coveralls on the floor.

Jackson shook his head. "All right, Ahmuls. All right." He stretched out on another bunk. His skin was already chafed in a couple of places; it was having a hard time getting used to the whole idea of being wrapped up all around the legs and crotch. But he was very badly embarrassed at the thought of stepping out in front of a spaceport full of people with a naked freak at his side. It was, when he stopped to think of it, the first time in his life that he'd ever been embarrassed at first hand.

It was the damnedest feeling. It occupied considerable of his attention while the ship was coming down in her final approach. Ahmuls whimpered and lurched around on the bunk all through the process. What's going to become of him? Jackson thought.

But Earth was pastorally green, its hillocks crowned by elms, its infrequent, low buildings starkly white.

"This is the site of the Associated Universities docking facilities," Susiem said as Jackson stared out through the open airlock hatch like a kid who has just watched a dart hit a target broadside on and bounce off. "There have been social changes on Earth since my last communication from the project. I have just been assured you will be brought up to date on these changes by another source. You and your companion are instructed to debark from this

vessel immediately, since it is no longer classified habitable. Attention, all hands! Captain going ashore!"

"Good-by fellows," the doctor said as Jackson and Ahmuls slipped down the ladder. "Don't worry, Ahmuls — your menu's on file with Central. They tell me all you have to do when you get hungry is say so out loud!"

"Always did," Ahmuls said.

Jackson looked at Susiem's height. She was beginning to ring. He noticed a swarm of bright, dancing insects? — whirling around the very tip of her prow. They were bulleting in from over the top of the nearest hillock, in a stream that thickened rapidly, divided to pass around the trunks and through the branches of the elms and clustered more and more passionately around the tip.

The ringing sound increased in volume, and he saw that Susiem was blunted. Her prow was gone. As he watched, the tightly spiralling insects ate another shaving of metal from her plates, and then came round again, cutting off a little bit more with each pass, passing very quickly. It was like a Looneytoon of termites destroying Elmer Fudd's house.

Some of the insects broke away from Susiem, and darted down toward the ground. One nearby seemed to be performing a typical action; it

had a little chunk of astronautics-grade steel in its mouth, and it was spinning like an augur. It bored down, Jackson judged by its speed, two or three feet into the ground, then backed out empty-jowed, and immediately streaked back to snip off more.

Larger bugs came down out of the sky, burrowing into the exposed 'tween-deck spaces, and the component arrays behind the striped-out plating. They buzzed away again, trailing some few components in their grappling appendages, casting off most of the others, which fell in a swath beyond the diminishing Susiem with sharp thuds on the thick, clipper green grass and delicate wildflowers. Ground-moving insects and other metal creatures of that kind were waiting to pick them over, chop them up into chunks, plant some and gulp down others as if they had digestions.

"Hey!" Jackson yelled, trying to get through to Susiem before there was no one left on Earth to tell him what was happening. But it was way too late for that. She and the doctor and the food-serving robot and the maintenance robot and everything about her — except for Jackson's coveralls — were dead and useless. Well, no, not useless. A lot of valuable minerals had just been put back into Earth's soil.

Ahmuls was looking around. "I see some people coming," he said. "They ain't got no clothes on."

TO BE CONCLUDED

Latter-Day Daniel

by BETSY CURTIS

*Letting a lion eat your arm off
isn't the easiest way to make a
living — but it beats starvation!*

Beale did not just stand there and watch the lion chew off his left arm. He helped!

Occasionally he yelled loud enough to be heard over the growling snarls of the busy beast. His right arm clutched one of the iron bars of the cage, and his right foot was hooked around another so that he could pull one way while Nero pulled the other. Nero wasn't working very hard at it. Although his teeth were firmly sunk into Beale's forearm, he hadn't taken the trouble to gnaw the joint, and the ligaments were holding. Beale felt as if he were about to be jerked into pieces, and he didn't dare hook his left foot on the bars too, for fear Nero would rear up and claw at the shoulder and he,

Beale, would have nothing to kick him back with.

Beale leaned toward the yanking lion, hoping that the beast would let go and take hold around the elbow somewhere and grind those tendons loose. Somebody in the crowd let out a snicker. "Fake!" he heard the damning yell. "Robot!" somebody else yelled, and a bag of peanut shucks hit the back of his bare torso. Beale would have liked to yell back, "The Hell I am," as the cold blasts of March wind brought out the bumps along his spine. But the orders read, "no back talk with the zoo patrons." And this was a good enough job as jobs went.

