

VORTEX

THE SCIENCE FICTION FANTASY

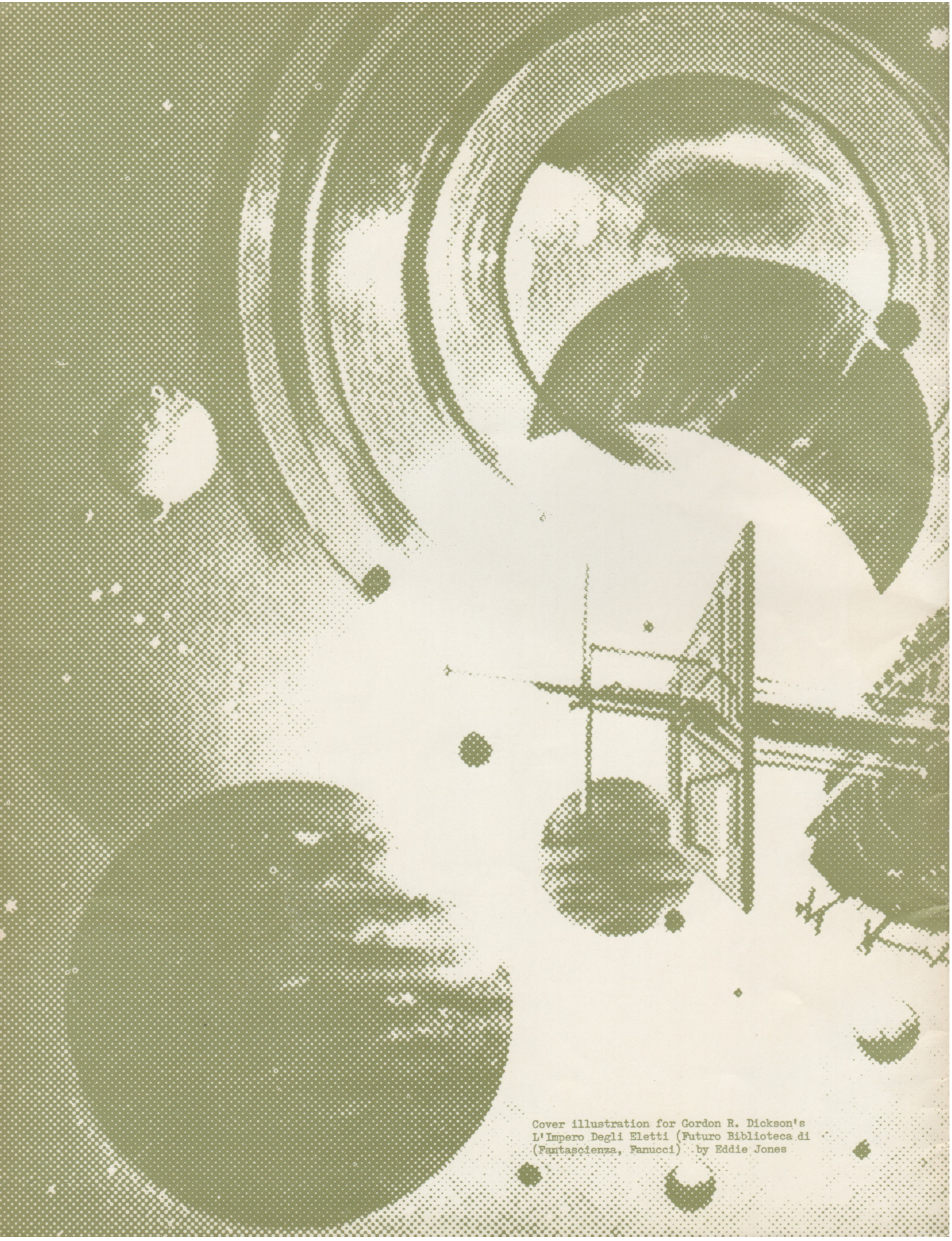
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Colin Kapp's "THE CHAOS WEAPON"

and stories by
Ambient & Greenhough

by EDDIE JONES



Cover illustration for Gordon R. Dickson's
L'Impero Degli Eletti (Futuro Biblioteca di
(Fantascienza, Fanucci) by Eddie Jones

EDITORIAL

Recently a colleague remarked upon the lack of 'real science fiction' included in VORTEX. This is not a consequence of personal editorial policy, but apparently a universal deficiency that has been worsening for some years. The hard SF that is available on the bookshelves consists substantially of old titles by familiar authors that have been republished, including SF classics — many of these having been written as long ago as thirty years. The reader's subconscious thought might be that modern tastes for science fiction have become decadent. For how is it possible that this old material should be relevant today, when the themes were invented to relate specifically to the very different circumstances of the last and even earlier decades?

Whereas Romantic Literature (by writers such as Emily Bronte, Jane Austen, Thomas Hardy, even Shakespeare, Spenser and Malory) is concerned with the eternal and ageless attitudes and problems of humanity, science fiction is written for the immediate present, since it often deals with current scientific trends and developments. At the time of remarkable scientific advancement with the hydrogen bomb, the safe atomic fission reactor and development in the field of cybernetics, science fiction mirrored the modern facts and their accompanying public apprehension, with stories of nuclear holocaust and robots rising to dominate Man. The 'scientific report' approach to topics that are relevant today is no longer possible, for the reason that recent scientific development is more subtle. To employ this in fiction today would result in stories by scientists for scientists, since general knowledge of the average reader would not extend to the intricacies of modern science. Simple, easily-defined subjects and settings, such as spaceships, moonbases, "the Research Centre", are old hat, but there is no equivalent that would be relevant in the same way today.

Another symptom of the decline of hard SF is the emergence of the appellation **Science Fantasy**, indicating that publishers feel the need to define this change. The scientific aspects of this fiction assume a more fanciful nature or merely provide a backdrop for the fantasy. Science can no longer be the central theme. Sensationalism and the faint sexy connotations that early SF acquired (branding it as adolescent fiction for adolescents) has given way to a more developed and diversified approach that appeals to a more mature audience.

Those who have read André Gide and Virginia Woolf (I am thinking here in particular of **Fruits Of The Earth** and **To The Lighthouse**) and similar kinds of literature will not find so-called 'speculative' and 'experimental' fiction so revolutionary. (Not revolutionary at all, really.) With increasing competition for work to be accepted for publication, only the very best literature becomes commercially available. And since any fiction that is 'unconventional', 'odd' or otherwise 'unclassified' is inevitably dismissed by those who do not know what to make of it as 'science fiction', it follows that the Genre must embrace the cream of modern literature and the ultimate in present day thinking.

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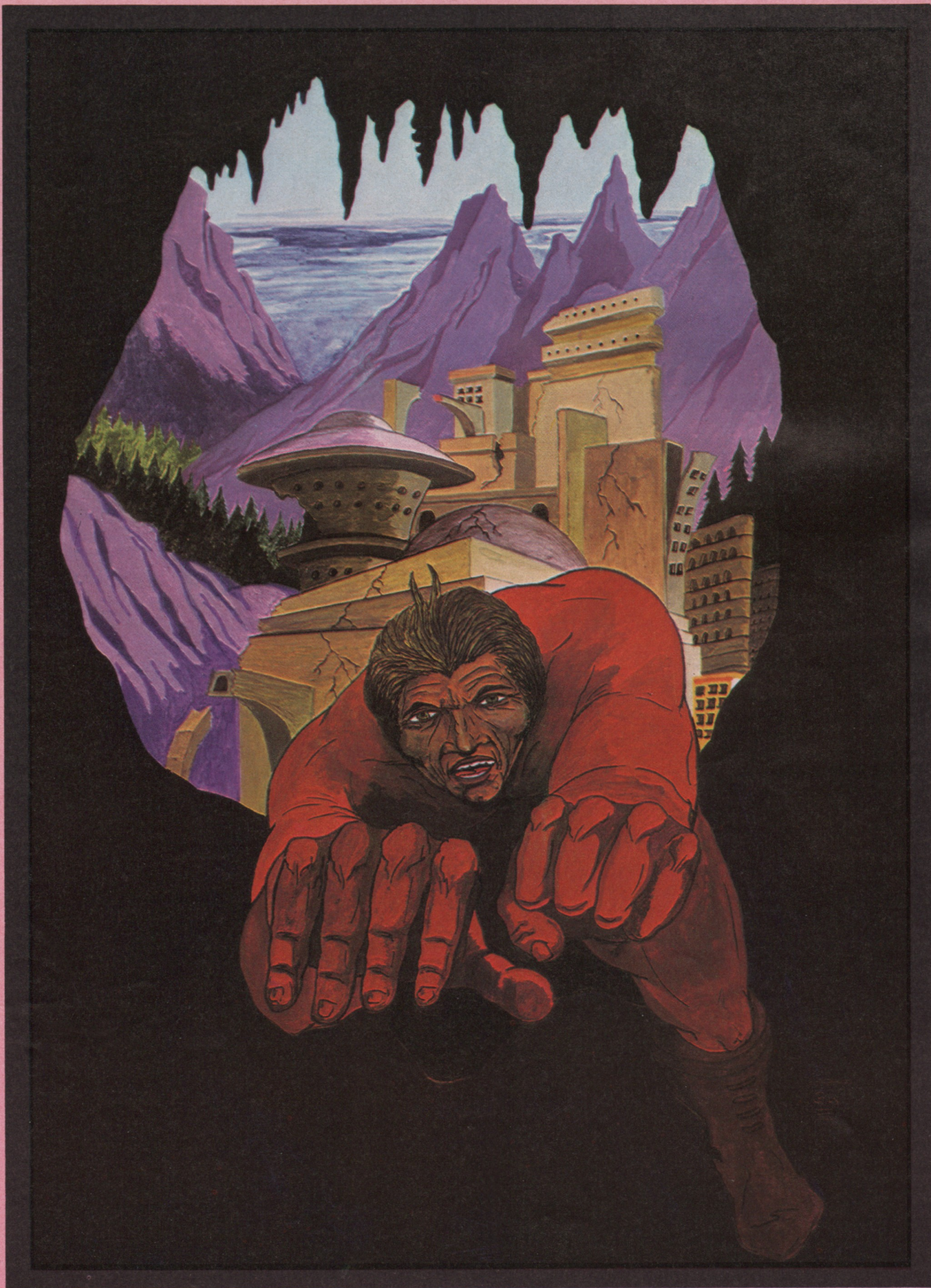
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COLIN KAPP

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part one

1

Under skies the hue of ancient lead, the threat of disaster brooded over the planet of Monai. Half a year of continuous snowfall had altered the shape of the mountains above the capital city of Edel, and millions upon millions of tonnes of precarious mass awaited the imperceptible signal to join in catastrophic avalanche. Crouching beneath its protective mountain outcrop, the frozen city viewed the altered heights with faint amazement but without undue alarm; the long granite backbone was a time-honoured guardian who divided the great slips and diverted them with relatively little harm.

A small snow-cat was ploughing its way towards Edel from the east, following the line of the frozen and snow-locked Spring river. At the controls, Asbeel had eyes for nothing but the immediate route ahead. He and his companion had driven far, the cat's controls were heavy and tiresome, and the cabin was hot to the point of near suffocation. His powerful frame rested unhappily in the inadequate bucket seat, and the jolting of the iron control column had substantially bruised the inside of his sinewed thighs.

In the rear of the cat, Jejun looked only at the snows poised breathlessly above Edel. Slightly smaller than Asbeel, Jejun's face was constantly alive with

questing speculation; his dark, intelligent eyes mirroring his appraisal of secret fears, and haunted with strange foreboding. He read in the brooding heights a message his companion had not seen. He kept the thought to himself until the myriad factors in the mental equation hardened into a daunting certainty.

'Asbeel, we're driving into a trap.'

'Are you certain?' The driver did not falter at the controls, but the lethargy induced by heat and boredom dropped from his shoulders like a mantle. Instantly he was the taut animal his training and experience had caused him to become.

'I'm certain. I can see it now. A rime of tension on the trees.'

'I see only hoar frost.'

'The bush-edges have a slight double-diffraction. There's a stress building in the continuum.'

'Your eyes must be more sensitive than mine.'

'Can't you feel the tension rising? Causality's been suspended in this place. A catastrophe which should have taken place has been held to await our coming. If we enter Edel, the trap will spring.'

'The Chaos weapon?' asked Asbeel.

'What else? We're entering a prime focus. We should have guessed they'd try it on us again sooner or later.'

'Well, we've beaten it before. Let's see if we can't do it this time.'

Two kilometres out from, Edel, Asbeel turned the cat away from the course of the frozen river and drove it into a rocky cutting. Here he muted the engine and joined Jejun in the rear of the cabin.

'As I read it, one of us has to go into Edel to make contact with Kasdeya. We're looking at two causal chains — the chain involving Edel which has been placed in hiatus, and a chain of cause and effect which brings one of us to this point of coincidence. One of us can go into Edel with a chance of survival. Theoretically, the other stands no chance at all.'

'The question then becomes,' said Jejun, 'which one of the pair of us has been linked with Edel's coming catastrophe. Exactly what brought us to this point?'

'Kasdeya. He asked us to pick him up. I piloted the ship, but it was your decision which set the timing. Perhaps we're all involved.'

'Never! You can calculate the directions of two causal chains, and manipulate the odds to ensure they intersect at a catastrophe. But the mathematics to handle three or more causal chains is never likely to exist. This has to be designed around just one of us — but we don't have enough information to decide which.'

'Supposing we neither go into Edel?'

'Then Kasdeya's dead for sure. At this moment the Chaos weapon's straining to hold off some great natural disaster.' As he spoke, Jejun's eyes were scanning the profiles of the surrounding rocks, reading how the stress in the continuum was warping the path of the light reflected from the rocks. Farther back and high above, potential avalanches hung poised in a kind of stasis. 'They must be tapping a young star a second to get power for an operation like this. If the coincidence isn't satisfied soon, something has to snap. When it does, all the power will be released in one almighty backlash. It'll shatter this territory from end to end.'

'What do you suggest?'

'I'll tell you. Drop me off here with a ballon, and take the cat a few kilometres out into the plain. Look for a spot where there seem to be no natural faults in the terrain. I'll try not to provoke the Chaos reaction until you're there, then I'll go in and try to reach Kasdeya. When the catastrophe breaks, move back fast and rescue the both of us.'

'What if it's you the Chaos weapon's aimed at?'

'Don't worry! It wouldn't be the first time I've cheated Chaos. Providing the entropy equations are satisfied, it isn't particularly selective. If necessary, another's death can substitute for mine.'

* * *

Unknown to the cat's occupants, other

eyes were watching. Across the valley, high on a windswept plateau, the Galactic Deep-space Observatory had become host to unusual visitors. Two spacecraft had made planetfall close to the observatory complex, and these formed the nucleus of an observational network directed not spacewards but onto the heights over Edel and across the cold approaches of the snowpacked plain. They were now well placed for a unique and privileged view of a disaster which threatened Edel. Yet the snows so precariously balanced above the city did not justify the awful foreboding of the computer predictions. Written wide across the Chaos printouts was the suggestion of an energy release many orders of magnitude greater than the avalanche could provide. It was this which had brought the inquisitive ships out from Terra to rest on this gaunt rock shoulder on Monai.

They looked for the unusual, and found nothing. Indeed, the only feature of any interest at all was when a small snow-cat appeared unexpectedly on the terrain scanner. Aboard the lab-ship *Heisenberg*, Space-marshal Cass Hover called for a visual image, and was presented with a telescopic view originating from a scanner set on the plateau's edge. Scowling, Hover read off the identification letters on the cat's dark hull.

'Local?'

Captain Rutter shook his head. 'With that index it'd have to come from somewhere way out — around New Sark, at a guess. And he's sure going to be sorry he made the journey. If that Chaos printout's true, all hell's going to get loose just about the time that cat hits Edel.'

'What's that?' asked a voice from the rear. The speaker was a tall, dark, bearded man whose black cloak eternally hugged his shoulders almost as if the attachment was symbiotic. 'Can you check that timing out for me?'

'Sure!' Rutter detailed two technicians with a movement of his finger. 'What's on your mind, Saraya?'

'I can't abide mysteries. That is all,' said the dark man moodily. 'Not in Chaos work. We've just rechecked the soundings on the snows over Edel and calculated the worst-case energy release. It forms a barely measureable part of the entropy change predicted by the Chaos equation. There *has* to be another factor at work here.'

'It checks out, Captain.' One of the technicians handed Rutter a strip of printout. 'If that cat keeps going on its present course and speed it'll meet the Chaos Omega point precisely in the centre of Edel.'

'Which has to be something more than a coincidence.' The dark man stroked his beard thoughtfully. 'Lock some surveillance equipment onto that cat, and try and find out where it came from and who's in it.'

'If I understand you rightly,' said Hover, 'that cat would have to contain a couple of fusion warheads if it was going to satisfy the entropy equation.'

'I doubt if it's anything that simple,' said Saraya. 'Rutter, how did the Edel authorities react to the prediction of instant extinction?'

'With a polite but disbelieving smile. Their emergency resources are on standby, but they regard the whole exercise as rather academic.'

'Let's hope for their sakes that it's true. But if it is, it'll be the first time one of our Chaos predictions of this magnitude has proved unfounded.'

'I've always thought of Chaos prediction as being on a par with astrology,' said Hover mischievously, puzzling over the focus of his screens.

'That's because it acquired too many practitioners with neither the intelligence nor the finance to use it properly. Even at ChaosCentre it's still not an exact science. But if I had any personal doubts, the existence of that cat heading precisely for Chaos Omega would make me think very carefully.'

'Then I'm sorry to disappoint you, Saraya, but the cat has just pulled off course and is heading into the rocks.'

'Damn!' The dark man bent to the screens to verify the statement, then retired to the rear of the instrument room to consult some notes. Captain Rutter caught Hover's eye and they exchanged a mutual glance of disbelief in the dark man's certainty. Then the disciplines of the Chaos countdown began to demand all their attention.

Soon the only sound to be heard in the lab-ship's instrument room was the muted whisper of the air conditioning system. The interest which had been generated by the cat's arrival drained to quiet concentration on the instrument boards and screens, whilst in the background the Chaos indicator began the slow countdown towards the onset of theoretical catastrophe.

Omega minus ten . . .

Hover was having to adjust the focus of his scanner constantly, which obstinately refused to retain a clear picture. The other technicians were having similar problems.

Omega minus eight . . .

The dark figure in the cloak ruffled through his sheets of notes like a miserly bat counting his assets.

Omega minus six . . .

The laser technician monitoring the snows above Edel wore an expression which indicated no significant change in the area of his observations.

Omega minus four . . .

Captain Rutter's concentration was disturbed by a recurring flicker of vision which he could detect only with the corners of his eyes and only because all move-

ment in the room had virtually ceased. The image troubled him. He could have sworn that *something* flickered over Space-marshal Hover's left shoulder.

Omega minus two . . .

The pantograph on the tracing plotter broke into a frenzied burst of activity, sketching a large eye-shape with increasing definition. The crossed datum lines in the centre of the plot fell precisely at the intersection of the major and minor axes of the eye as the Chaos computers confirmed the imminence of Nemesis: the drawn eye filled towards the middle, the centre of the sightless pupil being complete at exactly . . .

Chaos Omega!

The complete lack of any following reaction was probably as great a psychological shock as would have been the eruption of violent activity. All the observers remained frozen and immobile, their attentions welded to their instruments in case they were missing the obvious in the unchanging indications of the static read-outs. In the meantime the cat re-appeared from behind the rocks and headed back the way it had come.

The dark man, his face painted with disbelief, let his notes drop to the floor as he moved towards the plotting table to examine the errant eye. His examination did nothing to resolve the paradox.

'What do we do now?' asked Rutter after a while. 'The only catastrophe appears to be that we all go home with egg on our chins.'

The remark dropped the level of tension immediately. Most of the technicians relaxed and leaned back in their seats; some smiling with relief at the lack of activity, and some frowning because of it. Only Hover remained crouched over his screen, his fingers striving to maintain its failing acuity.

'Hold it!' The marshal's sudden command brought an almost electrical shock to the assembly. 'The cat dropped somebody off. He's heading into town on foot.'

'Are you sure, Cass?' Saraya was at his side in an instant.

'See for yourself.' Hover moved back to one of the more general screens, which was still giving a fairly clear view of the landscape between the point where the cat had rested and the outskirts of Edel. Here, a couple of black dots against the mainly featureless background showed plainly where a man was thrusting his way through the deep snow, dragging a bundle behind him at the end of a rope.

'Why, in the name of Space, should he bother to walk?' queried Rutter. 'The cat hasn't broken down - it's just taken off back the way it came.'

He looked to Saraya for an answer, then immediately wished he had not. The curious passion on the dark man's face was a daunting thing to see.

'I'll tell you why,' said Saraya. 'Sud-

denly the pieces begin to fit. I think that character down there had some inkling of the Chaos prediction. Somehow he's bucking the odds.'

'Explain that to me in words of one syllable,' said Rutter.

The dark man drew closer to the screen, and there was a strong undercurrent of emotion in his voice. 'Chaos predictions analyse chains of cause and effect by reading the patterns of entropic change which the chains radiate as they unravel. The entropic events can be likened to pearls strung out on a string, with the axes coincident between cause and effect. Given sufficient information, a chain can be read either backwards or forwards in time.'

'I said one syllable words,' said Rutter plaintively.

Saraya ignored him, an immense enthusiasm glowing rare behind his eyes. 'Imagine your string of pearls laid out on a table. Then imagine another string crossing it at right angles, with just one pearl - one entropic event - common to both chains.'

'I get the picture but not the message.' 'Coincidence. Cause begets effect, and effect follows cause. Don't you see where I'm leading?'

'Hardly!'

'At the pearl which is coincident to both, the sequence of cause and effect in each chain must be complete up to that point, else the event marked by the entropy cannot happen. It's a philosophical and actual impossibility for an effect to take place for which the cause is missing, or for a cause to happen without direct association with its effects.'

'If you're trying to make the point I think you're making, I don't wish to hear it,' said Rutter. 'The implications give me a headache in the pit of my stomach.'

'The implications are, my military friend, that the chain of cause and effect which controls the fate of Edel is linked at some point with the chain controlling that fellow out there. Somehow he's already thrown the Chaos prediction adrift by better than eleven minutes. At his pace it'll be nearly an hour adrift by the time he reaches Chaos Omega. With that sort of talent you could buckle the universe.'

'Does that mean Chaos Omega won't now take place?'

'Far from it. The entropy increase which signals this event is part of recorded Chaos. It's already tomorrow's absolute history. Nothing can alter the fact that it must occur.'

'Somebody's already delayed it,' pointed out Rutter reasonably.

'But at what cost? Theoretically, delay can only be achieved by straining the fabric of the whole continuum. I hate to think how much power that might consume. And since we know the continuum is elastic, that precise amount of power is

going to be released when the point of coincidence is finally achieved.'

'Which could explain the power difference between the potential energy available in Edel, and the energy needed to satisfy your Chaos equations,' supplied Hover, who had come up from the rear.

'You know, Cass, I think you reached that point ahead of me. Damn, I should have thought of it before! That sort of power isn't available to that character down there. Somebody or something else with a fantastic control of Chaos technique must be doing the manipulation.'

'I'm still unhappy,' said Rutter, 'about the idea of a disaster hanging around waiting for the arrival of a man.' He turned as a messenger approached, and began to scan the information he was handed. 'The results of our checks on the cat. As I suspected, it was out of New Sark. Chartered from a transit outfit by two men who came in from outspace a few hours earlier. They gave their names as Jejun and Asbeel.'

'Hmmm!' said the dark man. 'Of all times and places!' Lines of deep speculation began to cross his brow. 'What else did you find out?'

'The Civil Guard at New Sark ran the immigration checkouts through the galactic identifi- file for us. It threw up a blank. Their stated planet of origin doesn't exist, nor, officially, do the men. And their ship berthed at New Sark spaceport must have come from so far out in deepspace that they can't even classify the drive.'