He had a momentary flash of the newspaper ad. "One-armed man

needed for easy job involving public appearances.”

Nero loosened his grip and started working toward the elbow. Beale held his leaning position, working his arm down while trying to act as if he were trying to get it out of those slavering jaws by clever maneuvering. Just then Nero hit the artery, and blood gushed out over his face and onto the scrubbed stone floor of the cage.

“Ooooooh!” came from the throats of the crowd. That was always a sure hit. Beale tightened the muscles in his neck and shoulders and pulled. He hoped his audience would be impressed by his heroic stature and fortitude. And that they still hadn’t noticed how much stronger, longer, and meatier the left arm was than the right.

Nero opened the gooey great jaws for a second and then snap! crunch! — they closed on the elbow. Good. The forearm came loose with only a few shreds of tendon left holding it to the upper arm. Beale jerked and broke them and leaned back, panting and pretending to sob against the icy bars while Nero sank to the floor to worry the severed member, growling and snorting.

The crowd was momentarily silent.

Beale took the opportunity to sweep it with a single agonized glance. After all, he couldn’t just bow and walk out now. He still had to pretend to drag himself painfully through the low opening of Nero’s den. The show must go on — he’d read that somewhere.

Yes, there on the outskirts of the crowd was the telltale fluorescent green uniform of an officer of the Animal Protective League. The boss was right. You could never tell when they’d be there, but it was always better to be on the right side of the law. And in the zoo business the A.P.L. was the law. Or practically.

Just at that moment, half a sandwich flew through the bars and onto the gory floor of the cage. Beale leaned over it deliberately, picked it up and gestured with the stump of his left arm at the sign on the front of the cage which he knew read “Nero, the Only African Lion in Captivity in This Country. DO NOT FEED THE ANIMALS.”

The crowd rocked with laughter. Shouts of “what about you?” and “You did!” were clearly audible. Beale bowed. A touch of comedy was always good.

Then he dropped the sandwich into the trench on the outside of the bars and, clutching the still dripping left stump, went around the feeding lion and crawled into the low, dark den opening. A slow sigh of regret that it was all over arose from the mob in front of the cage; and Beale could hear them shuffling their feet before they wandered away to other exhibits.

Across the dark den he entered the door of his dressing room, where he stripped off the remaining section of synthiflesh above the elbow, tugging gently at the adhesive synthiskin where it was semigrafted to his own. Dropping the arm remnants into the incinerator slot, he

got out of his shorts and metal-toed shoes, showered very hot and soapy, rinsed and then dried in the blast of hot air from a floor fan.

He put on his neat, dark gray shirt, his dark blue street shorts and stormjac, slipped into the knee boots of softly polished gray leatherene, ran a comb through his crisp light hair; and, except for the left arm of the stormjac which he tucked into the side pocket, he looked just like any citizen getting a late start for a respectable desk job. Bob Beale, insurance executive . . . Bob Beale, bank teller.

Opening the outside door of his dressing room, he looked warily up and down the alley between the backs of the rows of animal cages. Zoo goers might not thrill to his quick change from victim to prosperous and comfortable citizen.

"Mister . . . uh . . ." Her green uniform fluoresced gaily in the sliver of sunlight which hit the pavement in front of his door.

"Oh," he said shortly, "Miss A.P.L. herself."

"That's right," she admitted. "I'd like to talk to you, Mr. . . . Mr. . . ."

"Beale." No words to spare for the likes of her — though on closer look it wasn't a bad likes.

"Mr. Beale. About the lion. You are the lion man aren't you? Can I come in?" she asked, her little black curls bobbing beneath the flat, shining green cap.

"There's nothing to talk about. This show is just the way you people ordered it. We're observing every regulation in the book. What do you want me to do . . . brush Nero's

teeth before and after?" His tone was sour.

"No, it's not that," she said earnestly, as if it were quite possible that she could order him to brush those monstrous dark yellow fangs.

"Well," he said slowly, "I guess I have time for a cup of coffee before I go to the lab to get my next arm put on. It takes a day to set, you know." He stepped down to the pavement from the doorway. "We couldn't talk in there . . . nothing there but the shower and my dirty clothes. We can get coffee at Alec's, and you can bend my ear, I suppose."

She smiled up at him. "Is it private? Does Alec's have booths or something? This is important, and we mustn't let anybody hear us. That's why I suggested your room."

"Yes, there are booths at Alec's." He looked at her curiously. "But I can't imagine anything about Nero that the world couldn't hear. He's pretty noisy himself, you know." They strolled down the alley, and from a break between the backs of the cages the lion's slapping and masticating could be plainly heard.

"It's a plot," she said earnestly in a low voice, "a plot to kidnap Nero."

"Well, I'll be a rhino's Aunt Milly! I suppose some other poor devil is being matricized for fake arms for the critter to gnaw off."

"Ssssh! We simply mustn't discuss it here," she warned him and laid her hand on his good arm, then looked down at it. "Doesn't it hurt, sometimes, when Nero takes as long

as he did today and shakes you all around like that?"

"Sure, but it makes a good show, though, and who are you to care if it hurts a mere man? I'm no animal to be treated with tender care."

"I just wondered. Was any of that blood yours?" She shuddered in the cold wind which swept around the end of the row of cages as they prepared to enter the main concourse.

"No. There's reservoir of the stuff (human, of course, from a blood bank) just below the shoulder. And there aren't any nerves in the arm, you know, just some synthitendons so I can make it move. Pretty realistic, though, isn't it?" he asked proudly.

"I think," she said decidedly, "that it's entirely too realistic. Its effect on the audience is utterly brutalizing. If there were one thing I could do about it, I'd have it stopped entirely."

"Come, now. You must be in the wrong job if you're more concerned about people than animals. Besides, you don't understand," they were crossing the concourse toward the neons of Alec's, "people need that kind of thing, really need it. You folks have done away with horse-racing, bullfighting, foxhunting and almost all other kinds of hunting, game fishing; and now you'd like to make vegetarians of the world. It's against the law now to display any kind of dead red meat, and poor Nero would have to eat only his pan of pulverized dog food if I didn't turn up with a good juicy arm every couple of days. And the mob would turn to carving one another up just

to get a little excitement. This is good for them."

"I never thought of it just that way," she said, and then primly, "You're quite a preacher."

He colored. "I didn't mean to make a speech; but I wouldn't want to find myself in a lonely place with some of that gang that was watching me today if they didn't have their chance to come to the zoo."

"Yes, and watching you just wets their appetites!"

"It does not either! It satisfies it. Some of them come practically every day I perform. But let's not fight. Here's Alec's. What'll you have?"

"I don't want anything. I just want to tell you what I have to tell and be on my way. I still have four major inspections today, including a dog pound."

"I didn't know there were any dogs left to catch. You have to have more references, financial and moral, than if you were going to adopt a baby just to rent a dog. Two coffees, Alec," he said, passing the counter and leading the way back to the rear of the dark eatery. He stopped at the last booth and let her go by to the back seat.

She slipped into the seat and sat very straight, her hands in her lap.

"Now what's this about a plot on old Nero?" he wanted to know. "Nobody can hear us here . . . all the booths are empty. The seals are getting the crowd along with their daily ration of synthifish."

"It's the MGM zoo in California," she whispered. "They haven't had a lion for ten years, though they did

have a lioness till last October." She leaned closer across the table. "Of course we won't let them import another one; and they've been jealous of Brooklyn and had their eye on Nero ever since. They've hired a gang of thugs to get Nero and bleach him a little and synthesize some new fur over that scar on his flank and truck him out to them. We got wind of it because the gang is posing as A.P.L. officials, and they're going to pretend it's a raid on the zoo for having some illegal predators or something. One of the leaders really was a minor official once, but he was fired for selling kittens several years ago; and we've been keeping a close watch on him. That's how we found out about the plot."

"Well, you don't have to worry, then. There isn't an illegal predator on the place; and the gang would have to be magicians to get an animal transport truck onto the grounds without getting tangled in so much red tape that they'd be sorry they ever had the idea." He syrugged his coffee and stirred vigorously.

"That's just it." She sat back. "We make the red tape, and in our uniforms they could get Nero out before you could say 'dachshund.'"

Beale sighed. "Well, he'd be treated okay even at MGM; and I can't say I'd be sorry to see this job come to an end for a while. I can always go back to selling newspapers." He shrugged his shoulders and took a drink on his coffee mock-resignedly.