'I'll bet they can't!' This latter remark was Saraya's aside to himself. 'Captain Rutter, I want the Civil Guard instructed to attempt to arrest the man in the cat if he returns to New Sark. I say 'attempt' advisedly, because they'll have to be damn clever to succeed. Marshal Hover, you see that fellow down there on the plain? I want him sane and alive and delivered to ChaosCentre on Terra. It doesn't matter what it costs or how it's achieved, but make sure that it happens. You've Galactic Override Authority for the mission.'

'You really think he's that important, Saraya?'

'I know he is. There's nobody more important in our galaxy right now. Or potentially more dangerous. He's one of a kind - and where his kind go, that's where they point the Chaos weapon.'

'The Chaos weapon? What in Creation is that?'

'I wish to hell I knew.'

'I'll go get him,' said Hover. 'You can explain it to me later. Somebody break me out a flier.'

'I'll come with you,' said Rutter.

'No!' The dark man stepped in decisively. 'That character's going to be well into Edel before the marshal can reach him. Whatever Chaos has waiting for Edel is going to break right then. If we read the energy equation right, there won't be

many survivors left. The marshal's had special preparation for survival in such emergencies — you haven't.'

Reluctantly the captain watched as Hover drew on his warm-suit. Against the dark recess of the suit locker Rutter could have sworn that a blurred something flickered above the marshal's shoulder; yet when he came to examine the phenomenon more carefully, no trace of it could be seen. Puzzled, he checked radio contact with the departing Space-marshal, then turned to concentrate on monitoring the progress of the lone figure clearing the plain and now almost at the city's outer limits. Something curious about the atmosphere made the image strangely double-edged.

2

With the screens studiously refocused, the progress of the man trudging through the snow was followed with agonized concern. Speculation about the nature of the netted package he dragged behind him proved singularly fruitless; the utility of such a burden was an open question. Shortly the man and his bundle topped a rise and appeared to make easier progress along more compacted tracks until he entered the outer limits of the city. In the meantime Hover's flier had landed well clear of the houses, and the marshal could be seen making fast progress on foot after his quarry.

If the fellow was aware of the flier's arrival, he gave no sign of it, but concentrated on dragging his load over the smoothest terrain available, and appeared to be watching always the forbidding snow-mass hanging above the scarp. Rutter had switched in some of the telephoto cameras which had been trained on the city itself, and obtained some close-ups of the back of the man for whom destiny appeared to have such strange affinity. The pictures yielded no new information, and all were haloed by the same optical fringe which was gradually narrowing the field of view, giving the figure an apparently radiant outline which in the circumstances was a disconcerting thing to view.

Despite this effect, however, it was obvious that the man had both purpose and objective. Although many times the watchers lost his image as he passed behind some of Edel's buildings, he always came back into view at a point predictable by imagining he was taking the shortest route straight to the city's centre.

'Find me a map of Edel,' said the dark man suddenly. 'We keep speaking of Chaos Omega, but I don't think any of us have looked to see what was actually at epicentre.'

Rutter produced a map and spread it over a console. It showed a city plan typical of many established on planets after the Great Exodus from Terra. The early fathers had attempted a geometrical design radiating from a central focus. Now the centrepiece was ringed by the vast restructured administrative complex for the local government, and the seat of the Council for the Monai Space Confederation. Under the Chaos Omega point, however, Edel's original government buildings had found a second lease of life through conversion into a commercial interspace trading centre.

Then as he turned back to watch the trudging figure, the breath caught sharply in Rutter's throat. In the centre of a broad highway not far from the Chaos Omega epicentre and at a point where he was clearly in view, the man turned suddenly and ran back towards the package on the end of the rope. At one moment he was looking almost directly into the distant cameras, and although the warm-suit hid most of his features there was no mistaking the level of tension on his face.

'This is it!' said Saraya. 'He knows something we don't.' He seized the radio handset. 'Marshal — watch out for yourself. Something's about to break. Our friend looks as though he's had a vision of hell itself.'

'Check! I can just see him. But there's nothing down here which explains . . .'

The man had dropped to his knees and was tearing urgently at his snow-clad bundle. The purpose of this manoeuvre was not apparent, but suddenly something blossomed close to the kneeling figure — like a white, expanding ball. The refringent distortion of the picture became almost complete, and the final phase of the action was lost in a muted blur.

All eyes in the lab-ship went back to the monitors checking the physical parameters which might signal the onset of catastrophe. It was not the monitors but their senses, however, which finally told the numbing truth. With a burst of subterranean thunder, the whole valley shook so violently that even on the great plateau the stabilizers of the lab-ships found difficulty in maintaining the vessels vertical. One of the technicians gave a cry of horrified realization as the nature of the disaster became apparent. With a fantastic heave, the whole valley floor rose and shook itself then settled again to leave a jagged chasm extending east to west approximately along the line previously followed by the Spring river.

With the first recoil of the shock, the interference on the screens had cleared itself. Before their uncomprehending eyes there flowed wave upon wave of subterranean movement which rippled the valley's surface as though the scene was being moved from below by a succession of gigantic underground rollers. The effect

was that of a waterless sea, with dry waves which broke angrily against the foot of Edel scarp, and drowned whole sectors of the city with the fall of its mirthless crests. The part of the city that did not sink into the fractured terrain was hopelessly fragmented by the tides of heaving bedrock. The immortal stability of the land on which man had dared to build was now part of a demon conspiracy apparently designed to reduce everything to one flat, featureless plain of scarcely-compacted dust.

Nor was this all. With open-mouthed dismay and fascination the watchers saw the huge avalanche gaining momentum as the shockwaves provoked it to move down towards Edel. Even the mountains themselves had been torn apart, and large fragments broke free and slipped with the mighty mass to pile high and dangerously on the granite backbone behind the inclined face of the scarp.

Unknown, unnoticed, the bruising upheaval had cracked the foundations of the great granite rock itself. Without warning, the entire face began to lean outwards under the weight, and to fall with a calamitous slowness to crush almost a third of the shattered city. This was followed by the full weight of the avalanche, which, now released from its former constraint, proceeded to bury much of what the scarp had left uncrushed.

'Q.E.D.!' said the dark man after a very long period of silence. His voice was one from which all trace of emotion had been carefully strained. 'Rutter, are you still in touch with Marshal Hover?'

'Amid that lot?' Rutter was incredulous. He looked bitterly across the altered landscape over which hung a low cloud of settling dust.

'Keep trying to make contact until you either get an answer or you can prove he's dead. But primarily concentrate your resources on finding the man Hover as following. Unlikely as it may seem, there's a very strong chance he's still alive. If he's who and what I think he is, he'd have entered that situation very well prepared. And I want him, Captain. Knowing what he knows could be just about the most important imperative for the survival of the human race. Is that understood?'

'No,' said Rutter. 'But that won't interfere with its execution. We'll call for disaster backup, then set one of the lab-ships down on the city itself. If there's anyone left down there in fragments larger than pieces of mince, we'll fetch them back in plastic bags and you can sort the bits out later.'

A technician reported directly to Saraya. 'The cat's coming back.' He pointed to the terrain scanner, which showed quite plainly the vehicle moving back over its original course. 'It must have been waiting just out of range.'

'Which means he too expects to find a

very special survivor,' said the strange, dark man, wrapping his black cloak speculatively closer round his shoulders.

* * *

In the seconds before the maelstrom broke, Hover had come into clear sight of his quarry. The man had been kneeling before his bundle on the ground, tearing away the snow-packed netting which concealed a streamlined pod beneath. The apparatus was not familiar to the marshal, but its purpose rapidly became apparent. As the first subterranean shock pitched the ground as though it was the deck of a storm-tossed ship, the man had opened the pod and evoked something which spread outwards and upwards like the blossoming of a great white flower. As the flower bloomed, the individual stepped into its centre, and the great petals closed around him to form a continuous cocoon which continued to expand until it formed a ball of about five metres diameter.

Then the marshal understood. Although it was of strange design, this was some form of space-disaster capsule. Out in the highway well clear of any buildings, the man was now encapsulated in a womb formed from a series of super-tough concentric balloons. Nothing but a massive crushing force could hurt him, and cradled against all shock, he could have still survived. Furthermore, because of its relative lightness and spherical shape, the sphere was perfectly suited to ride free upon a fragmenting surface where a heavier structure would have been trapped and crushed.

Further consideration of the point was the necessity for the marshal to attempt to secure his own survival. Before he could decide upon a plan, the ground under his feet again reared crazily up beneath him, and the pavement, not designed for such plasticity, shattered and split with a thousand fissures which opened and closed like hungry jaws, each with the capability of swallowing a man. Thrown heavily to the ground, Hover only narrowly missed death when hurtling masonry split off from a nearby building and deluged on to the roadway at his side. Twisting round, he was attempting to assess the degree of his present danger, when a further wave of underground movement proved likely to throw the remainder of the shattered building down on top of him.

'Help me, Talloth! I'm in much danger.' His cry was directed to the insubstantial something which hovered over his shoulder.

'Do you believe in me?'

'Hell of a time you choose to ask questions. Don't I share my existence with you? What do you want - blood?'

The ground reared and bucked beneath him like a crazed animal; the paving

split wide, and before Hover could swing to avoid it he rolled into a shifting, opening pit.

'Talloth...!'

With the passing of the earth-spasm the sides of the pit began to close. Teetering above, on slowly buckling skeletons of steel, the entire line of buildings near him broke into catastrophic collapse; the falling rubble pouring like a cascade of furious water to bury the spot where the marshal was already trapped in his narrowing grave.

'Tal...'

Time was arrested. The whole universe seemed gripped by a mighty hand which forbade motion. Masonry descending from the sky froze into breathless immobility and ceased to tumble. The edges of the jagged pit into which Hover had fallen, were held apart; and alone of all things present, only the marshal still had movement. Then time stepped back in discrete quantum steps; and he had fallen, was falling, would fall, was on ground he knew would break, and finally had moved away from the potential chasm and out of the path of the deluge of falling bricks.

Then Talloth, the brown, leathery, symbiotic god who lived on Hover's shoulder, relaxed his grip on time's insistent progress. For a few furious seconds the rate of everything around them seemed to multiply, with crevices opening and closing like snapping jaws, and whole walls which dropped from the sky as though fired from a cannon. The accelerated heaving of the ground produced shocks which threw the stumbling marshal clean into the air, and he landed on his back and waited doggedly while the universe wound slowly down to normal pace.

As time came back to its accepted rate, Hover sat up to find himself in a landscape altered beyond all recognition. Edel was a heap of pulverized ruins, the massive scarp had all but disappeared, and fully a third of the former territory was in the process of being covered by the detritus of an avalanche of such proportions that any search for survivors in the area would be futile.

Shaking the fragments of his recent experience from his head, Hover attempted to explore his own situation. He was severely bruised, and his right leg was extremely painful when he attempted to stand. He reckoned, however, that no bones had been broken. The equipment packs at his waist and chest had survived intact, but when he examined the sad state of his communications set, flattened as though by hammer blows, he realized how narrowly Talloth had timed his escape.

'Thanks, pal!' he muttered to the quivering insubstantiality on his shoulder. 'But you cut that one remarkably fine.'

'If you have criticisms,' said Talloth, 'I can always arrange to put you back and leave you there.'

'Forget it!' Hover was searching the scene for signs of the white bubble into which his quarry had retreated. Initially finding no sign, he considered that it must have failed and become crushed and buried. Then he noticed a whiter patch on the earth-mixed snow and found the open and deflated 'blossom' abandoned and empty. Nearby, a youth lay dead with what appeared to be a deliberate head-wound. Of his quarry there was no sign at all.

This raised problems. There was virtually no way in which the individual he was seeking could be distinguished from the scattered survivors who occupied the shattered scene. His only hope was to continue towards what he judged to have been the Chaos Omega epicentre in the hope that something would explain what had brought the man to Edel in the first place.

The buildings of the Monai Space Confederation had been built on a vast structural raft. At first sight the buildings themselves appeared relatively undamaged, until one appreciated that not a single wall could now consist of more than broken fragments adhering to a buckled frame. Beyond these, an older building had suffered an almost complete collapse as the outer walls had shattered whilst the strength of the reinforced floors had remained. A fallen sign told him that here had been located an interspace trading station, and it was a leap of intuition which made Hover decide that he now was probably looking for two men instead of one.

He turned back then, trying to follow the route by which he had entered Edel. The way was mainly destroyed, and many detours were necessary where the roads had been obliterated by piles of rubble. Remembering Saraya's injunction about the importance of his mission he had to force himself to harden his heart and ignore the screams of people trapped in the wreckage or the pleas of those trying to attempt a rescue. Sometimes the resolve was painfully difficult to maintain, and anguished reproach frequently followed his departing steps; but the mandate of Override Authority which had been impressed upon him necessarily outranked all other considerations.

Finally he came to the end of the city ruins and stood on the edge of the plain. Even here the scene was nearly unrecognisable. The once supreme flatness of the great waste-land was now ridged and broken as though a giant had raked it with a careless harrow. Here he waited, alert and expectant, examining every shadow of a slowly closing dusk. One of the lab-ships took off from the plateau and passed overhead on a high trajectory which took it well behind him into the centre of Edel. He noted the fact without particular concern. His own gamble was

that the fatal man had come into Edel to collect someone else. Whether or not the attempt had been successful, that man at least would almost certainly attempt to leave again, and probably by the same route he had used to enter. Hover was keeping quiet station with the intention of making that escape impossible.

Soon he knew his intuition had been correct. Although he could see nothing, he could hear the complaint of a snow-cat's engine as it strained over the ridged terrain. It was making for a point well to the left of his present position, and he moved rapidly to make an interception, drawing the safety rings from his weapons pouches as he ran through the closing darkness. His fingers selected a shock pellet, and he slipped it into a projector as soon as he saw the dim outline of the cat heading inwards from the plain.

Crouching low, he fired, and the dim tracer told him his aim had been sufficient. Instantly he turned away to protect his ears, and the compression wave gave him a stinging slap across the shoulders. The softness of the broken ground and the pico-second duration of the pulse made it unlikely that the noise would have been detectable at any great distance. Nonetheless the cat slewed to an untidy halt as its stunned driver relinquished control. Instantly Hover was at the cat's door hatch, making a swift entry and securing the stunned occupant against quick re-entry into the game by sticking a self-adhesive drug-patch anaesthetic inconspicuously behind the sleeper's ear. Then he turned on the headlights to form a visual signal, and leaped again out into the darkness.

Now he traced a great circle to prevent himself entering into the radius of the lights, and finally pressed up against a rough bank waiting to see what his trap would draw. There was not long to wait. Soon a dark figure streaked from cover and ran straight towards the cat. From the mode of his approach it seemed doubtful if he realized anything was amiss with the driver, and he scrambled overtly through the hatch door. Hover managed to project a gas pellet precisely through the opening before it could be closed. He counted twenty slowly to allow for the dispersal of the short-lived knockout gas, then drew out another anaesthetic drug-patch and went to secure his second prisoner.

This was his great mistake. Somebody leaped out from the darkness and with hands incredible and precise dealt the marshal a series of scientific blows which even through his warm-suit crippled his limbs with a numbing paralysis. Conscious, shocked, yet virtually unable to move, the marshal toppled like a log, and was rolled into the beam from the headlamps by an expert foot whilst his attacker peered down to establish his identity.

'A Space-marshal, indeed! Even so, you're way out of your league, I think. Don't try to join the game until you can give it a name and understand the rules. Give that message to Saraya. Tell him Kasdeya sent it.'

After a short delay the cat restarted. Swinging to face its new direction, the tracked vehicle was hastily reversed. Hover was actually glad of the creeping numbness from the blows. He felt virtually nothing of the pain as the tracks crushed both his legs. On his shoulder, Talloth flickered uncertainly, not finding it necessary to intervene because the marshal's hurt was unlikely to be fatal.

3

'What do you see across the valley, Roamer?'

'Two men repairing damage from the storm.'

The Terran Institute for the Study of Chaos Phenomena was more usually known as ChaosCentre. Knowing of the Institute's reputation, Space-marshal Jym Wildheit was full of curiosity as he entered the wide glass portals of the administration block and registered his presence at the desk. Not the least of his interests was why he had been summoned here from half the galaxy away.

'Watch carefully, and describe the detail.'

'The hammer falls on the bright-green shingles, out of phase with the sound. I can roughly work out the distance from the intervals.'

As he entered the lecture suite it was suddenly obvious why the security had been so strict. This was probably the first time all twelve space-marshals had ever been together on one planet. Now in the room were the full dozen down-to-earth elite whose duties were to safeguard the essence of civilization over the vast sprawl of the galactic empires. These were the legendary 'untouchables' of space; whose authority outranked planetary governors and kings; and whose powers were feared by tyrants and space-pirates alike. Considering their influence in the galaxy, it was re-assuring to Wildheit to note his comrades still remained quite ordinary men. In fact Marshal Hover's electric carriage, which had to serve him until his cloned replacement legs had been cultured, underscored the mortal fragility of which they were all only too aware.

'Close your eyes, little one. What see you now?'

'I see small pulses of entropic change.'

Muscles drive the hammer: the nail responds: a little order comes out of chaos: entropy falls: the universe winds back.'

There was one other man in the room, a stranger to Wildheit. Dressed entirely in black, his style of flowing cloak proclaimed him to be from some far outworld. He acknowledged none of those who entered, but sat hunched, with his knuckles supporting his chin, directly under the great portrait of Bron the Warlord, founder of the Federation. His dark eyes were constantly questing, as if searching for answers to which no one was able to supply even the questions.

'Look into time, Roamer. What see you there?'

'Sparks in the brain, bidding the muscles. Mind versus Chaos: entropy lessened.'

Chief-marshal Delfan, alone amongst those in the room to have decorations on his otherwise strictly functional uniform, brought the assembly to swift order.

'I expect you're wondering why we took the undoubted risk of calling all twelve space-marshals off-station and having you report to Terra. The fact that we found it necessary indicates the extreme gravity of the situation. Gentlemen, the truth is that the Galactic Federation is under attack by a weapon so serious and insidious that ten years of its action threatens to destroy all we've built during two thousand years in space.'

A ripple of dissension swept through the audience. Marshal Tun Tse voiced the disagreement.

'I find that difficult to swallow. I've personal knowledge of three space sectors, and my colleagues cover the rest. If any such threat existed, we'd be the first to be aware of it.'

'You are aware of it. It's just that you don't see it for what it is. Take the death of General Caligori near Harmony, for instance.'

'A sunflare sterilized his ship. An act of God.'

'Then God must have changed sides with remarkable alacrity. In the past year alone, one hundred and eighty specific individuals have died as the result of substantial natural disasters.'

'A hundred eighty?' Tun Tse was enraged. 'Galaxy wide, the death toll from substantial disasters must be billions.'

'I'm not disputing that. But I said specific individuals. Specifically, they're the top intellects of our time — the scientists and administrators whose main genius sets the direction for the whole human race. They've a statistical death rate greater than chance by over a thousand times. Gentlemen, our investigations leave no doubt that the best of those who shape

our future are being deliberately culled. Humanity in space is being killed off from the top downwards.'

'By natural disasters?' Tun Tse was trying to make sure of his ground.

'General Caligori was caught by a sun-flare. Nobody ever had a more potent effect on the development of our space-weapons potential. President Bruant was killed by a major meteorite strike on Barbec. Without his administrative genius, the Hundred Worlds threaten to lapse back into mutual warfare. Julius Orain's ship was destroyed in a tachyon storm. His brain took with it some theories of relativity that promised us access to unlimited energy for all eternity. The list is endless. Our entire tenure of space is threatened by this selective pattern of disasters.'

'Look to the sky, Roamer. What see you there?'

'Beyond the cloudrace and the great storm's eye, there run the long, slow tides of entropy, peaked with sharp wavefronts of catastrophe.'

'To me that seems a contradiction in terms. How can you have a selective pattern of random events?' asked Tun Tse, whose bafflement mirrored that of his comrades. 'And what was that you mentioned about a weapon?'

'For that I'm going to hand you over to Saraya, Director of ChaosCentre. The things he'll tell you may seem hard to accept. I ask you to listen carefully and with an open mind, because the shape of the future for humanity could well depend on your understanding.'

The dark man ruffled his cloak as though it contained wings with which he intended to fly.

'Gentlemen, Marshal Delfan has outlined the problem. ChaosCentre, aided by Marshal Hover, has for some time been trying to find the answers. We haven't got very far, but what we have found we don't like. I'm going to start by asking you to make a rather subtle mental inversion: it's not that great disasters happen to important men — but that important men are present when great disasters happen.'

'A subtlety which eludes me entirely,' said Tun Tse.

'It's really quite easy. Every day, all over the galaxy, catastrophes occur. Some people die in them, some escape. And every man has a few incidents in life where he has missed death by a narrow margin. Marshal Wildheit, do you follow me so far?'

'I can't take issue with you on it. I've had many close escapes myself.'

'Then try this. Supposing one of those nearly fatal incidents had happened differently — perhaps a little sooner, or later, a bit to the left or the right, or

quicker or slower.'

'Then there's probably a few tales I shouldn't be around to tell,' said Wildheit.

'Good! We're nearing the crux of the problem. Let me postulate the existence of a device capable of modifying the conditions of a catastrophe with such selectivity that for a given individual his chance of surviving the incident becomes almost nil.'

'There you leave me. I don't see how such a thing can be.'

'Yet all our evidence suggests such a device does exist. Hover and I have seen its effect with our own eyes. For want of a better name, we call it the Chaos Weapon.'

'Let me get this straight,' said Tun Tse. 'Are you saying this device creates catastrophes?'

'No. It merely results in the displacement of an event which would have happened anyway. The event itself can neither be created or nullified, because its signature is already recorded in the patterns of entropy which we call Chaos.'

'I may have it wrong,' said Hover, 'but in Edel, didn't the weapon actually add to the scale of the catastrophe?'

'It did. And for a very good reason. You can't hold up an event containing all those billions of ergs of energy without supplying an equal and opposite amount to hold the balance. And the longer you hold it, the more energy you have to pour in. When your control finally does slip, all that energy is released at once.'

'I'm still not convinced,' said Wildheit. 'But assuming for the sake of argument that what you say is right, who built such a thing, and why is it being used on us?'

'I don't think there's much doubt about why it was built. Since we broke into space, human expansion has grown at an exponential rate, and we're already investigating the possibilities of populating other galaxies. Somebody wants us cut back — and hard. Chopping out our prime intellects must seem a more rewarding alternative than all-out spacewar. In the long run it could also be more effective.'

'But no clues as to who?'

'Would you care to speculate how many alien races there may be in the universe? And how many of these might view our expansion with alarm? I do have a few suspects, Marshal, but not one shred of evidence. That's why this meeting was called. You know the places and frontiers of space better than any other man alive. We need your help, because unless we find and destroy the Chaos weapon, it's going to destroy us.'

Delfan took control of the meeting again.

'The matter has been discussed by the Security Committee of the General Council. Our instructions are that we co-operate with ChaosCentre in establishing the lo-

cation of the weapon and its originators. If we succeed in this, we can call on aid from any of the armed services to secure its annihilation. Cass Hover has been posted to ChaosCentre to handle liaison. Jym Wildheit will take over as the operating agent. The rest of you will be given specific assignments from time to time. The public will not be informed at this stage, but I have to instruct you that we are officially at war. The first thing we have to do is find the enemy.'

The communicator on the conference table shrilled a sudden summons. Saraya took up the handset and listened to it gravely, asking a few crisp questions. Then he dropped the instrument suddenly and rose to his feet urgently.

'Gentlemen, we've already an emergency on our hands. One of our Chaos computers uses a reference baseline centred on this building. That baseline trace has just disappeared off the top of the graph. If our interpretation's correct, we're four minutes away from another catastrophe — right here. I suggest we evacuate the building fast.'

'What are the portents you see in the sky?'

'Vaster than storms, dark forces are buildings: blacker than absolute, redder than fire. Mammoth disaster, death and destruction. Minds meshed in chaos . . . the war has begun!'

* * *

The space-shuttle *Spanier* coasted into earth-orbit and prepared to shed its speed over three complete circuits of the globe. Course calculation was entirely automatic, and on the control deck the captain had little to do other than cast an occasional eye over the instrument registers and sip the green-eyed venus-lime from a null-g bag. Upon cessation of the powered drive, the ship had been in a free-fall condition, and now the gentle action of the retro units began to bring a welcome sensation of low gravity back to the craft and its three hundred space-weary travellers.

On the completion of the first orbit the instrument readings were true to specification, and the computers themselves opened up a communications channel and began to feed data to their destination port at Alaska field. Then something went wrong. One of the triplexed onboard course computers began to disagree with the remaining pair, and a fault was signalled right across the boards. The captain hastily summed up the situation, decided that two computers in tandem could make the landing without his intervention, and switched out the manual controls which had been activated when the first computer had fallen out of accord. He reported the fault on the voice channel to Alaska field and relaxed warily in his har-

ness in case any further trouble showed up.

It did. Halfway through the second orbit the temperature sensors in the titanium hull indicated a reading climbing above the safety limit, and the integrating altimeter protested that their rate of descent was far too high. Cursing, the captain reached to take back control, but in the instant before his fingers contacted the switch, the errant electronics played their last and final joke. A massive burst of the retro units killed the ship's momentum, subjecting the occupants of the shuttle to dangerously high g-forces. The shuttle nosed deeply into the stratosphere, and the airfoils were powerless to restore its flight path in the thin atmosphere. Like a stone the shuttle dropped towards the earth; and the stone became white hot and coalesced into a ball; and the ball became a flaming mass. A strange tension in the continuum shaped its final trajectory so that the fireball hit ChaosCentre like the bursting of a bomb.

From the centre of the parkland where they had gathered, the group watched the missile fall. With a crash like rampant thunder, the building seemed momentarily to expand in all directions, then to collapse inwards upon itself. Very few seconds after the strike there was little left of the ChaosCentre admin building but a pile of rubble overhung by a cloud of dust and smoke. Rising straight into the clear skies above, the vapour trail left by the descending missile stood like the shaft of a spear which had been plunged out of heaven.

'What the hell was that?' asked Delfan, after a long silence.

'Some sort of spacecraft, I think.' Saraya's face was grave. 'We'll get a report on it later. We've lost nearly a third of our Chaos computing capacity there. But I wonder if the information we've gained wasn't worth the exchange.'

'What information?'

'The fact that the incident happened exactly when and where it did. In Chaos work, we frequently start with a resultant and scan back to locate the cause. I suspect our unknown enemy has done a similar exercise — looked at some future event which gave him reason for concern, then tracked the cause back to this point in time.'

'Is that possible?'

'Entirely possible. The entropic shock-points of a cause or an effect expand like bubbles in the ether. But only two related events have exactly co-incident axes. If you start with a cause, you can usually locate its effect, and the converse is also true. In this case it's a reasonable guess that our deliberations today are destined to have a measurable effect upon the future. In fact, so worried do they seem about the resultant that they seem to have produced a panic reaction. In terms of entropy, this is a relatively small dis-

aster.'

'Does it mean we're all now candidates for the Chaos weapon's attention?'

'I think not. It's more certain to be only one of us. Multiple Chaos patterns become too diffuse to follow. Both Hover and I were present at the Edel catastrophe and nothing was directed against us there, so I think we're in the clear. The new factor today is Marshal Wildheit's involvement with ChaosCentre. It's a coincidence that can't be overlooked. Marshal Wildheit, how does it feel to be looking down the wrong end of the Chaos weapon? I wonder what you're going to do to justify such powerful attention, Jym?'

'It's an attention I could afford to do without,' said Wildheit ruefully. 'But in any case, they missed.'

'Certainly they missed. But that was because you had the benefit of advance-scan Chaos information. Unless you want to spend the rest of your life in our computer room, you're unlikely to have sufficient warning the next time they make a try against you. Unless...'

'Unless what?' asked Delfan.

'It's a crazy idea, but it might be worth a try. During the Great Exodus many minority groups on Terra left to establish colony worlds of their own. One of them, a way-out cult, was dedicated to re-establishing human senses they believed had been allowed to atrophy in the human animal.'

'The Sensitive?' asked Tun Tse, who had been following the conversation carefully.

'Exactly! On Mayo they interbred and multiplied, and by a rigid application of their philosophy they've produced some individuals with talents remarkable by anyone's standards. But even the Sensitive had no idea of the extent of the sensory fields they were entering. Talents showed up for things they didn't even know existed. If my information's correct they even have a Chaos seer, who seems to be able to read the patterns of Chaos direct.'

'How feasible is that?' asked Delfan.

'It's certainly not impossible. The human organism is sensitive to heat, light and sound waves. I see no good reason why it shouldn't also be sensitive to entropic waves.'

'Surely the human being has skin, eyes and ears as receptors for heat, light and sound. And there's an evolutionary advantage in using them. I don't see any such justification for the reception of Chaos.'

'No?' asked Saraya, and there was a light of faint amusement in his eyes. 'Did you never get a feeling of foreboding? Did you never get a hunch about the outcome of something? And how about a leap of intuition? I think that everyone can read Chaos to a limited extent, but we never bother to develop the ability. But if this

Chaos seer exists and can be persuaded to work with Wildheit, then we might begin to get some of the answers we're looking for.'

'I really don't see how a seer would help.'

'Imagine the advantages of having real-time Chaos sensing and interpretation combined in something as small and mobile as a man — and working in co-operation with a prime target for the Chaos weapon. Firstly, the enemy wouldn't be able to get at Wildheit without his having advance warning. Secondly, we'd have someone who could stare back up the barrel, so to speak, with a strong probability of being able to locate the source.'

'That sounds like sense,' said Tun Tse. 'But the Sensitive have a reputation for being highly insular, and Mayo's now a forbidden world. It may be difficult to get the co-operation of their seer.'

'Consider their position. Mayo's stuck right out on the fringes of the Milky Way. They've everything to lose if the Federation falls to pieces because, like it or not, it's the Federation ships which keep the aliens at bay. If our defences began to crumble, they'd be nearly the first to go. And alien races don't take prisoners...'

'That sounds convincing to us, but I doubt if it would cut much ice on a Rim world before the alien threat became a reality. Remember, they don't see any of the action for themselves. They don't even *know* that things are waiting for them out there.'

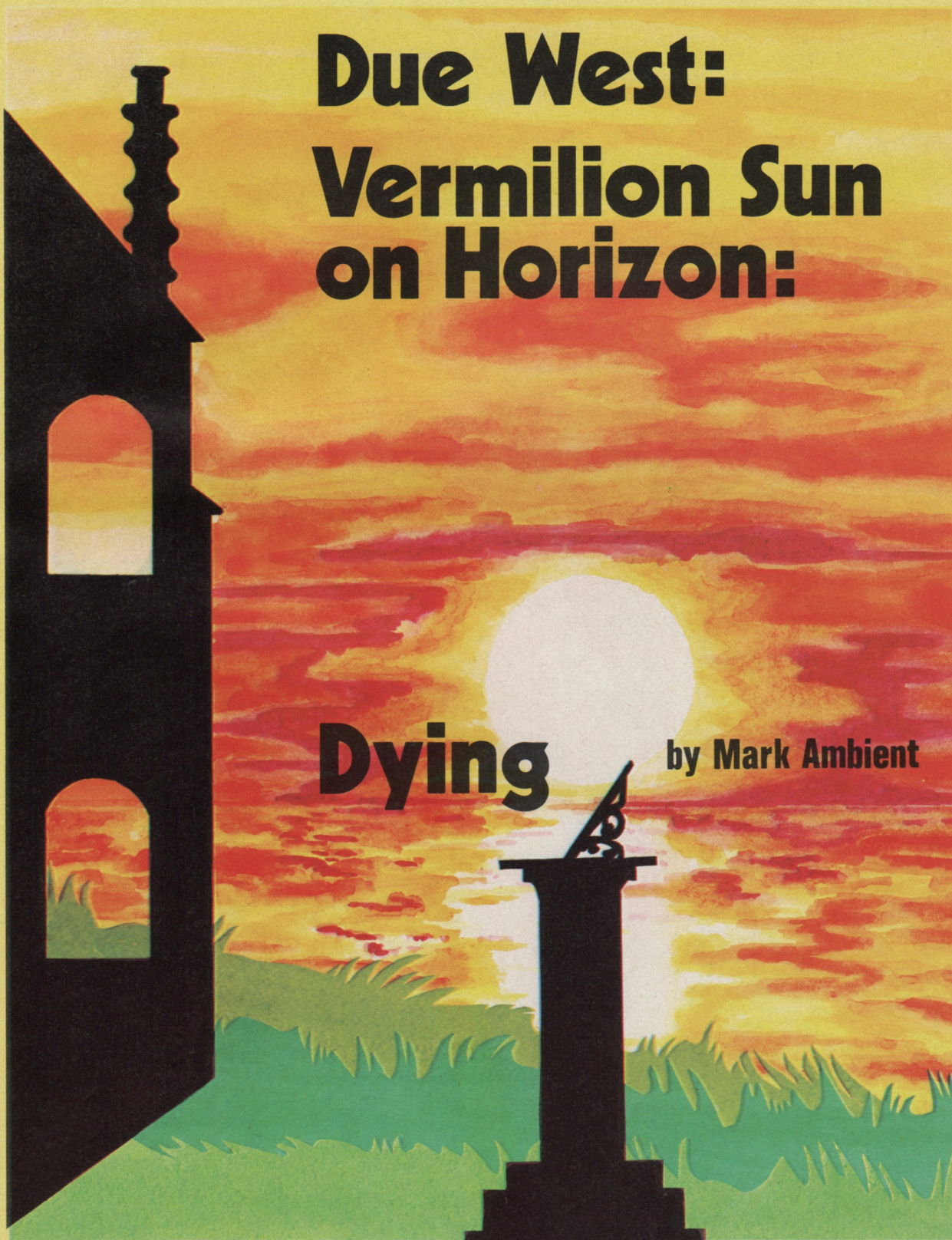
'Then it's up to Marshal Wildheit to convince them. Jym, that's your first job. Go to Mayo and secure yourself a Chaos seer.'

Cont'd
on P22

Due West: Vermilion Sun on Horizon:

Dying

by Mark Ambient



Swallow, my sister, O sister swallow,
 How can thine heart be full of the spring?
 A thousand summers are over and dead.
 What hast thou found in the spring to follow?
 What hast thou found in thine heart to sing?
 What wilt thou do when the summer is shed?

— Algernon Charles Swinburne, *Itylus*

Terrier -- transmogrifying OR Clock -- chiming

.... THE MAN WAKES up -- slowly, by degrees. He senses that he is lying face-down, spread-eagled in an uncomfortable position. He moves slightly.

His eyes blink, but being this close to the ground, he cannot see much. What he can see is sideways, and the image makes no sense. His cheek is against hot stone. He pushes with his hands and gets himself into a kneeling attitude. His head feels full of something.

So he shakes it. But his head remains still, and his body and the world jerk violently, rapidly, from side to side. He sways, still kneeling, until the ground rights itself.

What am I...

He falls, the rail crumbling. The fall ceases and is replaced by pain (for surely there must always be *something?*).

Then:

The man wakes up --

What am I doing...

As he climbs to his feet, the chiming of bells pound into him like blows, and he reels, and falls.

He climbs again. *Clock?*

What am I doing here?

The bells have left a permanent pain in his head. It varies. It says: **Terrier, TERRIER!**

Johnny.

JOHNNY! Johnny Terrier!

He looks up to the sky, attempting to find the...

Vermilion glare from mirrors on a tower!

It is frightening.

I am not Insanity. Not me. I am...

He sees that he is standing in some kind of small court. The weird light pouring from the mirrors creates an over-real starkness. Everything is either black or white. It will allow no variation of tones. As for colour...

Colour?

The weird LIGHT is repulsive to the man TERRIER. He runs away, through one of the archways into the large, old-fashioned gardens.

He leaves too soon to see a trilobite scuttle into the court and hide behind the plinth of the sundial.

Sundial?

Yes, in the sky he sees the sun. Stark. White. The sky immediately around it is vermilion. The rest of the sky is turquoise.

The SUN seems to jerk a little further along the ecliptic. In time, it would touch the horizon. Pass through the horizon. And die.

TERRIER keeps RUNNING. PAIN IN HEAD.

Machines -- mending

... * THE GOLD HUNTER was virtually hidden within a complex array of equipment on the largest bench in the Earl's subterranean laboratory. Its lid was fully open, and a few of the six hands were moving calmly around the plain face. It was lying horizontally, and directly over it, gazing down like a possessive parent was a miniature television camera. The picture was being fed into the computer at the other end of the laboratory.

Set up around the watch were a variety of instruments -- some for measuring, some for stimulating. These instruments too were fed (via a hastily knocked-up control monitor board, consisting largely of bare wires, crocodile-clips, and cannibalised cathode tubes) into the computer.

Steve Mitchell, in his gleaming white lab-coat, with a doctor's circular mirror on his forehead and a stethoscope hanging limply from his neck, completed a minor adjustment to the infrared heater and moved to the monitor board at the end of the bench. Before the board was a large leather-bound tome. He pushed over the ancient crinkling pages until he came to the first blank page. He picked up his quill, positioned the mirror over his left eye, dipped the quill in the jar of cerise ink and was ready to write. He glanced up, smiling normally, admiring the way he had got the lighting to illuminate only the watch and the area immediately surrounding it. Away in the distance, lights on the computer twinkled, tapes whirled and circuits hummed.

My suspicions that the Watch not only measures the activity of Entropic decay in its immediate vicinity, he wrote, but also that my Adaptors can actually alter what we normally take to be Normal Events has been proved correct. Today I have filmed a record of such an alteration.

Mitchell put down his quill and read the entry, checking the grammar and spelling. It *seemed* okay. He turned on his heel to regard the bench behind him. Here was the film projector, ready to show the film he had just mentioned in his notes. He pushed the mirror onto his forehead again, and scratched his scalp through his thinning hair. He decided to repeat the experiment, and not to re-view the film.

He edged quickly along the bench to arrive before the watch. From a drawer under the bench he lifted out a box of eggs (half dozen size) and placed it on a tiny area of vacant, scarred bench-top to the side of the equipment. Opening the box, two white eggs were revealed. He chose one, lifted it up, and dropped it two feet onto an aluminium disc secured to rails running directly under the watch. The egg cracked, and bits of shell floated serenely about on the disgusting looking white, and yellow yolk of the egg's interior.

The Earl's nose wrinkled. The egg, as he had expected, was rotten. He discarded the doctor's mirror and reached for a gas-mask, pulling the awkward thing over his head as quickly as possible. The perspex windows before his eyes started to mist as he breathed heavily, dispelling the putrid stink from his lungs. He pushed the egg under the watch, then dashed back to his monitor board. He activated all the instruments, and as he flicked the switches or joined together crocodile-clips, a variety of fresh hummings filled the laboratory. He watched the feeble traces on the tubes until he was satisfied that everything had warmed up properly and that the experiment proper was therefore ready to begin.

He depressed a large rectangular button, which flashed on and off, displaying the word =Commence= in bright orange. The humming increased, and Mitchell grasped the sides of the bench, feeling that he was riding in a rapidly accelerating lift. He could only guess at what this sensation would be like should he move closer to the watch.

After a minute, the =Commence= button popped out and the humming dropped away to nothing, and the lift sensation ceased.

Earl Mitchell tugged the gas-mask from his head, letting it fall to the floor. Returning to the watch, he pulled out the aluminium disc.

From its surface, he picked up a whole, intact egg.

He held it for only a second before smashing it again.

He sniffed in confidently. The egg was no longer rotten.

Smiling, he looked around for his doctor's mirror.

Watch -- wandering

... * . LOOKING BACK FROM the centre of the Elizabethan-style gardens, Heydn Hall looked no less than extremely impressive. Yellow sunlight, flooding groundwards from the sun not much beyond its noon position, made the array of windows burst into shimmering irradient flame, almost as if the Hall were on fire -- God forbid.

On their left, its windows appearing a touch duller than all the others (because they had not been cleaned in many a long decade) rose the ivy-clad rectangle that was The Bloody Tower; so named because historic rumour had it that the fourteenth Earl and Lady Newhaven committed atrocities involving over ten girls on the fourth (top) storey.

—Shall we go inside again?— asked Karen Black of her tall, slim companion. She felt that the sun was too warm. She looked at her wrist-watch, and shook it back to life. —Er, I should think most of the visitors are in the Cafeteria taking lunch. We would probably have the Picture Gallery all to ourselves. Shall we?—

Lady Caroline Giles turned her head slowly and looked vacantly at Karen. She pursed her lips, plainly non-committally.

Karen took her friend by the arm and they began to tread the paved pathways towards the terrace. In her own crocheted blue woolen skirt and cardigan suit Karen felt close to fainting, her brain swamped by a sense of unreality. She wondered how Lady Caroline could remain conscious, dressed perpetually (at her own requests) in a long gown of rich brocade, looking bright, even garish in the strong light.

Having lived in the Hall since its first opening to the public, Karen had adjusted completely to the situation of strange members of the public wandering over much of her home during

much of the day. Resident visitors, however, rarely felt comfortable, and found Heydn Hall worse than even a large hotel. Karen judged her friend's dissociation to be nothing more than a symptom of an attempt to adjust to the condition. After all, this was only the second day of her stay.

As they walked, looking across to the Countess, Karen saw the aristocratic eyes staring with mild puzzlement at the large prism device set atop the South Wing. The prism had been viewed and explained on the previous day. Karen decided she had better explain the device yet again, before the sun sank into ocean, obviously.

In the cool of the Hall's interior, Karen felt much better, and she had the impression of waking up with the same bad taste in her mind that she had experienced when waking after a night of strange and unpleasant dreams.

On the first floor, the women stepped leisurely from the lift onto the legendary =Haunted Gallery= Directly opposite them was a wide doorway above which was fixed a carefully lettered plaque labeling the room beyond as the Picture Gallery. They moved silently across the lush green carpet (a tasteless colour, Karen had admitted, some time after having it fitted) and into the bright Gallery.

As Karen had predicted, there was in actuality a distinct lack of public indulging in the pleasures of the pictures and antiques. To balance the situation, the sun problem had re-emerged, for huge shafts of mote-filled sunlight were streaming like cascades of violent water through the tall windows on their right.

Karen left Lady Caroline, and walked irritably about the Gallery, glancing insouciantly at the same, old, familiar originals by Constable, Stubbs, Dali, Titian, Rubens, Gainsborough, Almond, Renolds, Matthews, Vermeer, Renoir, Seurat, Van Eyck, Bosch, Da Vinci, and even Jones. She paused beside her favourite cabinet in an area where the sun at this moment did not reach, and smiled down at the odd Victorian trinkets.

Lady Caroline had joined her. She was fumbling subconsciously with the string of pearls about her perfect neck. To Karen, Caroline looked like a ghost, a shade, an insubstantial spirit. To intensify this interpretation of the Countess' mood, upon her breast, the brocaded woman was wearing a badge engraved with the word *Elysium* followed by a serial number.

—We are all Shades of Elysium— muttered Karen, absently, staring hard at Caroline, wondering whether her friend were quite well, then wondering whether in fact *she* were well.

—What?— said Caroline.

The terse question awakened Karen from her ridiculous reverie. Quickly, she said —This one's nice— She noticed that she was pointing to the six-handed gold hunter, one of the more interesting items that Earl Mitchell had unearthed when searching the attic of the Hall for this very collection.

—So it's not a picture gallery— said Lady Caroline, curiously aggressive.

—What?— Karen took a tiny silver key from the pocket of her crocheted cardigan.

—It's got antiques in it. It's a Pictures and *Antiques* Gallery—

—True— Karen admitted, failing to feel (unlike the Countess, evidently) that the misnomer was in any way uncomfortable or disturbing. —Would you like to see it properly?— She had unlocked the cabinet and was moving her hand towards the watch where it resided in its purple velvet support.

As she gripped with her fingertips to lift the whimsical device, her brows came together violently to form an ugly frown. —I say— she said presenting the watch to Caroline. —It's a fake. It's just a convincing replica of the front. Look, the back's hollow—

—So?—

Karen relaxed her frown for an instant, but then it returned as severe as ever. —It was unmistakably *genuine* last week—

Rodent -- reviving

... ** THE GAS—MASK LIES discarded on a bench cluttered with old, broken TVs, a selection of ashtrays and beer mats taken from the world's most famous hotels and restaurants. Steve Mitchell has taken to using nose-filters.

His lab-coat is a little stained. His doctor's mirror is in need of a wipe.

The *Commence* button pops out.

Mitchell breaths heavily, noisily, through his nose, and moves on wobbly legs to the watch. He pulls out the aluminium disc.

A tiny mouse is waking up. It opens an eye and watches its re-creator for a second, remembering the crushing bar of the trap as it sliced through its entrails, snapping its back.

The mouse springs away, insane.

Mitchell feels like God. He returns to his notebook, to tell it so.

Balustrade -- breaking OR Dreamer -- dropping

. * . . —WE MUST INFORM Earl Mitchell of this— spoke Karen decisively, the fake watch clutched in one hand, Caroline Giles' wrist in the other.

Her steps were forceful. The Countess in confused tow, the two women marched from the Gallery, returning to the Haunted Gallery. (The three Irish navvies, killed whilst construction work on the Hall was in progress in 1636, were not to be seen. Their faintly drunken version of =Molly Malone= was not to be heard either. Karen was not sure whether she could detect the indistinct form of the Mad Architect hurling himself into the Ballroom below.) Something distracted her. She started, and turned her delicate head in time to see the door to the Clock Gallery bump shut.

—Earl Mitchell!—

She pushed the door open and was out on the open-air gallery (which overlooked the Clock Court on three sides) confronted by an ill-looking presentation of Johnny Terrier, the Earl's favourite acquaintance.

The seedy young man was attired in his usual tatty corduroy jacket and threadbare cotton flared hipsters. He did not react at the women's appearance. He was likely =lost in thought= Standing beside the large bulk of the clock (upon the face of which was the inscription =Zeus Strikes=), it was surprising how much like a permanent fixture Terrier looked.

Still pulling Lady Caroline with her, Karen moved round the Gallery to at last stand before the abstracted man. She held out the fake watch, hollow side up. —Mr Terrier?—

—Johnny— he corrected. Then waking up —What?— He noticed the watch. He seemed disturbed. —Oh dear, you've found out—

—What do you mean, Mr Terrier?—



—Johnny— he repeated. He searched for words. Smiling slightly fatuously, believing it might put Karen off her guard, he attempted to lean relaxedly on the rail of the rococo balustrade. His blotchy hand, however, passed through the rail, the whole rotten structure powdering to dust. Upon the instant, his expression was one of embarrassment rather than fright.

He dropped from the Gallery, and a moment later the women heard the inevitable, sickening, thud.

Lady Caroline, brought to life by the horrific event, pressed her hands to her temples and screamed and screamed.

Karen edged forward and looked over the broken balustrade. Terrier's strangely twisted form was spread on the bone-white flagstones thirty feet below. Blood creeping out from wounds in his crushed head looked black with the strong contrast of light.

Caroline Giles would not stop screaming. Her eyes (when they were open, when she paused for breath) were agony.

Karen took hold of the Countess' wrist, tugged vigorously and they were off again.



Someone -- searching OR Timepiece -- travelling

. * . * HAVING TURNED THE bedroom upside-down, having got halfway through the drawing-room, Electra Vanderpump paused. She hooked her thumbs under the belt of her trousers and huffed, glaring about her with fierce angry eyes. Petulantly, she tugged at the watch-chain looped across her waistcoat, and the end flew out. She caught the clasp, stopping it from striking her chin. She noted that, as before, the watch was still absent.

Exasperation tickling the back of her mind, she stormed to the door, blundered through into the hallway and kept on towards the wide stairs. The blakeys on the heels of her black leather brogues tapped loudly on the black and white tiles, until she struck the deep carpet fitted on the stairs.