"No, no, I don't want . . . we don't want . . . well the local officials think that the Brooklyn Zoo should keep Nero as long as he lives. The

zoo has really done very well in following all our regulations. I mean, if you tell your boss, he can have guards posted or something. You aren't going to let a gang of crooks *have* Nero, are you?" she asked incredulously. "You . . . you coward!"

"Now wait a *minute*, Miss," Beale protested. "You don't mean you want me to take this seriously? Why if another zoo stole Nero, how could they display him without having to account for his being there? The boss would just bring action and have Nero shipped back here by jet in time for the next arm-chew."

"They'd maintain that they bought him legally and that the transaction was cleared with us and that our people brought him to them . . . if you could prove that it was really the same lion. At the same time, they'd institute a big investigation through the real A.P.L. to find out by what criminal negligence you'd allowed your own lion to die or disappear. Not only would it be a nasty mess all round, but who knows what effect it might have on Nero? Psychologically, I mean . . . the trip and having to get used to a new trainer and a different climate and all. It would be simple cruelty, but very hard to prove," she pleaded.

"Well," Beale reconsidered, "I suppose we could have guards, but the boss hates to hire an extra man without pretty good reason. And I don't know a one of the regular staff who isn't so well trained that he'd let anybody in one of those green uniforms walk away with the entire

menagerie if he insisted. At any rate, I'll talk to him about it. I'll have to tell him who told me, though. What did you say your name was?"

"I didn't say . . . but it's Whipple, Delia Whipple. I hope it won't have to go any further than your boss, though, because the Animal Protective League doesn't want its espionage system revealed in detail. And I'm fairly important in it."

"Okay, Delia," Beale grinned. "And if you see anybody looking at you suspiciously, you just get in touch with me, and we'll have a date so their spies will think your being with me is on the up and up."

"Oh, I couldn't!" She looked agast at the suggestion. "Not date an animal man! I'd be fired . . . or something!" The idea seemed to arouse her much more than even the plot to steal Nero had.

"Oh! You'll go just so far to save Nero but no further, huh? Dinner and a show with a smelly animal man is too far?" His voice was rich with scorn. "I might chew off your arm in an unguarded moment?"

"Oh you don't understand," she cried, her face white. "Our organization has no legal recourse in cases of disloyalty, so our security measures must be terribly strict. My mother and two of my uncles work for A.P.L., and if an investigation showed that I consorted with a known animal man, they'd get fired, too, for consorting with me before I even knew you. It's that stringent. I just couldn't."

"Consorting, huh. Interesting word," he sneered.

"You pick a better," she retorted.

"Frankly, I think your whole family would be better off working for some free and open outfit like . . . well . . . a slaughterhouse. What do you get out of it anyway besides a salary? Permission to keep a Pekinese?"

"Oh no," she objected indignantly. "We could never qualify to keep a pet. We all have to work, and there's nobody home daytimes to look after a pet."

"You win." He shook his head and grinned at her incredulously. "I guess I just can't understand. I'll go and get my next arm plastered on so it can get its full forty-seven hours to set; and then I'll go see the boss and tell him what you've told me." He moved to the edge of the seat.

"Mr. Beale . . ." she hesitated.

"Yeah?"

"You'll probably think I'm terribly snooty, but why don't you get a real arm of your own with nerves and all instead of having poor imitations chewed off every two days?"

"Couldn't afford it. I'm saving up," he told her gruffly. He rose and looked down at her and added, "I guess you'd better wait a minute or two so that we aren't seen leaving together. Somebody might think we were consorting."

"Thanks," she said graciously. "You won't regret it."

"Think not?" he asked and headed for the register where he dropped a couple of zoo tokens and glanced out the door at the same time at the crowd shoving past the restaurant on its way to the monkey house where the diapered chimp babies

would be receiving their bottles from the prim, white-clad nurses, behind one-way glass.

Suddenly he was startled to close attention. Four burly men in shining green uniforms were shouldering their way against the tide of the mob — in the direction of the lion house.

"Delia!" Bob Beale's voice was urgent. "Miss Whipple . . . quick!"

She appeared at his side. "What is it?"

"Are those your boys?" He pointed after the vanishing husky backs.

"I can't be sure from the back, but I think so." She raced to the door, and Beale followed close behind.