Using violent, expressive sweeps, she switched on the electrical lighting as she strode down the corridors on the first floor of her distinguished Establishment.

Panting, she stopped before the tall oaken door of one of her laboratories. She grasped the chill brass knob and twisted it savagely. She shoved the door open and stepped inside, dragging the scent of her perfume with her. The twitching fingers of her left hand found the light switch and operated it.

Choking spasmodically, she wasted no time, but set to work immediately, sweeping great drifts of dust off the control panels and computer consoles. Satisfied that she could now operate her instruments, she sat down heavily and flicked all the power switches into their =on= mode. Coloured lights blinked at her, accompanied by various humming sounds and the rhythmic clicking of relay switches.

Disregarding the fact that she was chipping her new black nail-varnish, she began to type (with intense zest) a programme into her machine.

Something like an hour later, the screen before her was flashing the word =Running= (vermilion on orange background) on and off. She chewed her lower lip, waiting.

Finally, the screen flashed its final message (white on green background): *Heydn Hall, Newhaven Sussex: 1933: This Alternative*

Well, Electra thought, at least she had located the watch. The problem now would be to recover it. *This Alternative* -- most convenient, but what was the *present time*? She depressed the =Retain= button, then de-activated the equipment. Adrenalin pounded through her veins as she leapt into action again, dashing from the laboratory.

In the hall, she picked up a newspaper (relatively new, she decided, by the condition of the paper) from the telephone table. She checked the date on the first page, then slung the thing from her in disgust and frustration.

The knocker on the front door knocked.

Sand -- shifting

. * . * STEVE MITCHELL CROUCHED on the beach, and looked up, startled, mistaking the sound of his rustling tweed sports jacket for that of an unwanted promenader. Seeing that he was indeed completely alone, he returned to the work in hand.

For an instant, an inane, insane grin had his mouth in its

grip and he shook with excitement, his arms trembling, and his fingertips dancing convulsively. Exerting self-control, his face returned to his conscious command, and the trembling became manageable.

He thrust his fingers into the warm, yielding sand, and lifted up two fistfuls of the stuff, the fine grains trickling like runny custard through his fingers onto his bent knees. He stuffed his hands into the pockets of his sports jacket, then released the load. His hands were sticky with sweat, and now they tingled, in the open again, resembling some kind of malleable stone.

As his hands come down upon the sand for the second time, Mitchell watched in fascination as the fingertips met their shadows, then pushed through each other until his wrists had met his wrists -- the hands and the shadows having seemingly each obliterated the other. Mitchell lifted more sand, and this time deposited his prize in the inside pockets of the jacket. He thought about the imminent experiment. He sensed his diaphragm quiver with laughter.

Squatting as he was, buttocks on heels, Mitchell slowly tilted sideways, then suddenly fell on his left side, during which time the laughter had grown to veritable mirth. For more than a minute, he rolled about, jerking with the private merriment, whilst attempting to force yet more sand into the pockets of his twill trousers. Abruptly, he was still. He was on his back staring at the blinding sky. He remembered to squint, respectfully.

He had made a fool of himself, and he accordingly felt a fool. The sun, through his lashes, looked yellow, with vermilion streamers flaming into the dark sky. The star was just past its noon position. He could not see a face on it -- a symptom of maturity.

The surf whispering on the shingle sounded like an audience tittering. The cawing of seagulls sounded like laughter. But the act was not intended as a comedy -- it was serious. Really, it wasn't even an act.

Now he felt embarrassment rather than foolishness.

He scrambled to his feet and blundered away, back toward the cliff, noticing the extra weight of the sand he was carrying. The shingle heaved under his shaking feet like a hard, giant mattress.

In the shade, off stage, Mitchell felt calmer. He looked up at the stark crumbling limestone, at the precarious narrow ledges where juniper bushes grew, only to fall down when the next rock slide occurred.

He located the black jagged hole of the tunnel's entrance, and began to climb; that same insane grin threatening to take possession of the left corner of his mouth.

Electra -- extinguishing

*** SEBASTIAN DORRELL, ONE of her acquaintances, as she would have put it, had been standing on the threshold. He had stepped inside, smiling his usual fatuous smile at Electra.

—What do you want?— she had said. —I'm busy. Extremely—

She had eyed him with her usual anger. For once he was fitting in with the times. He was wearing a bottle green frock coat, a mustard silk waistcoat, mustard and green check trousers, a pure linen shirt, and smart, but rather =fast= tan and white shoes.

He had removed his black top hat. He had made another step into the hall, holding the top half of his apparently broken

black silver-topped stick. —Just passing, as they say— he had told her. He (in turn) had eyed her gentleman's three-piece dark grey suit. —A little ahead of the times?—he had suggested.

—I'm extremely busy— she had replied. —What's happened to your cane?—

Dorrell had gestured through the open front door. —Brakes failed— he had answered. —Had to stop somehow; seeing that I'd actually arrived an' all—

Electra had looked outside. On the pavement, a young boy in long shorts and a ragged shirt was supporting the infamous tandem. —Who's that?—

—Oh, I'm paying him a shilling to hold it up, until I'm finished here. What's going on then?—

Electra had slammed the door petulantly, and the hall had gone suddenly gloomy. Without a word, she had marched to the stairs, determined to conclude (somehow) the business in hand.

Sebastian Dorrell had followed.

—So— she said. —If I can't retrieve it, I'll have to destroy it. It's fallen into bad hands. He'll do something terrible with it. I know he will—

They were in the laboratory, seated before a dusty (though functioning) console.

Sebastian Dorrell swiveled on his swivel chair. —Well I'm sorry— (He was emphatic.) —I'm not taking you to 1933. Not no way, see— He grimaced at his own English.

Electra merely snorted and returned to her controls.

Dorrell watched her fiddling feverishly. He became bored quickly, so instead he averted his eyes to the huge screen, set above them, angled downwards. He blew dust from his nostrils, and moved a hand towards his frock coat pocket, intending to find out whether he had brought his snuff with him. His hand was stayed however, when a colourful scene burst upon the screen. A volcano, like a vast ugly pimple protruding from an otherwise featureless plain, was erupting. Columns of dense smoke coiled upwards, shot through with streamers of glowing ash. Rivers of bright vermilion lava curved their way down the mountain's steep sides (setting fire to the sparse vegetation on its way) to join the lake that was spreading outwards, going brown as the molten rock lost some of its fierce heat.

—Pretty— complimented Dorrell.

—Ziephany— muttered Electra.

He looked at her. —What?—

—Its name—

—Oh—

As he watched the continuing eruption, Electra turned to fresh controls, until this moment in the whole procedure, untouched.

The volcano was frozen. The screen was now only a photograph.

Electra turned a knob and the smoke and ashes and lava began to go backwards, back into the crater. Ziephany's clothing of yellow grass and little shrubs returned to its sides. The reversal accelerated.

—Very clever—

—Glad you like it—

After some minutes the eruption ceased (or was about to begin) and Electra maintained the reversal for a few minutes more before freezing the scene. Then she flicked a switch, and a frozen mansion appeared on the screen.

—Heydn Hall— breathed Sebastian.

—Yes. That's right—

—What!— Dorrell was alarmed. —You can't. The people inside . . . It'd be murder—

—I've got to destroy it somehow—

She flicked another switch, and the two frozen images were presented superimposed upon each other.

Trilobite -- tumbling

... STEVE MITCHELL'S SAND-ENCRUSTED hand groped along the cellar wall, and at last it found the light switch. The switch squeaked loudly as the strong fingers forced it down. The darkness, which up to this moment had caused the Earl to shake with fear (whereas only minutes before he had been trembling with excitement), was banished to the deep recesses of the laboratory and the stark shadows.

Mitchell blinked with the brightness, and remained leaning against the wall, panting heavily, until his eyes had adjusted to the new ambience. Then he made directly for the large pile of junk, wherein the watch was lying. As he went, absently, he brushed his hands against his thighs and dusted his jacket a little. Grains of sand that were thrown before him grated underfoot. Having reached the bench, he pulled the aluminium disc from beneath the timepiece and proceeded to ladle handfuls of sand (from his misshapen trouser pockets) onto it. Satisfied that the amount of sand was sufficient, he reached towards the stool beside him, taking his lab-coat and doctor's mirror, and donned them with the ease of a professional. He patted fastidiously at the sand, and repositioned the disc under the watch.

His excitement was returning. He did not know it, but it was making him lick his upper lip on the left side. The shadows looked grey, and even benevolent.

At the control monitor board, Mitchell dimmed the lighting so that only the watch and its attendant equipment were illuminated to any degree of intensity.

His diaphragm jerked down, and stayed there. (In short, he held his breath.) He activated the computer and the other instruments. He watched as the traces on the screens stabilised. All was ready -- he started to breathe again. His fingertips touched the cold plastic surface of the =Commence= button, and certain muscles in his arms and shoulders applied adequate pressure. (He depressed the button.)

The familiar humming was music in his ears. The orange light from the =Commence= button flashed madly in his eyes. (Or else the light was sane, and his eyes mad.)

He experienced the usual vertigo and feelings of sickness. It seemed to go on for ever.

The Earl stared incessantly (his eyes were definitely mad, now) at the blinking button.

He was retching drily when finally the button popped up, and the machines turned themselves off. The floor was heaving like the ocean itself. He tried to move towards the watch, but collapsed immediately. He shook his head, attempting to throw the dizziness from him. Something fell from the bench to strike the concrete floor with a solid crack.

Mitchell raised his head to see a trilobite scurrying off, confusedly, across the laboratory.

He began to laugh, painfully, silently.

The intercom speaker said --Mr Mitchell! Mr Mitchell! something terrible has happened!--

It was Karen's voice, badly distorted by the cheap equipment. She was outside his office. Mitchell rose, and starting to panic, he tugged off the mirror and the coat, letting them fall. He dashed to the intercom fixed to the wall next to the spiral

stairway.

He pressed the tastelessly designed red knob, and using the calmest voice he could manage, said --I'm just putting away a private file. Wait one minute, please-- He switched off.

Taking a huge gulp of the stale subterranean air, he plunged up the stairs, pulling with his hands, pushing with his feet, giving the long climb all he could. At the top of the stairs, two minutes later, sweating and red-faced, the Earl pushed weakly at the secret panel and stepped into the shower booth in his bathroom, nearly slipping over on the wet soapy tiles.

From the bathroom he entered his bedroom, and thence his office. He stepped to the door, wiping his forehead with the back of his right hand.

Pulling the bolt back and drawing the door inwards, he saw the blank countenance of Karen Black and the even blanker countenance of Caroline Giles.

Man -- missing OR Clock -- chiming

... * STILL PANTING RATHER obviously, Steve Mitchell stepped back from the awful gap in the balustrade. Karen's *Fabergé Brut 33* (for men) was making him feel sick. The news of what had happened, and now the evidence of the terrible accident lying revoltingly twisted in the Court below made him feel even sicker. As well as nausea, he felt annoyance too.

His heart pounding, he breathed out slowly and loudly, and made to draw the handkerchief from the right-hand pocket of his sports jacket. As he did so, a stream of sand trickled to the floor to make a neat pile near his right toes. He sighed whilst mopping his prickling forehead.

Having stuffed the handkerchief home, and kicked the sand away, he turned to the ladies by his side. He did not speak immediately. His throat was held immobile by the sight of Lady Caroline Giles screaming silently. Floods of tears were squeezing from behind her tightly shut eyelids. Her lips were drawn back, like those of a mad wolf, and a slight hissing noise escaped from between her white teeth.

Karen was looking at the Earl attentively.

--Is he-- asked Mitchell, --alive?--

Karen's smiling eyes were unique. --What do you think?--

Mitchell glanced back to the balustrade. --Yes, of course.

A stupid question-- His pause was extremely brief. --Did you happen to notice whether he had his notebook with him?--

--It was not in his hands-- Karen replied. --He was =thinking= I think

Lady Caroline was still screaming.

--Perhaps it could be in his pocket?-- Karen concluded.

--Yes. Better take a look--

As they left the Gallery, behind them, the Clock commenced to chime.

Lady Caroline was not able to scream whilst she was walking. (She was frightened to move with her eyes closed, and she could not scream continually with her eyes open.) But now they had arrived on the flagstones of the Clock Court, she was able to start up again.

The glaring sunlight (coursing from the prism above) made everything look either white or black. This effect offended Earl Mitchell's eyes. He screwed them up, which made no difference (so he unscrewed them), and looked across the Court.

A pain, like a strand of red-hot wire, whipped through the top-left of his brain. He thought he was going to fall over. He blinked.

The Court was deserted, of flesh living, or flesh dead.

Johnny Terrier was gone.

The Earl strode on shaky legs to the spot where he had last seen the body. He looked up to the Gallery to check his position. He looked at the paving and could detect no drop of blood -- no signs whatsoever to indicate that a man's speedy descent had been abruptly halted by the sun-white slabs.

He turned to face the women. He stared at them.

His cry held as much pain as Lady Caroline's screaming. The word was drawn out over three seconds. It echoed audibly for three more.

—Terrier!—

As the echo died, a trilobite scurried across the Court heading for the park, and the unseen sun seemed to jerk a little further along the ecliptic towards evening.

Dorrell -- demurring OR Electra -- evading

. * . —THE SUBLIME AND the ridiculous are often so nearly related— said Electra, thumbing over the pages of a tatty world atlas (*Cerberus*, London, 1877, 3 gns), —that it is difficult to class them separately. One step above the sublime, makes the ridiculous; and one step above the ridiculous, makes the sublime again—

Sebastian Dorrell looked down from the colourful screen (still showing Ziephany and Heydn Hall). He agreed entirely with these sentiments. —I agree entirely with those sentiments— he told her. —Shall we get off *now*?— He placed a taut hand on the arm of his swivel chair, preparatory to rising. —While we've got the chance?—

Electra found the co-ordinates for which she had been seeking and typed them into her machine. —Not on your life!— she reproached. She seemed uncertain. —My life? Anyway— she tossed the atlas over her shoulder into a deep drift of dust, —*you* can leave if you like. Don't forget, *you* weren't even invited to take part in this, er, *fiasco*—

—Were you?— Dorrell decided to stay. He relaxed his hand.

—No. Well, *yes*; to the extent that I found myself *up to something*—

—And you're going to see it through?—

—It's not my decision, is it, darling—She was condescending.

—I'll keep going, I suppose—

Dorrell indicated her control console. —Get on with it then—

—All right. All right— She flicked more switches.

Dorrell was rigid when he saw the familiar and well-loved form of the Pantheon, Portmeirion, replacing the previous double-image on the screen. —Portmeirion—

—Don't proclaim the obvious. It makes you look a twerp—

—Portmeirion— he repeated. —What are you doing with Portmeirion?—

—I've got to have *some* fun, haven't I?—

With the flick of yet another switch all three scenes glimmered in full three-dee on the screen. Another flick, and time started to advance normally.

People strolled, a gardener picked at weeds (and his nose), and Ziephany rumbled.

The eruption was merely minutes away.

—Do you— asked Dorrell, —believe this is *right*?—

Electra glanced round at the odd ambience wherein she found herself; the impossible machines, the absurd heaps of dust, the piles of yellow, mouldy copies of *Vortex*, *New Worlds*, and *The Literary Caprice*. —You know they're not your own words, you hypocrite—

Seismometer -- shaking

. * * THE SUN GLARES down like a mammoth spotlight, not far from the sparkling waters of the English Channel, impetuously pounding at the base of the cliffs below. The park is like a vast stage. All that is lacking is the audience -- and

The mummers.

JOHNNY TERRIER, insensate (as he has been since shortly after noon) runs into the SCENE. His threadbare cotton flared hipsters are grass-stained, indicating that (apparently) he has fallen over many times.

He falls over again.

He gets up again. He spits the bad taste from his mouth. Then he reels.

He sprints down a narrow street, crowded with ambling people, and somehow manages to collide with none of them. *What is this place? What happened to the -- the park?*

He whirls. A great blue dome is rearing over him. Before he can turn, the SCENE shifts of its own volition.

A village. Does he see someone carrying a *Portmeirion* carrier-bag?

(Most likely.)

The buildings grow indistinct. They faint. They fade.

He sees Heydn Hall. But why is lava, shooting ash and billowing smoke gushing from the top of the Bloody Tower?

Something in the pocket of his tatty corduroy jacket commences to buzz urgently. He lifts out a cube-shaped device replete with flashing lights, dials, and sunken buttons. It is his pocket seismometer. It is registering a violent earthquake. The little instrument flies from Terrier's trembling hand as he plunges down hard stone steps towards a street in the village of which he had caught a brief glimpse but a minute before.

He crashes into the roadway, which has become a flowing river of glowing lava. He thrashes in the fire. His lungs draw on the molten liquid.

He picks himself up from the soft grass, and runs on.

Shadows growing from the same holes as tall, stark blades of grass look like streaks of black blood.

Terrier -- trying

. . . LADY CAROLINE GILES is confused. She thinks the very condition. Other thoughts however, begin to impinge upon her confused mind, and within seconds she forgets that she is confused. These other thoughts are:



Where am I?

What am I doing here?

Why am I alone? I have not been alone for -- ever such a long time.

Her tread is light. Her brocade gown swishes about her thin legs. The dull green grass feels a lot like carpet. She is under the impression that the thick clouds are extremely low.

The enshrouding mental haze lifts a little. She tastes coffee within her mouth. Has she just partaken of dinner?

They are not grass and cloud, but carpet and ceiling.

She is on the second floor of Heydn Hall, heading for her bedroom. She feels dizzy, yet does not sway as she walks on.

The sound of a door opening.

Johnny Terrier is leaning against the jamb, looking at her as if she were attractive. She feels certain muscles contracting. She realises that she has paused and is standing before Mr Terrier.

—I have some port in my room— he says. —Would you care to join me?—

She feels his eyes upon her, caressing, stroking. She feels a pleasant tingling and knows that when she undresses she will be wet. What makes this happen? His pose? His voice? The allure of his room and what would likely ensue should she accept his invitation?

She cannot stop her right hand moving to the inside of her thigh, pressing into the thick fabric and moving upwards to move ever so slightly back and forth.

She steps back, fearful that in reality it is not her hand,

but his. Another spasm. Very wet.

In reality?

—Mr Terrier— she says, unable to take her eyes from the contours of his cotton hipsters. —I, I . . . I don't know what I'm doing here—

Making to move on down the corridor (shroud descending: across the grass?) she sees Terrier reach out and feels her arm caught by his strong fingers. His head bows. His damp hot lips, his passionate breath cause her to shriek out in ecstasy.

She sprints away, forgetful of the welcoming room and the eager lover. Her dying cry echoes from the clouds.

The splendid brocade sticking to her like prickling sweat, she spins into her room, slams the door, soars onto the bed and sinks into sumptuous sleep.

Dorrell -- departing

* SEBASTIAN DORRELL STEPPED jauntily down the stairs, away from the locked laboratory on the first floor of Electra's distinguished Establishment.

Relatively unaccustomed to the brogues that she wore, the Vanderpump woman was tripping about at his side, trying to keep up.

—Really, I can't see what I'm doing here at all— he told her.

Electra was disappointed. (Her exercise, on the verge of success and completion had collapsed suddenly -- and before a small audience, one onlooker, Sebastian of all people.) Disappointed, thus angry.

—I've got to have someone to talk to— she snapped rudely, speaking too fast and slurring the whole phrase into a sort of high-pitched shriek.

They hit the black and white tiles of the hallway. Electra's shoes sounded like a marching army.

—What will you do now, then?— Sebastian asked politely, expressing real interest and concern over his acquaintance's problems. He glanced about him, at the faded wallpaper, the sparse furnishings of the extensive hall, the scene brought to feeble life by the weak pink light filtering through the dusty stained-glass windows (tall and narrow, reaching to the ceiling) on either side of the dark front door. He took his hat from the stand and positioned it successfully on his head. He reached into the umbrella stand and took out his broken stick.

—I don't know— She huffed. She opened the door for him. —Whole rotten thing's seized up, as you saw— She pulled a strand of her long black hair from where it had got caught under the collar of her jacket. —Not of course that there's now any necessity to destroy it, or even recover it, for that matter. It's a nuisance -- and I hate nuisances—

The street was bright and stark. There seemed to be a lull in the traffic, for there was not a single vehicle upon the roadway, and the last pedestrian, as they watched, turned a corner and was gone. Odd, for the time of day, this absence of people, Electra thought. Automatically she tugged at the watch-chain, intending to produce the watch. The end flew out, but this time she failed to stop the clasp from striking her chin. She swore. She removed the chain and held it out. —A present—

—How kind— Dorrell bowed slightly and accepted the gift. He stuffed it quickly into the left-hand pocket of his frock coat.

—I'd better get off then—

Electra nodded, silently, in agreement.

Dorrell stepped into the porch, and gasped. —My tandem!— His tone was incredulous.

Electra started to laugh her demure, patronising laugh.

The tandem was gone. So too the boy. You couldn't trust anyone these days.

Through her slight flood of tears (which incidentally, was spoiling her immaculate make-up), Electra said —You'll have to walk, won't you, dear?— She had joined him on the porch, and was pressing a hand into the small of his back, urging him down the steps.

—Walk?— he mumbled. —But I *can't* walk— He showed her his broken cane. (Should the tandem ever be recovered -- which was a distinct possibility -- he decided that the cane-between-the-spokes was definitely *out*, and that he'd have to have the brakes seen to.)

—Oh, you'll be all right— She took the cane from him and started to adjust him around it. —Put it under your arm. You'll look all right from the front, at least—

Electra propelled him down the steps.

—Blast— said Sebastian, getting to one knee on the pavement, placing the bit of stick beside him. —My insoles are coming loose—

Something -- smoking

EARL MITCHELL'S EXTENSIVE subterranean laboratory is deserted. Deserted, except for:

Three computers (one of which operates, and is in an =active= mode), much typical =laboratory= equipment reminiscent of many descriptions to be found in the so-called Science Fiction and Fantasy books accumulating dust in the Library on the second floor of the Hall.

And:

Virtually lost within a complicated arrangement of equipment, a

Watch.

It is a gold hunter -- and it is functioning. What its function is however, is another matter. It is odd, radically different from the usual gold hunter, for it has six hands.

Three of the hands seem to be still, though, quite reasonably, they are imperceptibly moving. The other three are moving visibly; two clockwise, one (the fastest of them all) anti-clockwise.

Normal time is being measured by a cheap office clock on the wall of the laboratory.

A trace of smoke can be seen. It is coiling from the hinge on the case of the gold hunter. The smoke grows thicker, the hands become more agitated. As the watch begins to overheat, the second-hand of the cheap office clock slows up, stops, then starts to move backwards. The cheap clock reads nine twenty-two (and decreasing). Outside, it must be nearly sunset.

The gold hunter is glowing red hot. Suddenly, the great clouds of smoke that have gathered above it are drawn rapidly inwards, back into the watch.

Apparently, the cheap office clock recommences to work normally.

Vermilion sun -- dying OR Everything -- ending

—I DON'T KNOW what people are going to think about all this— Karen Black is saying. —Really I don't—

Caroline Giles, who has overcome her screaming fits, is standing beside her. She is, however, standing rigidly erect (virtually cataleptically so). —All *what?*— she demands, not turning her head to direct the question. She still stares with red eyes over the gardens and the park.

—All *this*— repeats Karen, just as vaguely as has been her original assertion. She spreads her hands weakly, as if to give substance to, or perhaps merely to indicate

THE TERRACE, whereon they stand, close enough to hold hands. They are not holding hands. Really, there is no necessity for them to be this close.

Karen dips her head into her hunching shoulders as heavy rock music pounds through the still evening atmosphere. Elaborate bass rumbles, rising and falling through delicate scales. Drums jar, and jar, and jar, and a screaming voice takes over from the lead guitar with words that are just about comprehensible. She recognises the noise to be a piece entitled *Is It Hard To Understand?* performed by the Scarlet Renaissance. It is coming from the open windows of one of the bedroom suites on the second floor of the Hall, behind and above.

She glances at Caroline. The Countess appears not to be hearing the music. She directs her gaze towards the park again. The hedge at the periphery of the gardens has gone a deep blood-red with the sunlight slanting between its tiny leaves. A little further to the right, in the far corner of the gardens, the ruined Conservatory (merely a shell) is a stark silhouette. As the sun shifts nearer to the horizon (due west, lining up with the furthest, lone vertical girder of the Conservatory) minute shards of glass that still remain in the broken frames sparkle intermittently.

The gardens are striped with shadows that resemble gaping festering wounds, brimming with fresh gore. The air seems thick and heavy (though remarkably clear), and is stained a palpable vermilion by the setting sun.

—Can you see what's going on?— Caroline asks sharply, tersely.

The park is not as static as it might have been.

The women blink to dismiss visions of streets and buildings, people and shop-fronts; and rivulets of bright molten lava.

—It shouldn't be allowed— stated Karen, pushing back her short unruly hair. —Not this kind of thing—

To lend weight to her words, from the archways to their left (which lead directly into the Clock Court) come the sound of the bell striking nine o'clock.

—Can you see what's going on?— Caroline asks again. A skinny hand rises and the fingers fiddle with the pearls around

her neck.

Beyond the hedge is the park.

Appearing as burnt sienna, two-dimensional cut-outs (being set off against the bright western sky), can be seen the disturbed herd of fallow deer. The deer are mobile, whereas the stark, spiky elms are unmoving. (Stark, because they have no foliage, because Dutch Elm Disease struck every single one several years ago, and the huge carcasses have been left to rot, unattended, uncared for, though not necessarily unwanted.) Other mobile silhouettes number two. Two men are running about, back and forth across the park, disturbing the deer.

—Can you see what— says Lady Caroline, cutting the question short, and replacing it with the statement —My head aches—

—Don't complain, dear— Karen reprimands. —What do you expect under the circumstances? A lot has happened— She seemed unconvinced with her own words. —Looking at it one way—

The two men are Stephen Mitchell and Johnny Terrier. The Earl is trying to catch up with his best friend, but somehow, Terrier manages to remain that elusive single step ahead of his pursuer throughout the entire caper.

—We'll have to get inside, soon— says Karen, turning her bright eyes (that reflect pure vermilion from the low sun) upon the Countess again. —Bed, and all that—

Caroline Giles is holding her gaze firmly upon the lithe figure of Johnny Terrier. She begins to weep silently. Everything is ending, she thinks, though really it never started in the first place. —I think he loves me— she managed to say shakily through her tears.

Karen looks in horror at the running men, drawing quite near again. —*Who?*—

They run at the herd of deer. The poor creatures bolt in every direction, all over the place.

Caroline does not answer, for she is distracted by a small creature scurrying over the flags of the terrace towards them. It is a trilobite, possibly in some distress, probably wishing to escape the confusion escalating in the park.

Upon an impulse, Karen looks at the flaming vermilion orb, and notes that the lower edge of the disc is practically touching the perfect horizon.

Caroline lets out a gasp of delight as the trilobite maintains its wavering course directly for her. She makes to move towards it, and lifts her foot for the first step.

As she executes the movement, the sun touches the horizon. And that is where the foot sticks -- three and a half inches above the ground.

She is not aware (naturally) that the whole scene about her is frozen, as if in death.

the chaos weapon

4

CONT'D

On his journey from Terra to the Galaxy's edge where Mayo 4 orbited its own substantial sun, Wildheit was fortunate that both planets were situated on the same edge of the Milky Way's great sprawl. Even so, the journey of some seventeen thousand light-years was no small undertaking in a vessel as little as the patrolship. Five days out of Terra in the *GEGENSCHIEN*, he made the first jump from sub-light speed into subspace and emerged only six days later with nearly ten thousand light years already behind him. The first leap had been uncritical: its function had been merely to bring him to a point from which more careful jumps could place him finally within sub-light range of his objective.

From that point on, observation and calculation occupied the majority of his time. A further three and a half light years subspace jaunt left him barely a similar distance to travel, and he calculated each successive jump to progressively halve the remaining distance. Unfortunately, there was a minimum distance of subspace leap which the little ship could take, and if he overshot or undershot his target by too great a margin he could easily face himself with six months sub-light travel before he could make planetfall. In this he envied the great spaceliners, which, on a routine route, could regularly drop out of subspace after a single leap usually within a few days out from their intended ports of call.

He envied, too, the recreational facilities of the great liners. The single cabin of the *Gegenschein* and the ladders to the store and engine decks below provided the only area available for movement and exercise; and the light artificial gravity allowed his muscles to slacken to a degree where he knew that planetary contact with a world of terrestrial-norm gravity would be tiring and painful until his body had re-established its tone. At such times of reduced efficiency, the symbiotic attachment of the god, Coul, on his shoulder would become a conscious, nagging ache which penetrated through to the very marrow of his bones.

Coul himself was always more restless when in space. The unchanging scene offered no sustenance for his insatiable curiosity about things human. He would flicker on his ceaseless excursions across other dimensions and return despondently to Wildheit's shoulder with the heavy-

clawed twist of psychic feet; and the pulse which marked each beat of his return was a fresh stimulus to a set of jaded nerves in Wildheit's upper arm.

Despite the discomfort, however, there were many reasons which justified Wildheit's acceptance of the symbiotic god's tenure of his shoulder. As they dropped into real-space and he began to make the calculations for the next jump, Coul suddenly crouched in quiet contemplation.

'Marshal, I'm in communion with Talloth. Marshal Hover wishes to speak with you through him.'

'Strange! We're still in FTL transmission range. But he may have a special reason for using the communion.'

'Talloth is convinced of his need. Else we would not use our special roads to carry your pedestrian thoughts.'

'Then let's make the contact and see what Talloth is convinced about.'

'Breathe!' said Coul.

The actual period of communion was an experience Wildheit hated. Of all the paranormal things associated with the symbiotic dieties, he regarded this one as a true invasion of the body. He had learnt to come to terms with the ache in his shoulder, but to hear himself speak with another man's voice was something to which he never became accustomed.

'Jym!' The voice that came from his own mouth was recognizably Hover's, but the pitch and timbre were altered by the differences in his own vocal cords.

'What's on your mind, Cass?'

'I'm using the communion because I don't know who might be monitoring the FTL bands. Subject: our dark friend Saraya.'

'What of him?'

'Some little pieces that don't fit. When you asked at the meeting who built the weapon, he merely countered with another question.'

'I remember. He asked me how many alien races might be in the universe.'

'Then consider this. I saw the Chaos weapon operating on Edel. But the target character which triggered the disaster wasn't one of our rarer intellects. He came from far outspace in an unidentifiable spacecraft. The planet he gave as his origin doesn't even exist. He seemed to know the disaster was coming, and he even managed to delay it until the snow-cat was out of range of the effect. Saraya

called him one of a kind, and said that where he went, that's where they point the Chaos weapon.'

'Where're you leading, Cass?'

'Simply that I'm damn sure Saraya knows a lot more about all this than he's admitting. The men who came in the snow-cat managed to get someone else out of Edel. I think this was the one who jumped me and ran the cat over my legs. He gave me a message for Saraya by name. Said to tell him Kasdeya sent it.'

'The devil he did! What was Saraya's reaction?'

'He denied either the name or the message meant anything to him. Implied I'd probably imagined the whole thing. He probably doesn't know every space-marshall makes a permanent recording of every second of his day. I checked out the suit recorder later, and the message was there loud and clear.'

'What was the message?'

'Quote: "Don't try to join the game until you can give it a name and understand the rules".'

'What do you make of that?'

'Nothing so far. But I have personal doubts if we're looking for an alien device as such. I suspect Sara's playing some sort of double game. Since you're at the operating end of the mission, I thought you ought to know.'

'Thanks a lot, Cass. I'll keep it in mind. By the way, how are your legs?'

'Coming along well. I went to see them yesterday. In the culture medium they're now about eighteen years equivalent age. I remember when my own were like that. Clean, firm — beautiful. It's a pity they have to age them to match the ones I lost.'

'I wonder if they could do me a new set of brains,' said Wildheit ruefully. 'This set is getting all clogged up with questions that don't have any answers.'

The communion finished, Wildheit returned to his navigation. Because of the turbulent flow and eddies formed where the gravitational field of the Milky Way was lapped by the great tides of deep-space, there was no dead reckoning he could use to chart the absolute position of Mayo. There was therefore an element of luck in the final jump which terminated to leave him no more than a one week sub-light trip to the planet of the Sensitives.

* * *

Finally emerging from the darkness of a desert strip where he had landed, he came to the edge of the capital city. A broad river stood between him and his goal, its dark waters reflecting the random lights from the streets along the farther bank. Wildheit searched for a ferry, but found instead a bridge. It was a wide and ornate bridge, but unlit and probably seldom used. It underscored what his space survey

had told him about the city's isolation. As he started across the bridge, the god on his shoulder shifted expectantly, as though it read something of menace in the strange city beyond.

Wildheit had left the crawler near the patrol-ship, about six kilometres out. Experience had taught him that a space-marshal gained less enemies in an estranged community if he made a quiet approach on foot rather than arriving with a full show of strength. The actual truth was less obvious, but a man who walked to his destination appeared less ominous than one who came in an armoured crawler fully capable of resolving a major out-world war. He paid for this philosophy with aching feet and a broad pain in his left shoulder where the brown, leathery, insubstantial god gripped with an inseparable attachment.

As he traversed the bridge, his emotions were mixed. Social contact with a space culture as isolated as the Sensitives, presented a psychological mountain he was ever tired of climbing. The tremendous adjustments of insight and outlook needed to adapt to a strange set of mores, beliefs and circumstances was for him the equivalent of an intellectual death and re-birth. Nowhere, even on Terra, would he ever meet those able to appreciate the broad span of his own views of the galaxy and its peoples. Always the onus was on him to hunt for sense and clues in a situation; and bring his perception down to within the narrow constraints imposed by a crucially limiting environment. Though practice had given him proficiency in the art, repetition had done nothing to lessen the mental torment of the experience.

In front of him on the farther bank he began to make out namesigns written in Alpha Intergalactic characters. This suggested the dominant tongue would be a dialect of one of the thirty-seven space languages he had permanently memorised for use on assignments round the stars. As he walked he called up the mnemonics relating to the Alpha tongues, and tried to prepare his comprehension. Even from across the water it was obvious that the city was less advanced than his space survey had suggested. It was a fair example of arrested pre-technological development, although there was abundant evidence of the use of electricity for lighting. Such an anachronism was not uncommon in communities founded by dissident colonists after the Great Exodus from Terra.

The end of the bridge was guarded by twin gatehouses and a barbed metal gate. The structure itself proclaimed an element of paranoia and at the same time defined the technological capabilities of those it was designed to exclude. Wildheit estimated that given the necessity he could have taken such defences without even breaking stride. At the gate he grasped

the knotted summons rope. This evoked a gaunt bell so massive that its chime must have awakened half the city.

Old lamps were lit above his head, dim and inefficient, yet driving back the shades from the square before the gate.

'Who are you, who dare come in darkness?'

'Space-marshal Wildheit out from Terra on the orders of the Galactic Council. I wish to speak with someone in authority about a Chaos seer.'

'You're from outworld? You are forbidden to land.'

'I have already landed. I'm on Federation business.'

'Mayo doesn't recognize the Federation.'

'That's unimportant. We protect you none the less.'

'Come back in daylight. I'll see if anyone wishes to talk with you.'

'Find them now. I've travelled far, and the matter's too urgent for delay.'

'Wait, then, I'll see what can be done.'

Wildheit turned to the parapet and seated himself upon it, marvelling at the naivety of a community which apparently believed security could be obtained with an iron gate.

About an hour later the gate was opened, and an old, white-haired man beckoned him to enter. Behind him, dark-clad watchmen armed with short white sticks scowled uneasily at his entry. Wildheit was not deceived; the way the white sticks were handled suggested they were weapons of an easily lethal kind.

'I am Pilon,' said the old man testily. 'I was brought from my bed at your insistence. I hope you've something important to say.'

'An importance that brought me five kilo-parsecs to say it. Do you have authority here?'

'I'm one of the Elders. For you that will have to suffice.'

Wildheit looked at the circle of scowling watchmen. Suspicion and mistrust was written on every face. The Federation was not popular on Mayo, it seemed.

'Is there somewhere private where we can talk?'

'Perhaps. But first let me have your hand. I need to read your intent. There are many we aren't allow in the city.'

Wonderingly, Wildheit extended his left hand, and the old man laid his upon it and closed his eyes as though to concentrate. Meanwhile each watchman kept his weapon raised and pointing as if prepared for an immediate execution if the old man's doubts were less than satisfied. Finally Pilon spoke.

'He comes in peace, and has great need. Release him to me, and I'll take the responsibility.'

The watchmen appeared doubtful. 'You take too much on yourself, Pilon. There are others who will have to be in-

formed. They may fetch him. Either way, you will give an account to the Conclave of Elders.'

'So it is written,' said the old man, and he took hold of Wildheit's arm. 'Come, I've chambers close enough. There we can talk.'

Wildheit allowed himself to be led off the bridge and into the narrow, untidy streets beyond. The roads were sandy, bearing the occasional imprint of an iron-wheeled cart but no evidence of mechanical transport. The buildings were largely of massive masonry and rough-hewn timber, and the architecture appeared to depend on individual whim rather than customary style; thus the structures were simplistic and given to unexpected changes in form and outline. Under the small, wallamps, the effect was feudal, yet one of great permanence and quietude.

'What did you read from the laying of your hand?' asked the marshal conversationally as they walked.

'I learnt you are expected but not welcome,' said Pilon enigmatically. 'It's dangerous for you to be here.'

'You take great pains to guard your city gates. I find that difficult to understand, since none but the Sensitives occupy Mayo.'

'There are degrees of sensitivity. The rarer strains need protection from contamination, and the lesser need protection from the rarer. It's a difficult matter.'

They entered a large, timbered house, and Pilon reached out with his hand to take Wildheit's outer garments. The marshal shook his head.

'There's no need. My suit automatically adjusts for temperature, and contains many things I might need.'

'As you wish.' The old man was scanning Wildheit's face with a searching look. Coul quivered nervously on the marshal's shoulder. The god was plainly apprehensive about their situation despite its overall calm. Even Wildheit began to experience a strong sense of foreboding.

The old man began again: 'You're a strange man, Marshal. You carry more death in your pockets than Mayo has seen in all her human history. My eyes won't tell me, but I sense another being on your shoulder. You represent those with the bloodiest of pasts and an even bloodier future — yet you are a man with a wisdom and humanity that makes birds sing and stars shine. It must be very terrifying and painful to be you.'

'Let's get down to business,' said Wildheit.

They had entered a small booklined room furnished only with a few plain chairs and a table. When they were seated, Pilon looked at Wildheit with questioning eyes, but his attention seemed to be divided to rest partially beyond the room's thick walls. In the darkness beyond the mullioned windows, slight noises were

beginning to disturb the night.

'What's your problem, Marshal?'

'Chaos. I assume you know what Chaos is?'

'Reflections of the slow death of the universe. It has many mysteries for us.'

'And for us. That's what brings me here. The Galactic Federation appeals for your help. Somboddy or something is tampering with the patterns of Chaos. They've forged it into a selective weapon. This weapon's being used against key individuals most of whom are vital links in the future of man's tenure of space.'

'You realize we don't support the aims and ambitions of the Federation?'

'And I think you realize that were it not for the Federation forces on this edge of the galaxy, Mayo would long ago have fallen to the aliens. Like it or not, the Federation's existence and your own are inseparable.'

'A good point, Marshal. Please proceed.'

'So far our only defence against the weapon is anticipation — immediate and on-the-spot interpretation of the patterns of Chaos. If we're to find the weapon and neutralize it, this is a facility which is vital.'

'And for that you have your computing engines.'

'Nothing smaller than a room or a shipfull of electronics. Nothing as mobile as a man. But we're given to understand the Sensitives have a Chaos seer. We'd like to secure his co-operation in destroying the Chaos weapon.'

Pilon placed his hands together and looked at his long, slim fingers for many minutes before replying.

'You're a painful and terrifying man, Marshal. The more so because you don't know what you seek. What you ask is barely possible. If it were possible, it wouldn't be wise. And even if it were wise, the results would not be those you think.'

'I asked for assistance, not for a book of riddles. It's true that such a seer exists?'

'It's true there is one. But I doubt the rest of the galaxy's ready for the contact.'

'I don't understand.'

'Marshal — why do you think the Sensitives isolate themselves from the rest of mankind?'

'It is said you breed selectively over many generations in order to develop special talents. You can't tolerate the possibility of contamination by unexceptional blood-lines.'

'That's only a half-truth. The rest is that, having bred pure strains, we dare not release them on mankind. Their talents are too extreme, too powerful, too liable to be subjected to abuse or perverted to a foreign end. You're a man of wisdom, so you'll see my point. Would you deliver a dangerous power into the hands of an idiot child?'

'Is that how you see us?' asked Wildheit.

'That's how we see the Federation. A marvellous child, but congenitally immature. Its collective psychology is at an emotional level, barely above an instinctive reaction. It procreates mindlessly, and multiplies because it must, and spreads like a cancer through the stars.'

'Sophistry!'

'Is it? We've many seers, each with different specialities. Any of them might distort your ideas on what you think you want your society to become. We want no responsibility for what you might do with them — or they with you.'

'I think you over-estimate the potential of your seers. In any case, you give me forewarning. Thus the onus is on ourselves, not you. I repeat my request for a Chaos seer.'

The half noises beyond the window were growing gradually more distinct. Now there was the rhythmic rattle as of wooden sticks clicking together, and a sub-note like a deep and resonant horn. Coul was crouched in anticipation, flickering vaguely, always returning to the same attentive pose. Even Wildheit could smell a strong, pervasive scent like Terran violets.

'Something's going on out there,' he said suddenly to Pilon. 'What?'

'It's simply that the Guardians are come. There are many factions among the Sensitives. Some would side with you, some strike you down. I said it was dangerous for you to be here. The Guardians will maintain the peace until the Conclave decides what can be done for you — or with you. For a while you must be placed in isolation. I advise you not to resist.'

The safety rings on Wildheit's weapons pouch stripped open at the barest touch of his fingers. Smashing the ancient light to the floor, he moved swiftly to the window and scanned the strange-sounding darkness. Initially he could see nothing, but then began to discern in the roadway the movement of white sticks gripped by unseen hands.

Clickety . . . Clickety . . . Clickety . . .

A Vast horn, whose resonance dropped slowly beyond the lower threshold of human perception, bounced his senses with a throbbing pulse which seemed to snatch the power of volition from his mind.

Clickety . . . Clickety . . .

The white sticks were a hypnotic focus, filling an unknown void in his brain with an expanding pattern of criss-crossed sounds.

Clickety . . .

. . . and with the deep perfume carrying strange messengers into his lungs and thence into his bloodstream, Marshal Wildheit, weapons pouches readied but untouched, spun silently at the window and fell unconscious to the floor.

Wildheit awoke in a vault of white stone, pillared and arched in the manner of a cellar which has to support considerable weight from a building above. Outside it was day, and strong sunlight entering a line of holes each no larger than his fist, made bright pearls of reflection on the polished smoothness of the floor. His immediate concern was for his weapons, but they were gone, together with his uniform suit. Whilst he had been unconscious, hands must have stripped him, and he was left now with but a simple garment of woven cloth which he endeavoured to draw round himself in a manner reminiscent of a toga. Coul quivered uncertainly.

'A fine mess you let me get into,' said Wildheit to the god.

'You were in no danger,' reproved Coul mildly. 'It's no function of mine to preserve you from anything short of death. Who can choose between the strange things humans do to each other? You're a race pathologically addicted to interfering with the bodies of others.'

'A new moral philosophy is all I need to complete my morning,' said Wildheit morosely.

Shortly he located a door — or rather, several doors. All were stout, smooth, and without obvious locks or means of purchase. Retiring from an attempt to open one with his fingers, he climbed up and managed to look out of one of the holes by which the sunlight entered.

He found he was no longer looking at the city, but at what appeared to be a scattered fortress. A long, broad, castellated wall surmounted by a footpath followed the contours of the landscape as far as he could see, set between fields of verdant green. Occasionally a frowning tower broke the continuing line of the wall, and in places a whole village or enclave seemed to be contained within a deviant loop and thus isolated from its surroundings. The notion of 'containment' lent pointed support for Coul's last critical comment. Coming so soon after Pilon's jibe about the immaturity of the human race, Wildheit, for the first time in his life, had a momentary twinge of doubt about the validity of his actions.

Moodily, he continued to explore the cellar, but found nothing of any interest or value. Finally he sat on the floor amid the shafts of sunlight and waited for something to happen. He was not left long. One of the doors opened and a man dressed in a black, loose-fitting tunic came into the cellar. His approach was almost apologetic.

'Marshal Wildheit, I am Dabria, one of the senior Guardians of Mayo. Your apprehension was unfortunate but necessary. Had you consulted your star gazeteer, you'd have found that Mayo was a for-

bidden world. You should not have made planetfall.'

'I doubt the legality of refusing landing to a space-marshal. Most tyrants would welcome the option. In any case, my mission overrides ordinary considerations. The Federation needs the assistance of your Chaos seer. How else should I negotiate?'

'We appreciated your needs and your problems. Even now the Conclave debates the issue. But your arrival was unfortunate. Internal tension among the Sensitives runs high. Your coming could be the catalyst which liberates a terrible reaction. You're a danger to us all.'

'Then I'll strike a bargain. Return my clothes and equipment, and bring me the Chaos seer. We'll be off-planet within the hour.'

'A one-sided bargain.' Dabria was unimpressed. 'What do you offer in return?'

'A chance to resolve your internal affairs without my catalytic presence. And freedom from the necessity for me to call in units of the Federation Space Force to effect my rescue. That would really throw your dissidents into a turmoil.'

'A potent threat, but one you've no chance of achieving.'

'Indeed? I wouldn't advise you to put it to the test.'

The guardian moved back towards the door. 'I've heard of your ability to communicate without equipment. It's a chance I'll not take. Perhaps the solution you suggest would be easiest for us both. There'll be much opposition, but I'll see what I can do.'

Even as he spoke, he leaped, his hand moving in one lightning swing to chop at the side of Wildheit's throat. He arrived at the garment in which the marshal had been clothed only to find it already empty and still falling through the air. The full force of a blow on the nape of his neck brought Dabria down to his knees, and a wild foot pitched him forward on his face. His momentum carried him across the polished stone to where a pillar intercepted his headlong flight. Dazed, he found his attempted recovery blocked by the pressure of the marshal's instep threatening to crush his windpipe.

'That was a very stupid thing to try,' said Wildheit disgustedly. 'Killing me wouldn't have solved anything. Next time you'd have had six marshals and an armed cruiser to contend with. Now get out of here and go find me the seer.'

* * *



In the Children's place, Roamer was watching the grazing animals. All morning she had carefully moved them up the long slope under the guard wall, leaving the grass a close-cropped picture of serenity. Now she directed her charges downwards, dividing them equally between the little paths in order to neaten all the banks before she returned the herd to pasture.

It was patient, tranquil work. The intelligent ruminants were appreciative of her calm, intelligent direction, which assured them of full stomachs without stress or competition. In return, the

Children's place was cropped and neaten. It was all part of the pattern of interdependence between humans and animals which made life in this part of Mayo such a rewarding experience.

As they neared the completion of the task, Roamer looked back at their collective efforts, and was pleased. This was not her place — she was a tenant of an Adolescent's community — but all had to contribute to the welfare of the children. With fair weather, rich grass, and a calm herd, they had today achieved superb results, and the milk would be rich and plentiful.

Then as they reached the bottom of the slope, there came an unexpected change in the pattern.

'Ho, Roamer!'

She looked up to see old Pilon on the guard wall, beckoning. She ran towards him, laughing.

'Have you come to play more games today? Did you know I can pick up entropy from right beyond the stars? I think soon I shall be able to reach back to the Big Bang and the creation of the universe.' Then she stopped when she saw how grave was the look on his face.