Once in the midst of the mob, they were carried backward for several feet and completely separated before they could work to one side and out of the thickest of the press.

As soon as Beale got free of the surging throng, he raced for the alley mouth behind the predator's cages, to find the four men in green only a few yards ahead of him, standing truculently before the door beyond Beale's own — the door to the service room for the lion's cage.

Bob caught himself up short and sauntered nonchalantly up to the group. "Looking for someone, gentlemen?"

One of the men turned, a pasty-faced fellow made even more sallow by the reflected green glow on chin and jowls.

"No," he informed Beale curtly.

One of the others raised a fist. "Want me to tell him, eh boss?"

"I'll tell him," the other motioned him back. "We're the vet's men here to remove an animal for inspection for suspected damage. What's it to you?"

Beale turned at a sound and saw a big, fluorescent green truck nosing cautiously up the alley behind him. He turned back to see one of the men opening the lion service door with a key.

"Hey!" he shouted, "You can't go in there!"

"Who says we can't, buster, you?" The man who had raised his fist came forward suddenly and slapped Bob across the face. "None of your back-chat to the A.P.L., or we'll have you reported."

Beale shook his head to clear it. "Excuse me," he said deferentially.

The man stepped back. "That's better," he said.

The pasty-faced man stepped between them. "Excuse Judd, here," he said apologetically. "Judd, you shouldn'ta done that. He's a one-armed man . . . he couldn'ta fought back."

"So much the better for me," Judd laughed.

The truck was almost up to them; and the four men hurried through the lion door to avoid it. Bob opened his shower-room door quickly with his key and, once inside, locked it behind him. Just as it was shutting, he heard a shrill feminine cry from behind the truck, but he had no time to investigate.

He unlocked the inner door leading to Nero's den, slipped through. He could hear the men's voices in the

service room on the other side of a thin partition arguing about who was to go on in and bring Nero out. With sureness born of long experience, Bob crossed the dark den and looked out into the main cage. Nero was still working over the arm bone. Bob crawled through the den mouth and stood up in the cage.

"Here, Nero; here, pussy," he called to the big, sleek beast.

Nero raised his head and looked over at the den mouth, then went back to grinding away at the exposed ulna.

"All right, then," Beale muttered to himself. Looking out between the bars, he was relieved to see that no one was looking into the cage — that in fact there was no one even near the cage. He went forward to the bars and gave the jungle yell which was the signal to which he had trained Nero to respond by charging at him.

Nero got up sluggishly, looked at Beale inquiringly as if to say, "Another meal so soon? Good!" His tail waved from side to side.

"You'll have to catch me, though," Beale said to him, grinning, and walked around the wall of the cage toward the den mouth. Nero walked after him slowly. Bob got down in his hands and knees and crawled into the den. "Come on, Nero," he called back.

As he started to stand up, he collided with a heavy figure, which he realized was human. "What th'?"

"One side, buster!" It was Judd, the man who had hit him outside.

"Okay," Beale said obligingly and stepped to the left.

The man took another step toward the light of the den mouth and then stopped. "Gawd!" he yelled as the lion trotted through, blocking the light completely. He held out his left arm straight to ward off the trotting beast, and Nero obligingly jumped for the arm at the familiar signal.

Beale's eyes had adjusted quickly to the darkness, and he saw Nero's spring. "Down, Nero!" he commanded; but the lion was too well trained, and his jaws closed on the muscle of Judd's arm with a crunch.

Judd's gargling scream echoed hideously in the enclosed den.

Beale kicked out at the lion's hind-paw and at the extended haunch before him. Nero dropped back to the floor with a "graaaow" of pained surprise and turned to look at Beale inquiringly. His tail began to switch again, and he opened his tremendous jaws hopefully.

Beale pulled his left sleeve out of its pocket and waved it with the stump of his upper arm at Nero. Nero took a couple of steps toward him. All this time, Judd had continued to scream, but now the ululations subsided to an agonized whimper. Beale walked backward toward his door at the rear of the den, and Nero followed him at an even pace. Beale could hear the commotion on the other side of the service door. Somebody wanted to look in and see what had happened to Judd, and somebody else would be damned if he'd let anybody open the door and let that damned lion loose on them. Beale opened the door to his shower room, and the lion followed him in

quietly and stood suspiciously in the middle of the small space while Beale locked the door into the den.