'Come up here, Roamer. We have to talk.'

'I'm not allowed on the wall.'

'Today you are allowed. The watchmen won't stop you. I've serious news for you.'

'It can't be the end of the universe, else I'd have seen it coming.'

Hastily she directed the herd into the low pasture, and ran to the nearest tower. Unexpectedly the watchmen let her through, and she climbed the dusty, twisting steps and emerged almost breathless on top of the wall. It was the first time she had ever been on it, and the novelty of a sight from the wall's top gave her a delicious shiver of vertigo.

'What's wrong, Pilon? You look so sad.'

'You remember the other day when you read Chaos to me. You said the war has begun.'

'I could see it. What of it?'

'You were right, little one. The war has come.'

'Come to Mayo?'

'Not yet, but to the galaxy certainly. And of all our seers, you were the only one who knew. Now someone has come from the Federation asking for your aid. Your ability to read Chaos is unique. Perhaps you alone have the power to fight the growing darkness.'

'Then we should go and speak with him.'

'It's not just to speak. He wants to take you away from Mayo with him.'

'To the stars?'

'To the stars and beyond, perhaps.'

'What nonsense you do speak.'

'Already his request has divided the Conclave of Elders, and the guardians are at each other's throats. A curious form of nonsense!'

She turned away suddenly and looked across the green fields as if seeing them for the first time.

'So you want me to go?'

'I want what's best for you. Last night I was opposed to your going. Since then I've thought it through. There's little enough on Mayo for one possessing your talents. Outspace you'll have the most powerful of protectors and a chance to develop as you should. Most seers would give their sight to have such an offer. But my final decision rests on the fact that if you don't take this opportunity, it may

never be repeated.'

'Can you explain that.'

'The Federation man reminds me that if they lose the war, the Federation will contract. Then the aliens will sweep this edge of the galaxy clear of humanity.'

'You make such serious talk.'

'Life is serious. The walls we build between the communities are serious. The gulf we put between ourselves and the rest of human kind is serious. The old Sensitives were dedicated to liberating the full potentials in man. We've released them from the individual, but confined them none the less. Perhaps in that we've betrayed the ancient trust.'

'Isn't it taught that the stars are not ready for the seers?'

'Did anybody ask the stars? Perhaps they're big enough to take care of themselves. If not, they must suffer the consequences.'

'Then I shall go.'

'It may not be easy. Many of the Conclave are opposed. But if there's a way, we'll find it. Come, I think Dabria has a plan. He won't rest easily until this thing is settled.'

* * *

When Dabria re-entered the cellar he remained by the door and made no attempt to approach.

'Marshal—we had a disagreement earlier. It was nothing personal, but you do present considerable problems for me. But I take your point that killing you would multiply rather than end them. Therefore I've a proposition to make.'

'So have I. I want the Chaos seer and I want release from this place. I'll give you two hours before I call for a Spaceforce cruiser.'

'That won't be necessary. I've been talking with Pilon. It's seemingly in all our interests for the seer to go with you. Unfortunately it's prohibited by law for any Sensitive to travel offworld. If I appear openly to allow the Chaos seer to go, the pressure from other seers for like privilege could wreck our system of guardianship and destroy most of what we've established.'

'Which means you have a problem.'

'To which I have contrived a solution which should suit us both. Pilon goes to fetch the Chaos seer, who will be persuaded to accompany you. When the seer arrives, you'll both be left here until the late watch goes on duty. At that time you'll find the end door unlocked, and beyond it your clothes and equipment just as we removed them. I believe it well within your powers to force an escape and get the Chaos seer offworld before the watch can prevent you. Thus you gain what you came for, and I do not have a revolution thrust upon me.'

'Who else knows about this plot?' asked Wildheit dubiously.

'None but Pilon and the seer.'

'So if it comes to fighting, the blood will be real?'

'Having examined your equipment, I doubt the blood will be yours. Let's not be squeamish, Marshal. In the circumstances, there's no alternative.'

For the next hour Wildheit was left contemplating the tortuous nature of human duplicity. Then Pilon entered, bringing with him a wild-eyed girl barely reached maturity.

'Marshal, I bring you the Chaos seer. By a strange element of foresight, her name is Roamer. Take great care of her, because she's one of the rarer flowers the Sensitives have yet produced.'

Wildheit struggled to his feet. 'I'd no idea the Chaos seer was a girl. I'd imagined...'

'I warned you it wouldn't be wise.' Pilon was fighting with some buried emotion. 'I know also the results won't be those you anticipate. Nevertheless, you've forced the issue, and now there's no turning back. Roamer, this is Spacemarshal Wildheit, a sort of Guardian of the galaxy. His weapons are terrible and his motivations sincere. None the less he's naive, and misinformed about the nature of the universe. He'll need much instruction. Treat the stars gently, little one. Perhaps a few of them will survive.'

As he turned to go, Wildheit caught at his arm.

'Hold a minute! Roamer, had I known you were so young I'd not have asked for you. The journey ahead is going to be difficult and dangerous—and the hunt for the Chaos weapon even more so. Are you sure you're prepared to come with me?'

Pilon looked back, and there was a hint of distant mischief in his eyes. 'Well, Roamer, what do you say?'

'This moment already has its trace in the patterns of Chaos. It's the causal origin of one of the greatest entropic shockpoints the galaxy has ever seen.'

'Did you hear that, Marshal? Future history has already made its verdict. Let neither of you consider you've any option in the matter. What you have started, is due to shake the universe. It is not implied whether for good or evil—merely that it will happen.'

When Pilon had left, Wildheit turned to Roamer. From the look of consternation on her face it was evident she could actually see the god on his shoulder.

'You seem surprised at my companion, Roamer,' he said kindly. 'You must have great sensitivity. Most people can't see him at all.'

'What is it?' she asked. The tension in her vocal cords made her voice seem ragged.

'It's a god. His name is Coul.'

'I don't understand. God is infinite.'
'Believe what you must, little frog. But what I tell you is true. There are many gods. All of them are terrifying in their power. None is omnipotent.'

'Why does he flicker like that?'

'Because he travels in several dimensions, of which this is only one. He 'visits' the others constantly, thus at no time is he fully here.'

'Why does he sit on your shoulder?'

'We're attached until death — my death. Coul's immortal.'

'Can't you take him off — ever?'

'There's no way. He lives right into me.'

'Like a parasite?' The prospect clearly worried her.

'No, not like a parasite. This is symbiosis. We each contribute something to the other. A sort of partnership, you understand.'

'I don't understand.'

'I support Coul with the life forces he needs to maintain a partial reality in this dimension. Because I'm a good host he looks after my welfare when my needs become extreme.'

Roamer had lost some of her fears now, and her repugnance was turning to fascination.

'I think he's very, very ugly.'

'Touch him.'

'Should I?'

'He'd like it fine — if you believe in him. Do you believe he exists?'

'I can see him. Why therefore should I doubt?'

'Do you believe he's a god?'

She hesitated for a moment, anxiously reading Wildheit's eyes, wondering if, against all the odds, this could be some form of joke. She found no mockery in his face, only a profound sympathy.

'I believe he's a god,' she said.

With infinite caution she extended her arm and let her fingers come delicately in contact with the leathery brown deity. As she touched it she closed her eyes involuntarily and opened her eyes in a kind of ecstasy. She remained thus for a couple of minutes, then took her hand away.

'What did you feel?' asked Wildheit.

'I felt . . . music.' Her voice was strangely distant.

'That's good! He accepts you.'

'Because they live in a multitude of dimensions, all gods have problems of identity. You've demonstrated a belief in his existence here and now. That gives him a point of empathy he can use to strengthen his frame of reference.'

'You're being very technical.'

'I'm being practical. Coul needs belief the way you need food. And he's appreciative when he gets it. When you're in extreme need, call out to him. If you believe in him enough, could be he'll find a way to help. Now, what time does the late watch begin?'

'Soon now. Why?'

'Dabria has arranged a subterfuge. He daren't appear to approve of your leaving, so he's arranged to allow us to escape. When the watch changes, I'll have my weapons back and then we can go. Can you lead me through the city to the bridge over the river?'

'I think so.'

'Good! Out in the desert I have a spaceship. If we can reach that, we'll be safe. But we may have to fight to get there. Stay close to me, and do exactly as I say.'

As he was speaking he heard a slight noise from the far end of the cellar. Moving to investigate, he found one of the doors ajar, and in a small room beyond this his uniform and equipment had been laid on a table. Dressing as swiftly as he was able, he returned to Roamer.

'If you're ready, partner, we'll go see what Chaos has in store for us.'

Signalling for her to stand well back, he shattered the heavy door with a single explosive capsule, then fired a shock pellet down the corridor he found beyond. He ducked his head out of the way of the pico-pulse shock, then signalled for Roamer to follow fast. At the end of the corridor they found two stunned watchmen slumped over a table. Past them was another door and a flight of stairs leading upwards which brought them out on the top of a guard wall on the fringes of the city itself.

'Now which way?'

'To the left. That way we can avoid the watch-school.'

The day was closing to a golden dusk, and the streets beneath the wall were largely deserted. A tower in the wall suggested a means of descent and also the presence of more watchmen. Wildheit cleared the entrance with a shock pellet and followed straight through down the spiral stone stairs. At the bottom he surprised two watchmen who were coming to investigate the noise. He dropped one with a hand-blow, and the second fled into another part of the tower presumably to fetch assistance.

The marshal did not follow him. They now had a clear route into the sandy streets and an urgent need to reach the bridge before too many watchmen could be mustered. The few people they passed among the random houses appeared surprised to see the pair run by, but made no attempt to interfere. Soon they found themselves on the edge of the river and in sight of the bridge. Then the bell in the gatehouse began to sound a soulful alarm; and other bells set further in the city took up the message and relayed it until the whole evening sky seemed alive with clamorous sounds.

Wildheit swore, and drew the breathless girl into a recess between two buildings.

'Is there another bridge, Roamer?'

'Many kilometres away.'

'Then I'm going to have to take this one the hard way. If we get across, how will they follow us? On foot?'

'On animals, I think.'

'When we start for the bridge, keep running. Don't stop for anything until we reach the other side.'

Wildheit began to load the projectors carried in his belt as they ran. As soon as the head of the bridge was within his range he began to open fire. The first projectiles hit their targets and lay silently for a few seconds then each started to emit a piercing scream which jarred, throbbed and interacted with the others to produce a painful cacophony of sound which easily drowned the loudest bells and drove the watchmen from the gatehouses in panic and alarm. As they congregated on the approach road, Wildheit laid a pattern of gas pellets among them, and they sagged slowly to their knees and pitched forward in ludicrous postures of sleep.

With a pellet of high explosive, Wildheit shattered the iron gate across the path well before they reached it, and soon they were on the bridge itself. However, many watchmen were closing into the area behind them, and operating some form of projected beam which disturbed the light-path in the air as it probed disturbingly close. Continuing to run, the marshal began to distribute small canisters behind him: some of these produced eye-baffling flares and some, great clouds of smoke which the flares made luminous and thus impenetrable to the eye. Then as they reached the farther bank of the river, a great series of explosions ripped the bridge apart.

Panting painfully for breath, they stopped for a moment to look back at the damage. When the smoke had cleared there was nothing left of the bridge but a few broken piers protruding above the surface of the dark and muddied waters.

'That should hold them for a bit,' said Wildheit, and he lent the panting girl his arm to lean on. From a pocket he produced a small box and began to manipulate the studs inset on its front.

'What — what are you doing?' Roamer was still fighting to regain her breath.

'If they're fast animals I doubt if we've time to reach the ship on foot. I've a vehicle near my spacecraft. I'm calling it by radio. Now it's coming towards us. We'll walk until we meet it.'

Shortly the engines of the crawler sounded over the desert sands, and when it appeared, Wildheit halted it expertly close and they climbed into the cabin.



The experience of riding in a mechanical vehicle was new to Roamer. She closed her eyes and clung on tightly as they moved rapidly out to where the *Gegenschein* had landed. As they neared the patrol-ship, however, she opened her eyes and cried out in sudden alarm.

'Please stop! We can't go on. Some things's terribly wrong.'

'In what way?'

'I see a great and sudden leap in entropy. An explosion . . .'

Wildheit slewed the crawler to a halt, prepared to argue that what she was reading was probably the imminent future firing of the take-off engines. To allay her fears he was patiently explaining this theory when the *Gegenschein* burst abruptly into flaming incandescence which lit the desert as bright as day and threw out such heat that the crawler's occupants would have been burnt alive had the vehicle not been built for radiation safety. Then the conflagration died as suddenly as it had blossomed, and Wildheit knew he no longer had a ship. Another realization came also. From far out in the surrounding darkness came the sound of sticks on sticks . . .

Clickety . . . Clickety . . .

. . . overlaying the subnotes of a deep and reverberant horn . . .

. . . Clickety . . .

Great goutts of violet-scented perfume washed around them, and Wildheit found his senses starting to swim. His immediate reaction was to cut off the external ventilation fans and switch the crawler over to its own internal atmosphere. The idea worked, and the suffocating scent of violets was swiftly removed by the activated-carbon filters. Then he brought the motors up to a thunderous scream and engaged the torque converter. The vehicle leaped forward like a startled animal, and roared away across the desert past the molten remains of what had recently been the patrol-ship.

Curiously, even the great engine noise inside the cabin failed to prevent their perception of the clicking sticks; and behind and beyond the engine's roar, the baying of the great horn slipped inexorably down below the lowest registers of the human auditory threshold. Now, the slow throb of its pulse seemed alternately to attract and repel them, so that they began to sway like grasses before a wind.

With a bright oath, Wildheit switched on the crawler's powerful searchlights and swept them over the desert scene. The scanning beam revealed nothing of note, so he armed the automatic cannon and put a complete circle of close-spaced super-high explosive charges round them at minimum range. The clicking sticks went dumb, and the vast horn choked in mid utterance and was dead. To complete the certainty of their deliverance, the marshal then put out a second circle of

explosive death pitched at a slightly greater range. When he was certain that nothing within the span of his fire could be alive, he slowed the crawler back to cruising speed.

'One up to Dabria,' he said disgustedly. 'I should have guessed he'd lay an ambush. Letting us escape wasn't the only way he could keep control. Killing us would have been more effective. Nor would the Federation have bothered to send another marshal once the Chaos seer was dead. What I don't figure is how they had access to a device which could destroy a parked patrol-ship.'

'They wouldn't need a device,' said Roamer. 'Nor need it have been Dabria's work. There are seers who can mentally trigger any source of potential energy.'

Now the beam of the searchlight began to pick up the blast craters, and near them occasional bodies clad in the black tunic-dress of the Guardians. Several white sticks lay in the path, and farther out a buckled device of hoops and canvas was all that was left of the great subsonic horn.

'It's a pity they had to learn the hard way,' said Wildheit seriously.

'What do we do now?' asked Roamer. Her relief at their escape from the ambush was evident, but a lingering fear still haunted her eyes.

'We have to find another route off-world. And quickly. How far is the nearest spaceport?'

'There isn't one. When Mayo was declared forbidden, all the spaceports were dismantled and all the ships destroyed. That's how they made the prohibition absolute.'

Wildheit drew the crawler to a halt and let the engines die.

'Coul, I wish to speak with Marshal Hover. Can you enter communion with Tallath?'

'I see no great evidence of need,' said Coul archly. 'Have I not told you the purpose of communion is other than to circumvent your pedestrian communications system. Why not use your FTL transmitter?'

'Because the crawler's FTL set isn't powerful enough to reach Terra direct, and it could take days to attract the attention of a relay station. Anyway, the local sun broadcasts so much sub-etheric noise we'd never get any intelligence through the channel.'

'Then because you love me, I'll communicate with Talloth. If he's of like mind, we may grant your wish.'

Wildheit relaxed and tried to be patient, knowing there was no way he could force the issue. Despite their careful mimicry of human conversation, the gods spoke to each other by unknown means across a whole spectrum of dimensions and with a complexity of thought a human mind was never likely to comprehend. At some instant of quantized time and in some

alter-universe the two gods neared each other — perhaps shared a finite fraction of a second of composite identity. They were reluctant to use their powers of communion for the purpose of human communication, but the rare occasions when the request was granted frequently justified the presence of the gods on the marshals' shoulders.

'Breathe!' said Coul finally.

'Hullo, Jym! This is Hover. What's on your mind?'

'I'm still on Mayo, Cass. I've got the Chaos seer, but lost the patrol-ship. At the moment we're sitting it out in the crawler, but the local constabulary has elevated unfriendliness to the status of a fine art. What can you do about getting us off?'

'Hold a second while I check the shipping updates. Mmm! Not good. Spaceforce detected a mass alien breakthrough and put every ship they had about twenty kilo-parsecs out in the galactic drift. Even if they could spare a cruiser, it couldn't get to you inside six days. There's nothing Commercial anywhere near your edge of the Rim. Our best bet is a patrol-craft out from Terra, but that could take ten days. Can you hold out that long?'

'No chance! Without the patrol-ship I can't even refuel the crawler — leaving aside the niceties of food and rest.'

'Leave it with me, Jym. I'll put out an all-service priority call. There's bound to be some experimental craft around, or a random patrol-scout which isn't on the updates. Whatever you do, reserve enough power for the radio-beacon, so you can be located from space. How's he taking all this — the seer?'

'He's not a he, he's a she. Name of Roamer.'

'Aren't you overdoing this running-low-on-fuel bit?'

'Knock it off, Cass. She's about sixteen.'

'But she is a Chaos reader?'

'Pure and natural. I'd have been fried goose if she hadn't predicted the patrol-ship was going to blow.'

'Then clear all lines,' said Hover. 'We need that talent fast. The Chaos weapon just struck at Gannen, and we lost the relativity research ship and some of the best scientific brains in the galaxy.'

Wildheit added another fifty kilometres to their distance from the city before he decided to stop for the night. In the desert sand the crawler left broad and easily followed tracks, and he reasoned that only distance could give them relative security from surprise attack. He then closed down all non-essential systems to conserve their dwindling fuel, and activated the radio beacon in case Hover's estimate had been unduly pessimistic.

Just before dawn the soft bleep of the beacon's return signal threw him sharply

awake.

'What's the matter?' asked Roamer.
'Spacecraft in the stratosphere. Very likely making a landing. I think we're going to get lucky.'

He switched on the detectors and watched a spot of light falling across the screen, whilst the figures of the digital readout chased each other back and forth like agitated snakes.

'Landing for sure, but it's no Service craft. I've seldom seen such a haphazard approach mode. At a guess he's without instruments, blind drunk, and operating the controls with his feet.'

'Is that bad?' asked Roamer gravely.

'Well, there's only one group in space who can be that bad and still survive — and that's the Rhaqui.'

'The Rhaqui?'

'Space gypsies. There's three or four tribes of them. They wander round space in several old spacecraft salvaged from breaking yards. A finer gang of outright villains you'll never meet. Nobody will give them planet-space, and they're too lazy to develop a world of their own.'

From the path of its final trajectory it became obvious that the descending spacecraft was nominally homing on their radio beacon. So crazy was the approach mode that Wildheit cancelled the beacon and drove a kilometre out of position lest the craft should descend on top of them. Finally the huge hulk loomed down out of the sky and made an incredibly prolonged and untidy touchdown on the desert sands.

'That's Rhaqui for sure,' said Wildheit. 'We'll give them till sun-up then go over. It'll take that long for the ground to cool.'

At the sight of the first edge of the sun, Wildheit manoeuvred the crawler back into the vicinity of the antiquated and space-stained hull. Almost immediately a hatch opened and an outlandishly garbed and grinning figure wearing a huge tricorne hat climbed out and came swaggering across the sand to meet them.

'Kes-kes Saltzeim,' said Wildheit to Roamer. 'The biggest rogue of them all.'

'Hola, Marshal Jym! What coincidence to meet you here!'

'It would have been coincidence, if you hadn't been illegally monitoring the Service FTL transmissions and picked up an all-service priority call.'

Saltzeim grinned broadly. 'Marshal, to you everything's illegal. Smuggling, breaking quarantine, piracy, theft, rape — everything that gives life some spice. Not of course that I indulge in such things. But I can read, you understand?'

'I understand well enough,' said Wildheit.

'Like the story I was reading telling of a space-marshal engaged in a kidnap that went wrong. I think to myself I have ship and he doesn't and if this was true and not story I could perhaps arrange trade.'

'You thought wrongly, Kes-kes. I'm requisitioning your ship. Galactic Override Authority.'

'I see your lips move, but I hear no sense. Then I suppose to myself what the marshal's enemies would pay me to leave him here. Pure supposition, you understand?'

During the conversation about twenty more gypsies, an assortment of male and female, old and young, had descended from the spacecraft and were forming an interested circle around the negotiators. Saltzeim made a mock attempt to scan the skies.

'There's rumours of some unprincipled characters wandering this sector. That always puts a premium on freight rates and virginity. In the circumstances I couldn't get you offworld for less than a Marshal's Credit Note for six million stellars...'

'Space-worms have eaten your mind!'

'... and the crawler...'

'Federation property, not for sale.'

'... and the girl.'

'That's not even negotiable. You know, I'd be doing the galaxy a favour if I returned to my cannon and blasted this rat-hulk and all your "family" out of existence.'

'But you won't do that, Marshal Jym. My scanners tell me more than thousand riders approach across the desert. Do we have trade?'

'I'll offer you three million stellars. That's about a thousand times what your whole stinking outfit's worth.'

'And the crawler?'

'I'll abandon it on the desert. If you load it, you do so at your own risk. There's a death penalty attached to its unlawful acquisition.'

'And the girl?'

'Completely out of the question. The first man who touches her is dead.'

Saltzeim appeared to give the matter careful consideration.

'You drive a hard bargain, Marshal Jym. But we have trade. Please accept the hospitality of our ship. We'll be space-borne as soon as we've swept our traces from the dust.'

Wildheit shrugged. He knew that Saltzeim had no intention of leaving the crawler in the desert. He was comforted by the fact that all the ammunition and spares were deliberately non-standard and of such complexity that inept operation was as likely to be as dangerous to the operator as to the attacked. His own duty should have been to activate the crawler's radio-linked self-destruct mechanism, but he was considering a balance of risks. During the progress of the bargaining one of the onlookers had used the phrase '*Amindumi*'. Knowing something of the customs of space gypsies, Wildheit considered it wise to have extra armaments to hand. Unwittingly the Rhaqui were

busily engaged loading the vehicle containing these armaments into their own hold.

The interior of the Rhaqui ship was indescribably dirty and unsafe. The hull, by virtue largely of its extreme thickness, was mainly sound and unpatched; but the bulkheads, engines and life-support mechanisms were a frightening hotch-potch of old and adapted parts scrounged from shipyards at all corners of the galaxy. It said much for the ingenuity of the Rhaqui spacetinkers that such an ill-suited assortment of pieces could be made to function in any way at all. It said even more for the desperate thirsting for independence which drove the gypsies to accept such an inherently dangerous habitat as part of their way of life.

The flight-bridge was also the centre of the community. Here, dangerously degraded instrument panels vied for place with wooden trestles, stone drinking vessels, and a bewildering assortment of junk including cast-off clothing which appeared to have been dropped at random wherever the former wearer fancied. To complete the confusion, numerous small animals and birds from several worlds fed from trays placed about the floor and chased each other round the navigation consoles.

Saltzeim's superior status was indicated by his possession of his own cabin, which was reasonably tidy except, ludicrously, for the presence of a bathtub full of antique books. He shepherded Wildheit and Roamer into the cabin and waited pensively whilst the marshal drafted the irrevocable Credit Note. Then he folded the note with due ceremony and placed it in the lining of his outlandish tricorne hat.

'Thank you, Marshal Jym. This cabin shall be yours for the duration of the journey. The woman shall be found sleepsace elsewhere.'

'Not while I breathe,' said Wildheit. 'The girl stays at all times within my sight. Remember, I shall kill anyone who attempts to approach her.'

'That won't be necessary. I give you my word.'

'Your lips move, but I hear no sounds. When you're drunk, who will restrain the others?'