Now that he and the lion were safely and cosily locked into the white-tiled cubicle about eight by eight, he drew a long breath and tried to decide what to do next. "Down Nero! Sit, boy," he told the bulky brute, which Nero, after a suspicious sniff of his antiseptic surroundings, obediently did. That was the first step, certainly.

A hurried pounding on the outer door began. "Beale! Bob Beale!" he recognized the voice of Harris, one of the zoo guards. "You all right? Bob? Hey Bob!"

"I'm all right, Tony," Beale called through the door, "but I've got Nero in here with me, and there are four thugs in the service room next door who were trying to get away with him. Send somebody for the boss and a bunch of the boys. You see they don't get away . . . that's their truck in the alley."

He heard Harris shout away from the door and instantly after heard renewed commotion in the next room. "We gotta get outa here!" "He's got the lion in there." "Somebody go in and get Judd!" "You get him, then!" "Not me, I'm getting outa here!"

There was a scrabbling noise from the next room, the rasp of the outer door being opened . . . then the sound of a fight from the alley . . . thuds, grunts, shouts, the sound of the gnashing of the truck's gears and the rumble of its engine . . . then as the noise seemed to

recede up the alley, Judd's voice could be heard howling, "Get me outa here! Help! Help! Get me out!"

Nero's tail curled up at the end and switched from side to side. "Steady, boy," Beale told him and moved to stand beside him and stroked his mane. "I know he sounds delicious, but you've had yours for today."

Footsteps moved in the next room. Bob assumed that the door to the den was being opened, for he heard a woman's voice say, "Where are you? I can't see anything."

"Over here." Judd's voice died away through a whimper.

"There. Put your arm around my neck. Can you stand up?" Her tones came clearly through the door. "Now, up!" He could hear them moving uncertainly toward the door, then through it. "UNCLE JUDD!" he heard her shout. "Uncle Judd! What are you doing here?"

A sobbing whimper was the only reply.

"Well, let me look at you." A pause. "That arm's pretty bad, but the rest of you doesn't seem to be touched. I'll help you to a doctor."

A grumble.

"What?"

"Gotta get out of here before they catch me."

"You've got to get to a doctor at once," she objected.

"Lemme go. I'll get to a doctor. Gimme your coat. I'll put it over my arm, and nobody will notice it." Judd seemed to be regaining competency but fast.

"No, Uncle Judd . . . hey . . . ouch!"

"Gimme that coat, I said!"

"Oh, all right." Another pause.
"Here."

The door slammed. Then Beale heard a shout. "Got him. That makes all four!" Beale could hear tramping of several sets of feet up the alley.

The door opened and shut again. Then there was knocking on his own door once more. "Mr. Beale?"

"What is it?"

"Are you really in there with the lion?"

"Sure."

"What are you going to do now?"

"Are they all gone outside?"

"Yes."

"Well, sweetheart, you go back in and lock the door from the service room to the den, and I'll put Nero back in the cage."

"All right." He could hear her re-enter and do as he'd told her. Then he took Nero by the mane and turned his head around toward the door to the den.

"Up, Nero." The lion stood up and turned obediently as Beale forced his head around. Beale led him the two steps to the door, unlocked it, stood aside, gave Nero a mild kick in the rump. "In there, boy." And in the lion went, to be locked securely back in his own safe quarters.

Beale relaxed, and his hand went, routinely, abstractedly, to the shower button; and he caught himself just in time to avoid a thorough soaking.

"Mr. Beale . . ." She was outside again.

He went to the outer door and

opened it to find her looking up at him.

"Hi!" he greeted her. "A good day's work. Thanks for the tip. Now you better scoot along before they catch you, too." He gestured down the alley with the left arm stump and the coat sleeve swung free.

As he stuffed the sleeve awkwardly into the pocket, she said, "Catch me?"

"Talking . . . consorting . . . with me."

"Oh, that." She laughed relievedly. "I can consort with anybody now. That "thug" was my mother's brother, Judd. I've been consorting with my mother for years, you know, so I'm a permanent security risk. The Animal Protective League is done with me as soon as they find out. I'm unemployed as of this minute." She laughed even more merrily; and Bob Beale was surprised to find how infectious freedom seemed to make her laughter. He grinned.

"When I get my other arm on, honey," he told her, "we can start consorting without wasting a minute. I wouldn't want you to feel too unemployed."

It was a mere two days later; and the lion was tugging him toward the front of the cage, teeth firmly sunk into the elbow joint. Beale's eyes could search the crowd for the crisp black ringlets under the peaked white cap of a popcorn vendor. She was yelling with them for all she was worth.

So Beale did not just stand there and watch the lion chew off his left arm. He helped. **END**

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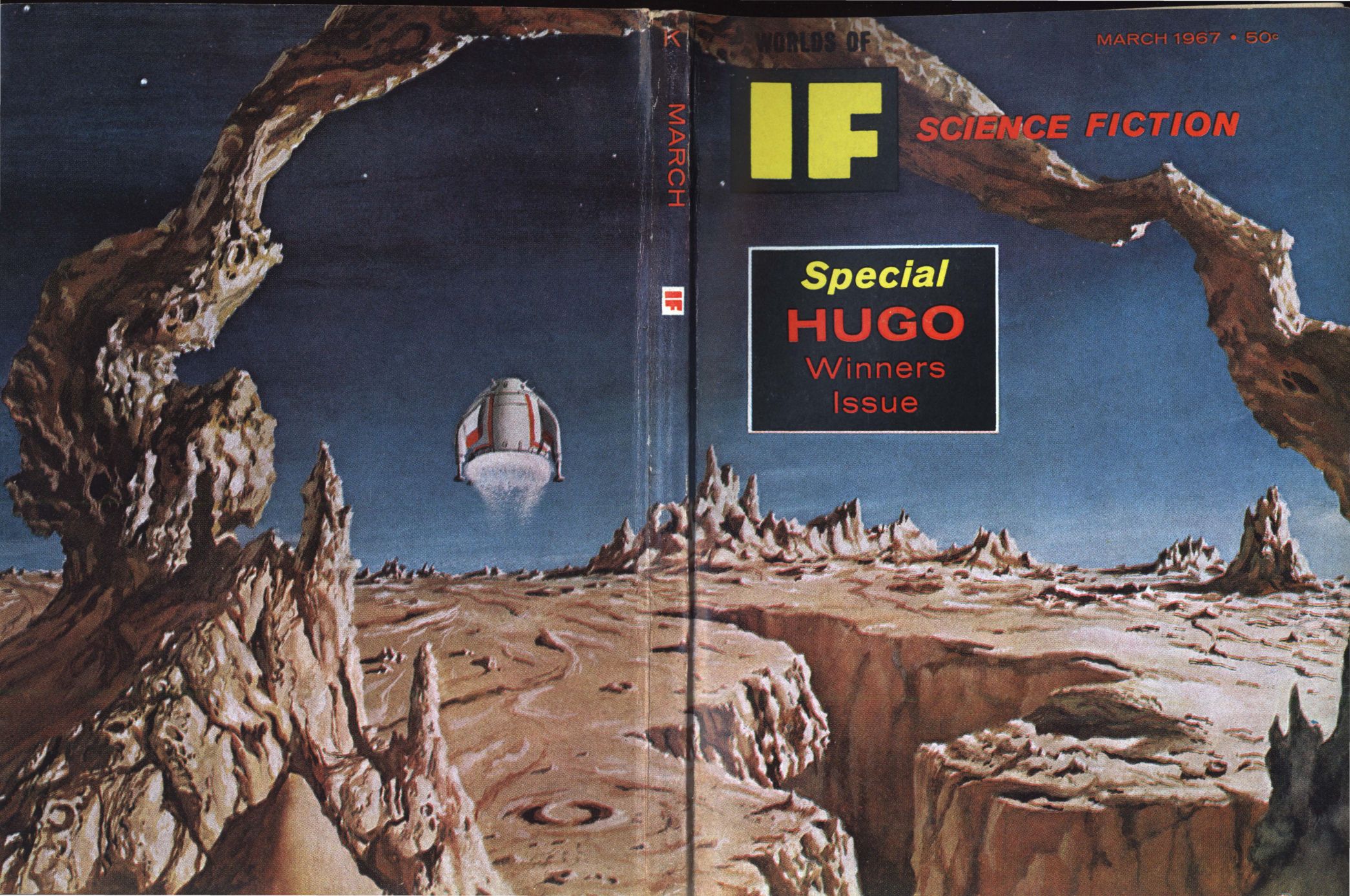
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