'Am I not the "father" of the "family"?'

'If you think so, you're a fool. Don't you hear them joking about *amindumi*? That's not part of our contract.'

'You'd take much upon yourself, Marshal, if you killed one of the "family".'

'I would be as happy to kill them all as to kill one. Therefore the onus is on you. Keep control, lest I be forced to do it for you.'

Saltzeim went away muttering under his breath, and Wildheit turned to examine the cabin.

'You can sleep on the bunk, Roamer. There's a curtain to give you some

privacy.'

'And you?'

'I shan't sleep. Some tablets I have will suffice instead. It'll be necessary for me to guard the door.'

'Is that why you were cross with Saltzeim?'

'Kes-kes is a fool. He's losing his grip. He's in no position to make promises binding on the others.'

'What is this phrase — *amindumi*?'

'To understand it, you have to understand Rhaqui history. There are only three or four small clans of them, and their life-style makes them a self-contained and insular people. Marriage outside the Rhaqui is forbidden by clan law.'

As he spoke, Wildheit was examining the construction and fittings of the cabin, his brain questing among the collection of intricate and ancient pipes, tubes and conduits with which the walls were laden.

'Unfortunately such a high degree of in-breeding combined with long space-flight exposures ensures a continuing supply of defective and imbecile children. Without the frequent introduction of new blood-lines, the Rhaqui would soon cease to exist. Their ingenuity suggested a way to ensure the new blood without breaking the marriage taboos.'

Taking tools from his pockets, Wildheit was removing some of the panelling from the walls and examining the wiring he found beneath. He shrugged, as if finding nothing of use, and turned back to Roamer.

'They abduct women of unrelated stock. When they have found a suitable prospect they hold a series of orgies in which every male in the clan tries to fertilize her. One usually succeeds, but none can prove which is the successful sire. The pregnant woman is kept under careful restraint until the child is born. The infant is adopted by the clan, but the mother is ceremonially killed by the wives as punishment for "Conjugal theft". These last rites are particularly barbarous. Their phrase for the victim is *amindumi*.'

'And that's their intention for me?'

Wildheit checked his weapons belt. 'There's a wide gulf between intention and its attainment. But I think you'd better take to the bunk for a bit, because Kes-kes take-offs aren't noted for finesse.'

7

The take-off was fully as frightening as the dilapidated state of the craft threatened it would be. After a series of great explosions, the hulk lurched uneasily skyward and seemed to be dragged upwards more by a spirit of desperation than by the thrust of its uncoordinated jets. The final achievement of escape velocity was greeted by ribald cheers from the flight-bridge, as though its attainment had been the subject of much doubt. With space-trained ears Wildheit listened attentively to every phase of the operation, and winced repeatedly as operational atrocities succeeded each other in a seemingly unending stream.

Once the ship had clawed its way into interplanetary space and settled into a continuous acceleration on gravitational drive, the space-breakfast was prepared. This meal was traditionally the first meal of any trip, and its serving had to await the completion of various ship chores associated with renewed flight. Thus its timing was dictated by the necessities of flight duties rather than by human need, and they were all extremely hungry by the time it was produced.

Roamer and Wildheit joined the others on the flight-bridge for the meal. The presence of the full "family" underscored the marshal's point about the high incidence of congenital defects. Nearly half of the "family" appeared tainted with some degree of lowered intellect, yet behind their overt childishness was a dangerous animal sharpness tempered by neither conscience nor an apparent appreciation of the relationship between cause and effect. Since all were wiry, strong and armed, it was a precarious situation for strangers.

The meal began peacefully enough. Saltzeim dominated the table from one end, with the seer and the marshal placed immediately to his right. Whole carcasses of meat had been roasted and brought to the table on thick metal trays at full oven heat so that cooking continued even while the meat was being served. Kes-kes, using a large-bladed knife of impressive sharpness, expertly divided the meats and flipped whole portions of it the length of the table to be caught by the plates of the "family". The guests were treated similarly except that the meat was slipped from the blade instead of being thrown.

As plentiful as the meat was the drink, a spirit raw from the crudeness of its fermenting and distillation. Wildheit, who had been uncomfortably aware that the eyes of all the male members of the "family" had been straying over Roamer since the meal began, became increasingly concerned as the alcohol loosened their tongues and began to conquer their minimal inhibitions. Soon the talk of

amindumi was phrased not as a question of its possibility, but of when. Finally the marshal rose to his feet, taking Roamer by the arm.

'Time to break this up, Kes-kes.'

'Sit down, marshal! They're just a little high spirited. Space has few entertainments.'

'And Roamer's not going to become one of them. Keep control of them, else I'll be forced to do it for you.'

'I'm their "father",' said the Rhaqui belligerently, a tongue of meat curling down his chin. 'Nobody would dare . . .'

A small gypsy youth with a curiously pinched face and shining-dark eyes leaped suddenly from the trestles and made a dive to get an arm round Roamer's waist. The marshal's hands were at his weapons belt, but he looked first at Saltzeim, giving him the chance to avert a tragedy. Kes-kes rose with an enraged oath, swayed drunkenly, then appeared to collect himself with a great shrug of his frame. He shouted at the errant Rhaqui, received no response whatsoever, then leaned across the corner of the table and struck out mightily with his broad-bladed knife.

The incident was a moment frozen in horror. The exploring hand, clean severed at the wrist, dropped on to the table where it spluttered rebelliously in the still-hot fat in one of the trays of meat. The miscreant, too shocked by the loss to acknowledge the undoubted pain, stood in dumb amazement at the fate of his erstwhile appendage. Then he fainted. The absolute silence which had fallen over the "family" was broken by a storm of anger and protest. Wildheit forestalled the melee by firing a noise-burst at the ceiling.

'Now hear this! You Rhaqui have accepted a trade, for which you are being paid a more than adequate price. Do not attempt to touch the girl. I shan't be as merciful as Kes-kes. I'll use a slim-beam on any and all of you who dares even to try.'

Back in the cabin, Roamer seemed quiet, but not as disturbed as Wildheit had expected. Nevertheless he gave her a relaxant from his medi-kit and sat watching the door thoughtfully while she slept.

Ostensibly the rest of the watch period was quiet, but when he and Roamer emerged at the start of the next watch, the attitude of everyone they encountered was one of scarcely-masked hostility. At the controls an unfamiliar face was surmounted by Kes-kes Saltzeim's tricorner hat. A form of clan justice appeared to have been exerted; and there was little doubt that in the space debris which reluctantly fell behind the still-accelerating ship, the body of the "father" of the "family" drifted now peacefully towards the farther shores of infinity.

No further incidents occurred until the middle of the third watch, when someone

knocked on the door and invited them to join the meal. Hoping the previous lesson had been sufficient, Wildheit accepted. They found the "family" unusually subdued, but there was an unspoken expectation in the atmosphere which drew Wildheit's fingers constantly close to his weapons belt. With the serving of the drink, the tension appeared to relax a little, but Wildheit sharpened his perception and remained even more alert.

The attack when it came was treacherous and swift. Without any warning, someone flung a jugful of spirit in the marshal's face and at the same instant a small and agile Rhaqui, who had not been present at the table, sprang onto Wildheit's back with a knife in each hand, and drew in his arms to plunge each blade straight into the space-marshal's eyes. Already partially blinded by the spirit, Wildheit could not have detected the danger in time, and would have been permanently blinded had not someone also attempted to drive a large stiletto between his ribs. The imminence of the certain death of his host was a circumstance Coul was not prepared to tolerate. For an instant, the scene became held in a time-locked stasis in which only Wildheit continued to move. Barely conscious of the few extra seconds the god had injected into his life, he hurled the enemy from his back straight onto a motionless stiletto, and had gained access to his weapons before Coul withdrew his temporal interference.

Wildheit's retribution was swift. He cut down three of the leaping Rhaqui with a slim-beam, then threw a localized shock-pellet to the far end of the room. The pico-pulse was painful to them all, but those closer to the pulse-point dropped to the floor unconscious. One of the gypsies produced a chemical-propellant handgun and brought it to swift aim. Wildheit directed the slim-beam not at the man but at the gun. The device exploded with an unkempt roar, and the flying shrapnel did so much damage to the man and his accomplices that the attack turned into a screaming rout. Wildheit deliberately cut down three more as they fled, then found himself the only thing still moving on the flight-bridge.

This was the first moment he had realized Roamer was no longer at his side. A muffled noise behind him told through which door she had been taken. He cut the lock and hinges away with the slim-beam because it was quicker than attempting to open the door in the usual manner. On the far side of the portal he stopped in amazement. The two young gypsies present in the room were dead. A quick inspection of their grotesque postures suggested neither of them had a single major bone unbroken in their bodies. Shaken, he turned to find Roamer watching him, her face unusually calm.

'Who did that?' Wildheit pointed to

the tangled corpses.

'I did.' The answer was without particular emotion.

'How . . . ?' He found his voice contained an element of anguish. Not the least disturbing fact was Roamer's own composure.

She looked at her small, slim hands, then back to his eyes. 'The Sensitive seers have specialities. But this doesn't mean they're limited to one talent. There's much I've not practiced, but if this is the pattern of life among the stars, I'll have to adapt to it. In time I think I shall learn to kill even more people than you.'

'You mayn't believe this,' said Wildheit ruefully, 'but killing's not the object of the exercise at all. I'm supposed to be a peacekeeper.'

She looked both at and past him. 'Then why do you carry so many dreadful weapons? Is peace the last thing the stars want imposed upon them?'

'One day I'll explain it to you,' said Wildheit. Then he began to wonder if he could explain it to himself.

Roamer suddenly gave a little gasp. The look of concentration on her face told him that her mind was searching far out beyond the Rhaqui ship.

'What's the matter, Roamer?'

'The patterns of Chaos. Something happened — a causal point on this ship leading to a sudden leap in entropy.'

'Enough to destroy the ship?'

'Certainly enough. But there's an oddity. The entropic blaze should already have taken place, but something is intercepting the link between cause and effect. It's delaying the reaction.'

'The Chaos weapon?'

'I don't know what to call it, but there's a lot of energy involved. See — already it begins to stress the continuum.'

When she had pointed it out, Wildheit could see plainly what she meant. A critical view of any surface revealed a slight optical fuzz as if the light were being partially diffracted by the atmosphere.

Frowning as he tried to understand the implications, the marshal's attention was suddenly diverted by a noise outside on the flight-bridge. He swung ready to repel an attack, but saw nothing but a fleeting gypsy figure scurrying through a farther door. Wildheit fired high as a warning, and the fellow let something drop to the floor as he disappeared round the corner. Suspecting a trick, the marshal slammed a shock pellet into the area, and followed fast to recover the object which had fallen.

He came back to Roamer bearing the remote-control box for the crawler, which must have become dislodged from his belt during the fight. The state of the indicators on it gave him cause for concern.

'What's the matter?' asked Roamer.

'Some cretin's been playing with the crawler's control box. They've keyed the command for self-destruct.'

'Which could explain our causal point,' said Roamer.

'The timing would be about right. But even if the crawler destructs in the holds it's unlikely to take a ship of this size with it. Yet the Chaos weapon appears to be holding off the reaction. Why?'

'It could be to concentrate the effect. The more stressed the continuum, the greater the energy release when the reaction finally gets free. I see it as an act of desperation.'

'Desperation?'

'Think about it. You go to hunt the Chaos weapon, right?'

'True enough.'

'And with my help, we'd be unlikely to voluntarily enter a Chaos omega point. Right?'

'I think that's a reasonable assumption.'

'Then the only way the weapon's controllers can stop us is to amplify the scale of some potential disaster we're not in a position to avoid.'

'Of course!' said Wildheit. 'The crawler destruct mechanism can only do limited damage by itself. But if by holding that point sufficient stress can be built up in the continuum, the backlash could well tear the ship apart. Is there anything we can do about it?'

'I don't know.' Roamer put her knuckles to her forehead. 'I think all we can do is to try to get out of range before it happens.'

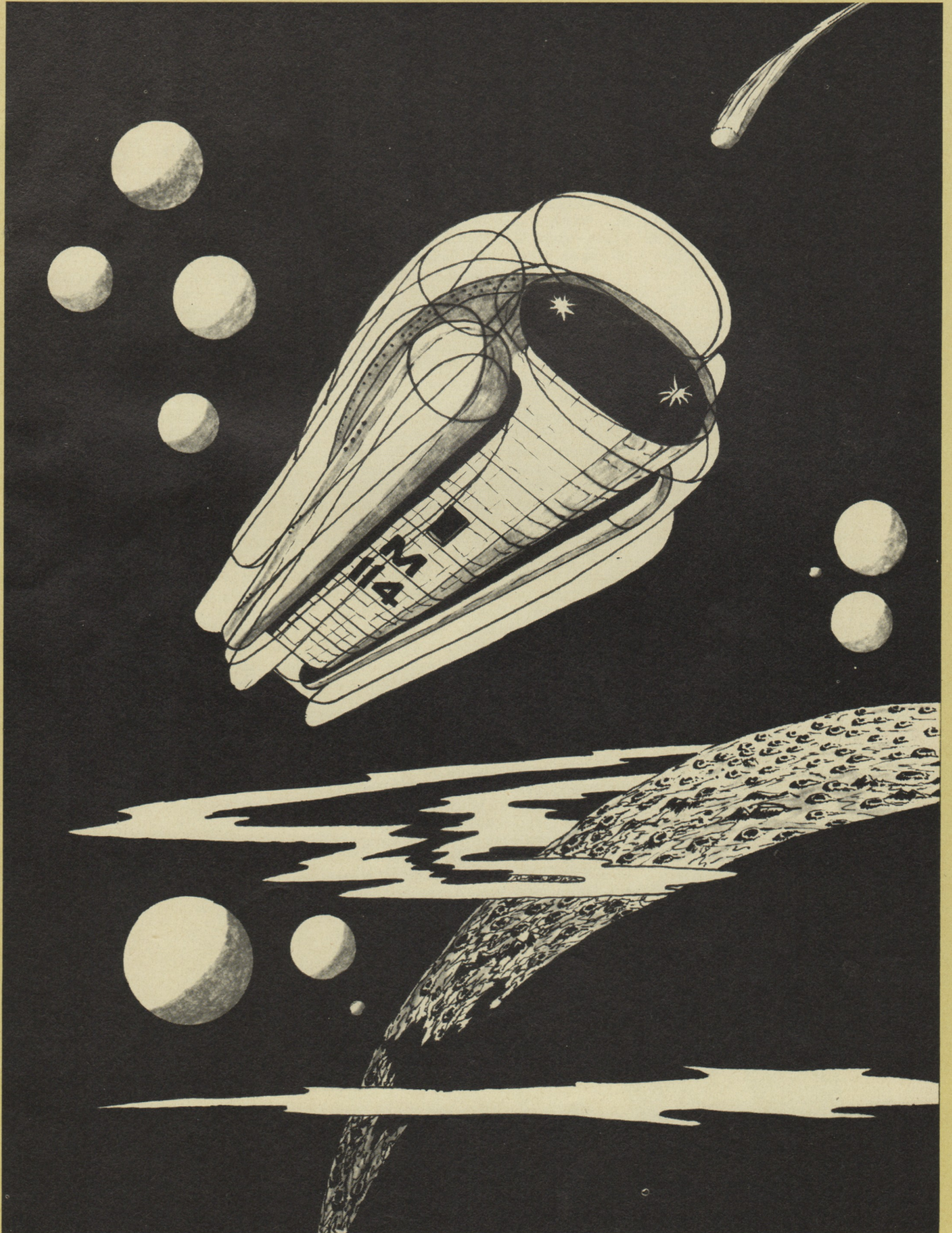
Abruptly a voice came over the ship's communicator. One of the Rhaqui was speaking.

'Marshal Wildheit, I call for a truce. The ship has achieved subspace entry velocity. Delay with the jump could be dangerous to us all. Because of our disagreement, you now hold the flight-bridge where our controls are located. If you'll return to your cabin, we will return to the flight-bridge to continue safe navigation. In return for this exchange, you'll have safe passage as an absolute guarantee.'

Wildheit looked at Roamer, and his eyes narrowed with speculation.

'I just wonder if this couldn't be twisted into the answer to our problem.' He reached for the communicator button. 'This is Wildheit. I've had enough Rhaqui guarantees to last me a lifetime. You may return to the flight-bridge under one condition. I want a serviceable life-craft commissioned immediately. Your "hospitality" has become unacceptable, and if I'm forced to kill any more of the "family" you won't have crew enough left to maintain flight safety. What do you answer?'

'An acceptable compromise, Marshal.' The voice carried obvious tones of relief. 'Three million stellars was already little



enough compensation for our losses. The lifecraft will be readied at once.'

Roamer and Wildheit returned to the cabin to wait, both now acutely conscious of the great stress which was building in the continuum. The distortion of light had become such that every edge of contrasting illumination and shade now had its own spectral rainbow, and fine print was becoming impossible to read. A kind of static charge was building up on surfaces, so that everything acquired a sort of slippery repulsion from its neighbours; under the deep vibration of the gravitational drive, small objects were beginning to move and slide over surfaces where friction would normally have maintained them still. Such was the nature of human engineering that friction was a designed-in essential for holding things together: yet if the present trend continued, even powerfully locked screws and nuts would begin to turn and loosen.

With a realization of the growing perils caused by the upwinding spring of the continuum, Wildheit leaned again to the communicator.

'Hurry along with that life-craft! We wish to be away before you make sub-space.'

There was no way he could explain the real reason for his urgency, nor did he attempt to do so. The Rhaqui, used to all the odd phenomena of space, probably attributed the effects to the imminence of some great storm in the regions between the stars. They would be cursing slippery locks, losing tools into cavities with unaccustomed frequency, and blaming the imprecision of their eyesight on alcohol or on some postulated space-vortex through which they might be passing. Only Wildheit and Roamer knew that the point of concern was not while the effect lasted, but the moment when it ceased.

'Marshal, the life-craft is ready.' The welcome message came at last. 'You will find her in the bow tube. We make sub-space in seven minutes. Hopefully we shall not meet again.'

'Amen to that!' said Wildheit. 'We're on our way.'

Presumably to avoid the possibility of a further incident, they met none of the gypsies as they journeyed forward to the bow of the ship. Here there was evidence of recent work, and great sheets of silver foil showed where a brand-new life-craft had been hastily broken out of its encapsulation. Wildheit breathed a prayer of thankfulness. He had been half afraid they would be given some fifth-hand salvaged vessel maintained by the customary Rhaqui indolence and prayer. The new vessel, almost certainly looted from a space-wreck, had been activated but was otherwise in the same flawless condition in which it had completed its manufacture. He helped Roamer through the tiny hatch, scanned the blur of the steady-state indicators, and thumbed the "accept" switch. With a bellow of compressed gas straining the ancient launch tube, they were ejected thankfully into space.

Almost immediately after they had left the parent ship's hull, their vision cleared, and the loss of the slippery feeling brought back a comforting familiarity to their tactile senses. Programmed for fast emergency escape, the minute craft maintained a constant acceleration of two gravities until its auxiliary motors were exhausted, then gave the occupants the choice of drifting with the momentum they had already gained or continuing on a lower-powered main drive. Wildheit chose to drift. Other than back to Mayo, there was no possible place the craft could take them at sublight speeds in less than several lifetimes. Their hopes lay in the fact that they were still in the planetary system of which Mayo was a part, and towards which Hover's rescue exercise would be directed.

The Rhaqui ship had no such hopes of continued existence. As they watched, the ship appeared to become less distinct, as though the stress in the continuum was enfolding it in a bubble with a refractive index different from that of normal space. The system was unstable, and the bubble pulsed and heaved and threatened to rupture. The heaving 'atmosphere' of distorted physical effects of which the bubble was

composed, grew constantly more dense, and Wildheit's mind was stretched to its limits trying to imagine what physical reality must now be like for the Rhaqui contained in this miniature, distorted universe.

The bubble burst. For an instant the ship appeared intact, then abruptly foreshortened as though it had tangled with relativity by attempting to ram the light-barrier instead of jumping it. The release of energy produced a blaze of radiation which raised the ship's hull to an immediate incandescence, and raised a wave of warning alarms on the life-craft's safety monitors. Then abruptly the situation was reversed. With a temperature rapidly falling to the wrong side of absolute zero, and an energy-vacuum which thirsted for every quantum of radiation available from space, the transient fireball which had been the ship dwindled to a dark nothingness to become the progenitor of an invisibly small black hole.

After a while, Wildheit turned on the life-craft's beacons, and began to explore the FTL transmissions hoping to gain the attention of a relay station. Roamer continued to stare fixedly at the point in space where the gypsy ship had once existed. She had postulated the use of the Chaos weapon as being an act of desperation. As an attempt, it had failed: now it was up to herself and Wildheit to justify the pitch of the desperation itself. Roamer thought she was going to like the stars.

(END OF PART ONE)



A GIFT OF TIME



by Terry Greenhough

R. Hopkin

He came slowly out of unconsciousness, remembering. He remembered the crowded spaceport, thousands of people awaiting dozens of flights. He remembered rushing, hurrying, struggling through jostling masses: men, women, children, human and non-human. Then a noise, the roar of retro-rockets as one of the huge liners turned overhead for the drop to the field. Nobody bothered to look upwards; the sound was commonplace and unexciting. Instead they glanced at the illuminated boards showing where the ship had come from and where it was going: FLIGHT 447, EX CLARIUS III, FOR ALTAIR SYSTEM.

Altair-destination travellers began to file towards the correct tunnel, clutching luggage, gathering youngsters. They moved in an orderly fashion, steadily. Then panic broke out.

The noise changed. It became the thin, high screech of a vessel out of control, plunging downwards. People did look up now, as if their concentrated stares could alter the course of the inevitable. They didn't. The shriek continued, increasing and descending.

An unruffled official voice came over the Public Address. 'Standard emergency procedure! Please do not panic! Everyone to the nearest shelter, please! There is sufficient room for all! Standard emergency pro—'

That was the last he remembered.

He looked around. It wasn't easy because a wooden beam lay heavily across his legs and a length of crumbled masonry pressed onto his chest. He felt quite a lot of pain, but didn't think anything was broken—except probably all the spaceport buildings and perhaps several thousand would-be-passengers and maybe the entire artificial asteroid. His head ached and thoughts came only with difficulty. He shook his head. The pain leaped, but his mind cleared somewhat.

Gradually he realised the asteroid must still be intact; there was no sensation of movement, so he couldn't be hurtling through space entombed in a smashed-off chunk of airless rock. *Air?* He could breathe. Therefore he had to be trapped in some part of the building which had retained its supply, or buried under the asteroid's surface in a freak pocket of breathable gas.

Questions: how long before he stopped breathing? When would the pocket run out? How badly had the buildings been

damaged? If seriously, could the jarred pipes be relied on to hold out until rescue arrived or he rescued himself? And even if he managed to wriggle free without help, would there be anywhere safe to wriggle to?

He glanced to the left, then blinked. He wasn't alone.

John Murray checked his flight-ticket: nearly two hours remaining before the daily cargo-ship to Neb Mainworld. He could have caught an earlier passenger vessel and saved time, but he'd booked on the slower cargo-craft for two reasons. Firstly, money; it was cheaper this way because travelling conditions were supposed to be inferior. Secondly, the travelling conditions themselves; Murray considered them far milder on the nerves.

He didn't mind sleeping on an old mattress in the corner of an enormous, part-filled hold; such ships seldom flew with capacity loads. To curl up with immense unoccupied spaces round him suited him fine. Better than paying a higher fare for the dubious privilege of living for weeks in a cramped cabin; he tended to imagine the walls pushing in, constricting him. And if he left his personal cabin, the only alternative was to enter a thronged lounge or games-room or a packed bar. He'd nothing against people as individuals, but any crowd made him sweat with loathing and fight to get clear.

He preferred to share his quarters with half-a-million packing-cases or even a fenced-off herd of livestock. If you undertook to see to their welfare for the trip, you could obtain as much as a thirty-percent reduction. He'd done it before and would doubtless do it again—a rough-and-ready way to get around, but definitely cheap, varied and often interesting.

Murray stared at the crowds in the waiting- and reception-area. It seemed a comfortable spot: soft couches, refreshment counters, smiling officials only too pleased to give aid or information. To him, it spelt acute discomfort. He shuddered as he recalled the battle to win clear of the throngs and secure himself a lonely post by a window.

He peered at six large metal crates lined up near a tunnel ten yards away. What were *they* doing here? Passengers were only allowed to keep hand-luggage with them. Any bulkier personal effects stayed in an adjoining shed, to be lugged out by automatic machinery at an extra charge. As for trade cargo, it should be several buildings away in a storehouse of its own.

He noticed arrows and writing on the crates, possibly the owner's name and destination, plus indications of which way up the boxes should stand. He decided some clerk had made a mistake and had them brought to the wrong place. Not that it was any of his business.

The view outside the window was pleasing, in his opinion: emptiness, landing-pads, ships. He gazed at the wide open spaces of the asteroid, in actuality eight sizeable minor planets locked together to form an irregularly shaped jumping-off point along the vast routes between the stars. It had adequate gravity to keep a human happy, also specially designed areas for creatures used to less or more gravitational pull. In his room would be assembled oxygen-breathers accustomed to one-G, Earth-measurement, or thereabouts.

Consulting a clock showing local time, he found he'd still well over an hour and a half to wait. How to pass the time? He decided on buying a book, but immediately changed his mind. It would mean braving the crowds in order to reach the shop. He didn't feel up to it. He wasn't a coward, but certain things he took pains to avoid.

Not a book, then. In that case, what? Nothing else for it: simply look through the window, enjoy the view, think about it, watch the comings and goings of ships. He'd just started to turn when he caught sight of a board lighting up: FLIGHT 447, EX CLARIUS III, FOR ALTAIR SYSTEM.

Then he realised a terrific noise had been thundering in his ears for several seconds, explaining the message. A liner was turning into the backwards fall, rockets roaring. He shrugged; Altair wasn't for him.

About a hundred people called their families together and collected their baggage. Without haste they moved in the direction of a circular door above which a green light flashed. When the door opened, they'd be conveyed directly to the vessel after passing through a brief, routine check on baggage-weight and tickets.

Murray wondered if someone would send a porter-robot in for the six metal crates. Not seeing one, he dismissed the matter. The crates couldn't be headed for Altair System, either. Not to worry.

Then he did. He worried hard. The rocket-roar had been replaced by a loud shrill wail. *Trouble!* The pilot had lost it or the engines had cut. The vessel was coming in fast—*too* fast—with no retro power to slow it. He thought quickly. Ships of the liner-class turn for the approach at roughly—what? He'd forgotten the exact altitude, but it was a long way up.

And that meant a long way *down*—a

long, fast way down without power! It depended on chance just where the ship would strike. Long-odds against it crashing into the buildings, but even a distance of twenty miles away wouldn't be enough.

The Public Address system was unemotionally requesting orderly retreat to the shelters. A few travellers walked quickly but fearlessly towards them; Murray wondered if they'd have time to descend to the level of safety. Most folk were fighting to get to them but getting nowhere in the confusion. He turned swiftly, not panicking, to the nearest shelter. It seemed a long way off. He walked rapidly, trying not to run.

The PA was saying flatly, '—do not panic! Everyone to the nearest shelter, please! There is sufficient room for—'

He heard it without really listening and kept up a brisk pace. Above, the whine of the hurtling vessel increased, descending with horrible speed. He saw the shelter beckoning but didn't think he'd make it. '—all! Standard emergency pro—'

Then the world seemed to drop on him.

Turning only his head because his body wouldn't move, Murray glanced to the left. He wasn't alone.

The throbbing in his head had abated a little, but his chest and legs hurt badly. The beam across his legs wouldn't budge. Trying to make it do so sent daggers of agony as far up as his thighs. From there, other pains took over. His stomach had developed cramp from being twisted in an awkward position. The block of stone cut his chest; it couldn't have fallen on him from far up, since no ribs felt even cracked.

He could move his arms. Minor abrasions didn't help, but he managed to get a grip on the stone and push upwards. It lifted an inch or two, then dropped. He grunted and dust wafted onto his face.

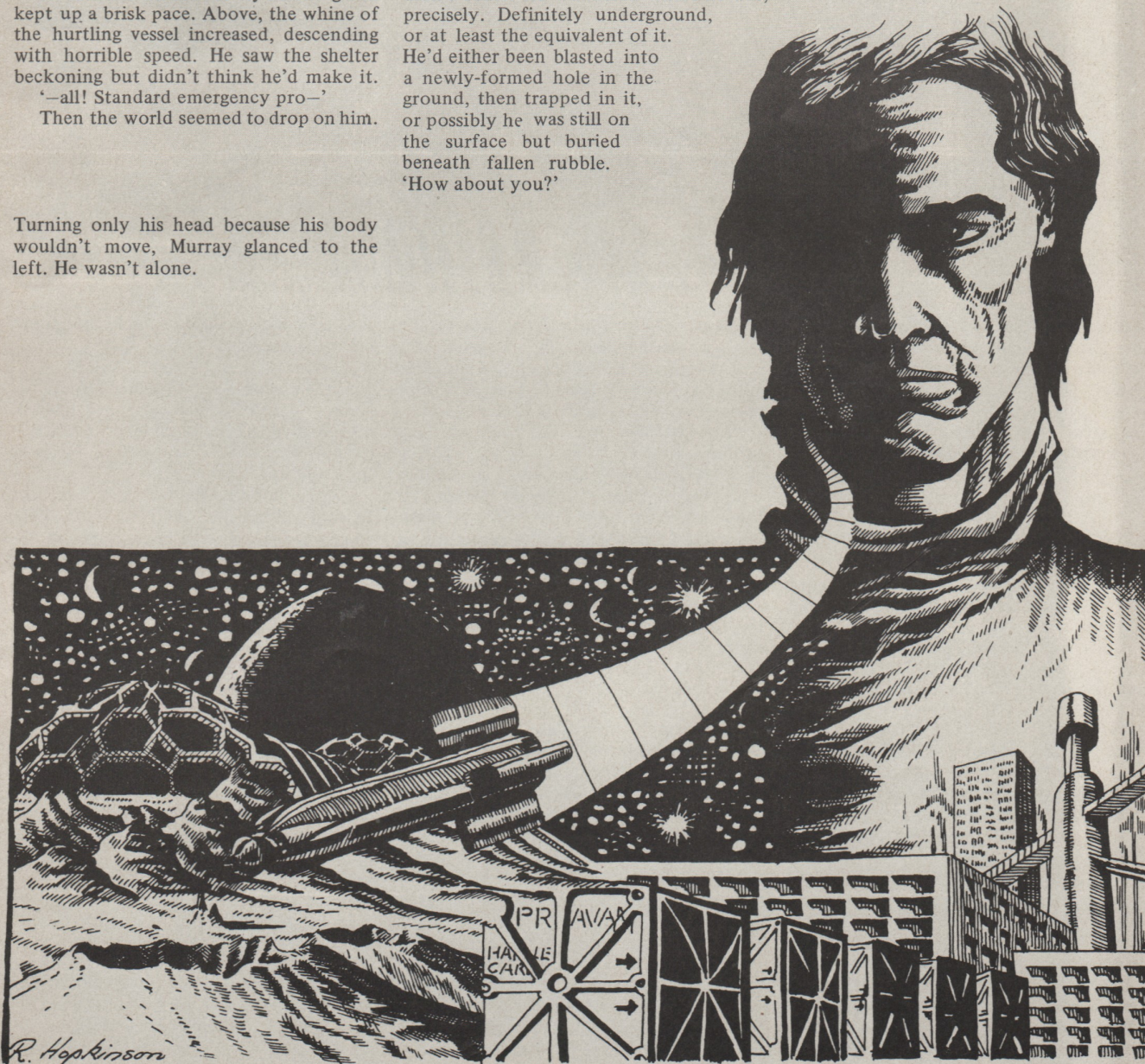
'You all right?' a voice asked tonelessly.

'No. Could be worse, though.' *I think*, he added to himself uncertainly. He could be dead. Probably would be soon, if rescue didn't come. He wondered where he was, precisely. Definitely underground, or at least the equivalent of it. He'd either been blasted into a newly-formed hole in the ground, then trapped in it, or possibly he was still on the surface but buried beneath fallen rubble. 'How about you?'

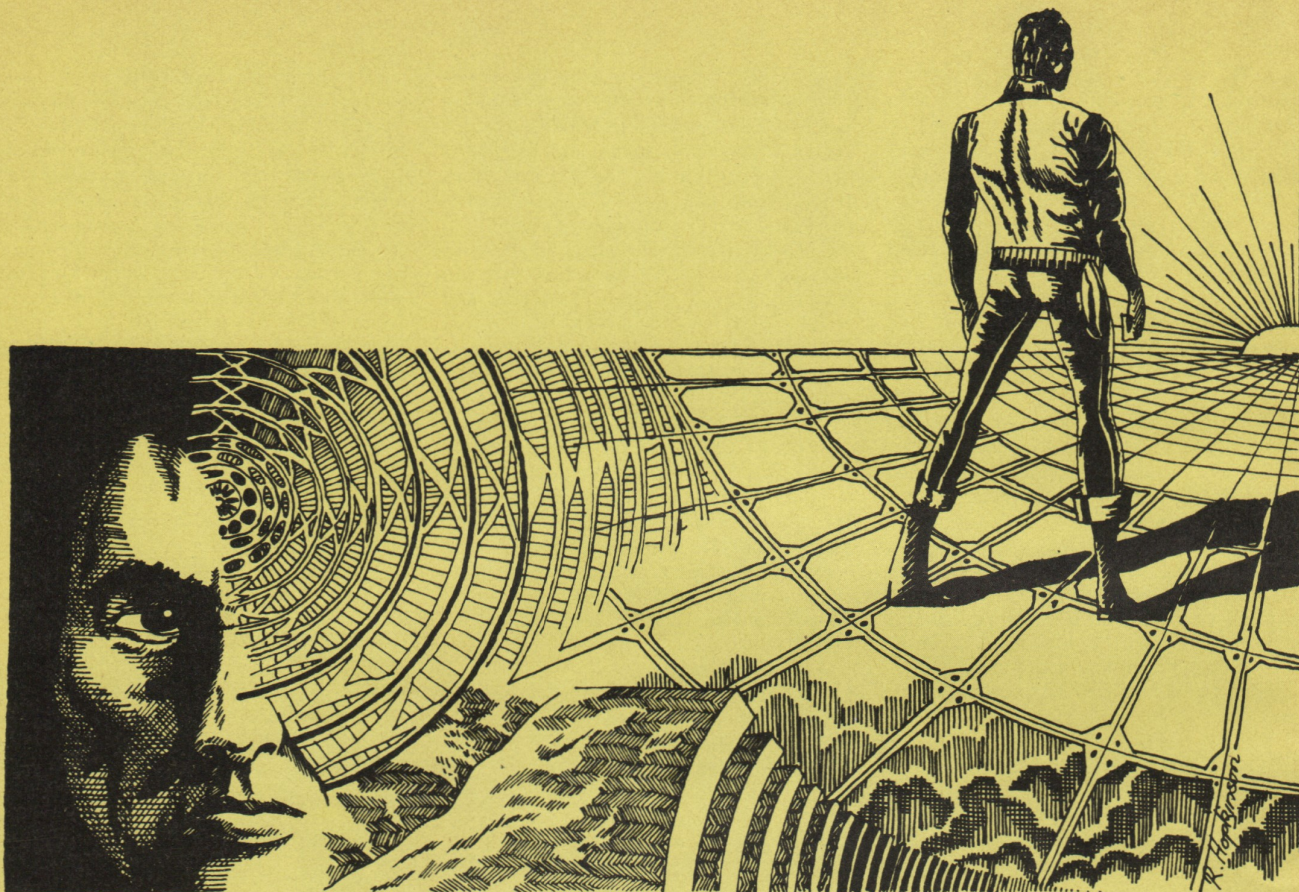
'In one piece, thank you.'

'Good.' A faint light gleamed, its source invisible—possibly a shaft up into daytime, hidden by bends. He could see well enough to know he was confined in a space sufficiently small to disturb his obsession. But at any rate he wasn't in a crowd—far from it! He studied his companion: a large metal crate, partly burst open. The front was ripped off down one side, the metal folded back. He stared into the opening.

A huge bloodshot eyeball stared back. It was mounted on a fleshy stalk as thick



R. Hopkinson



as his arm. 'What are our chances?' The voice originated above the bizarre eyeball. No more of the occupant could be seen.

'Fair, I suppose, if I can shift these things on top of me; I could fetch help. Though it might already be on its way.' He wasn't sure he believed himself. Suppose there were no other survivors? 'If I can't shift them, we're up against it. You can't get far, of course?'

'Out of the question. We're not really built for speedy locomotion. I could manage twenty yards in an hour.' There ensued an explosive snort, akin to laughter. 'If I hurried.'

Oh well, thought Murray, *somebody* can see the funny side, if there is one. He doubted it. He was close enough to read the writing on the crate now: **HANDLE WITH CARE. ONE ADULT PRAVIAN, MALE. EXTREMELY FRAGILE.** Smaller script exhorted shipping workers to enquire within in case of further instructions being necessary. **DESTINATION: PRAVIN, RIGEL SYSTEM. TO BE COLLECTED.** Murray noticed air-holes and also the direction in which the arrows pointed. 'Are you sure you're okay? I mean, those arrows—'

'Fine, thank you. Upside-down, that's all. I hope my family survived.'

They'd be in the other five crates, Murray realised. He wondered where they were; probably not far away. He looked at his narrow environment and suddenly

claustrophobia hit him. Sweat ran on his face, under his arms. He struggled and pain shrieked. He couldn't get out. He couldn't simply open a door and find somewhere spacious. He panicked.

'Let me help you.' The voice was still toneless but he knew its owner meant well. He remembered reading about the unique gifts possessed by Prabians. The lesser talent was an ability, not to telepath completely, but at least to sense strong emotions in anyone physically close. 'Go blank!'

He tried. The Pravian helped. Somehow his mind went nearly thoughtless and the other threw in illusions of open space, large rooms, empty deserts.

'It isn't working!'

'Never mind. We'll try another method.' The eyestalk trembled with effort. Murray's brain seemed to lurch. He entered a dark limbo and then emerged in time to hear the Pravian speaking. 'Fine, thank you. Upside-down, that's all. I hope my family survived'—exactly what he'd said earlier! Murray realised the Pravian's family would be in the other five crates and wondered where they were; probably not far away. He looked at his narrow environment and suddenly claustrophobia *didn't* hit him. I've walked this road before, he thought.

He was prepared for the sensation, so he'd guarded against it. 'That one worked. Only it isn't possible!' He'd read of it and

now he'd experienced it, but he still didn't believe it possible.

'Of course it is. I did it, didn't I?'

That was irrefutable—unless it had been merely a trick, a feeding of impressions into his mind. 'It could have been subjective. You made me *imagine* I'd gone back a few seconds.'

'Oh, you know better than that,' the Pravian said levelly. 'All I did was put the clock back a little. It's normal enough.'

'Not for me it isn't.' He wished he could express thanks, but his mind was spinning with the implications of what his fellow-prisoner had done. 'You mean you turned time *back*?'

The Pravian admitted it but confessed he couldn't put it forward.

'It isn't possible!' Murray repeated stupidly.

'It certainly is. Objectively, too. For anything within my sphere of influence—which is pitifully small—time reverted a few seconds. I can flick it back as much as a couple of hours, then make it go as slowly as you want. I can't stop it altogether, though.' The Pravian's flat voice seemed almost to convey apologies for his limitations. 'All our race can do it, with training.'

'Could you take us back to before we were trapped? Undo the crashed ship, even? Make it *not* crash?'

'No chance. I could put us back before it crashed, but I couldn't prevent what

happened. Simply flip us into earliness so we'd be able to face the tragedy forewarned. Prepare us emotionally, you see. But not undo anything.'

'I see.' He didn't, quite. Could the Pravian revert them to the pre-crash state and then, by slowing time, allow everyone to reach the shelters safely? No, because that would alter what had happened. People killed or injured in the accident would be enabled to come out of it scatheless—an impossibility! If they were dead already, they had to stay dead. Unfortunate, but it couldn't be avoided. As the Pravian had said, he had limits.

It struck Murray as ridiculous to be thinking and conversing about the anomalies of time whilst trapped and in pain. At any moment they might both stop breathing, yet here they were calmly discussing metaphysics.

'It's a compensation,' the voice above the eyeball continued. 'We can't move around very well physically, but we can manipulate time slightly. You can do it yourself, up to a point.'

Murray stated he was pretty sure he couldn't!

The Pravian explained, 'Yes, by utilising memory. Actually that's just a picture of the past, not a return to it, but when and where you visit is under your own control. Similarly, when I go back to is under mine—within limits.'

'I hate to be mundane, but what the hell do we do? We're stuck!'

'Oh yes, that's true. I hope my family survived.' The eyestalk quivered. 'I sense pain and fear as far as I can stretch. Too many different species for me to positively pick my family out, but I *think* I feel someone familiar.'

'Look, put me back to before these things fell on me. Maybe if I get into the right frame of mind to resist the pain and gather my strength—'

'Easy.' The Pravian did as asked. Murray's brain somersaulted and the sombre limbo enveloped him again. Time reversed until he'd once more been blown onto the ground. The beam and the stone hadn't yet dropped. Minutes passed sluggishly, held by the creature in the crate.

The beam and the stone smashed down. He was still in limbo. He didn't emerge this time. Sensing the exercise was useless, the Pravian pulled him into the present.

Murray shook his head. 'No go. I couldn't marshal my strength; I wasn't conscious when it happened. What now?'

'I'll go back myself, to before the accident. You see, we travel folded up; no extremities to get broken off, that way. Personally I always risk an eyestalk, for curiosity's sake.' The voice from the crate explained how slow Pravians were physiologically. Unfolding took several hours. Murray wondered exactly what had to unfold, but the voice droned on and he couldn't enquire. 'Naturally I can't undo

what's happened already and arrive in the present fully unfolded. But at least I can ready myself mentally and start thinking myself into the process. I'll still be folded when it's *now* again, yet I'll have gained as much time as has passed since the disaster. Simple. 'Murray didn't argue; he could *almost* follow it. 'You'll have to backtrack too, of course. So will everybody within my scope.'

It began. Murray's mind went dark; time reversed; it steadied off at the point decided on by the Pravian, then began to roll forward.

John Murray checked his flight-ticket, stared at the crowds in the reception-area. He shuddered as he recalled pushing through them. Briefly he wondered why six metal crates were standing nearby. Surely they should be in the luggage-shed or the cargo-storehouse? Not that it was any of his business.

He glanced at the ships outside on the asteroid. A clock showed him he'd over an hour and a half to wait. How to pass the time? Buy a book—no, it would mean braving the crowds again. Not a book, then. In that case, what? Just look out of the window. He started to turn.

A board sprang into light: FLIGHT 447, EX CLARIUS III, FOR ALTAIR SYSTEM. He realised a terrific noise had been thundering in his ears for several seconds: a liner, turning to come down. Altair-passengers moved towards their tunnel. Would someone send a porter-robot for the crates? Perhaps, perhaps not. Anyway, not to worry.

Then he did worry, hard. *Trouble!* The pilot had lost it or the engines had cut. He heard the PA calling for order, over a loud wail. Some people panicked; some didn't. Murray made for the nearest shelter but didn't think he'd get there.

He didn't. The world seemed to drop on him and after a while he revived. He wasn't alone. There was a broken crate with a bloodshot eyeball peeping at him. He couldn't see all of the creature, but he talked to it about time. Somehow, time did an action-replay.

'It's *now*,' said the voice. 'I've done it. I'll start unfolding soon.'

Murray wasn't certain how unfolding would help. So much depended on what unfolded and how quickly. Going back had been an eerie experience, even though he'd been expecting it. How would other people similarly afflicted react? He decided they'd probably ascribe any queer sensations to shock. Possibly he'd do the same himself, in their unsuspecting circumstances. 'Hell, I never even thought to prepare myself for the disaster! I went through identical emotions again. I could have saved myself *some* discomfort!'

'I thought. Also told my family what to expect, so they could balance their minds accordingly. I hope they survived.' The voice stopped for minutes. 'Yes, I'm unfolding.'

Murray resisted the impulse to say, 'Great! Just do it fast!' He knew Pravians didn't do much at all fast. He had to wait through silence; his companion was busy unfolding, not speaking. Murray found the pain harder to bear without distractions. Normal time seemed to drag more slowly than slower slowed-time. It infuriated him but he couldn't do anything about it except try to raise the stone again. The attempt only brought failure and agony. Frustrated, he waited.

A tentacle flipped out of the crate. 'Just the one, I'm afraid. The other's a bit cramped.' A serpentine sluggishness flopped through the dust towards him. The eyeball twisted around to follow its movements. 'There. Got it.' Inside ten minutes the appendage had clutched the beam. A further ten and it had lifted it. 'What we lack in speed we make up for in strength,' the voice said. 'Now for the stone.' The tentacle disposed of the masonry in only seven minutes. 'You're free, my friend.'

'Thanks.' Murray fought blazing pain and managed to stand. 'I'll find the source of the light and get out, if I can.' He hobbled to the crate and looked in, then immediately wished he hadn't.

'I suppose I'm not particularly pretty to human eyes, am I?'

'Well—to tell the truth, no,' Murray admitted. Obviously the Pravian had sensed his instinctive abhorrence. It wasn't exactly beautiful: an upside-down ovoid mass of slimy, smelly, sickly-green flesh. While one tentacle had unfolded, the other jerked ponderously. Below—that is, above—the eyestalk, a vertical mouth appeared, becoming visible as the flesh around it wobbled. Murray couldn't see a nose or any ears, but he just glimpsed two more stalks, not outstretched. 'Can I do anything for you? Drag you out?' He gulped.

'No, I'm too slow to be of use. When I'm dug out, a lifting-tackle's the best you can do for me.' He gave another snort of laughter. 'But if *you* get out, you could do me the favour of checking on my family. It may be possible to locate them. I hope they've surv—'

Murray promised to do his best, then left.

Up inside the ruined building, he tried to take in several awful sights at once. He estimated the sheet-covered dead so far recovered at two-hundred; they lay in ghastly rows in a corner. Roughly ten times as many people were being treated for injuries. Rescue-work was in progress at twenty points: digging, removing rubble,

uncovering corpses and injured travellers.

None of the outer walls had been holed, but vibration had shivered down almost everything inside. The air was breathable, the gravity fractionally heavy—presumably damage to the grav-maintenance gear underground. Plenty of people had survived without a scratch, but the scene nauseated Murray.

The five metal crates still stood where he'd last seen them. Four of them were squashed flat. Green pulp stained the floor around them and he didn't bother checking on four-fifths of the Pravian's family. The remaining crate lay on its side, whole. He stooped to read the inscription: **HANDLE WITH CARE. ONE INFANT PRAVIAN, FEMALE.** Poor kid, he thought sorrowfully; your father's okay, but the rest of them—no, *they're* not! How would the Pravian's humour face up to *this*?

Murray glanced at the place he'd just left: a crater gouged by falling stone, into which the first case had toppled. A brief check to see the child was all right and he bent to the hole from which he'd crawled. 'Hello! The one on the end looks unhurt, but the other four—'

'I know. Thank you, anyway.' Yes, there was definitely emotion in the voice now. Murray shared it. He felt thoroughly sick. Suddenly he saw the fire. Two or three buildings away, flames blazed violently. A man positioned in front of them was yelling. Other men were keeping everybody in the reception-room. The Pravian said, 'I feel your fear.'

'So do I! This is bad! The whole lot's set to go up! Explosives in the cargo-store and the fire's nearly there!' Could anything be done? Could time be erased so he could prevent the fire? No, it had already happened. Consequently it *had* to happen. He couldn't be ready for it and stamp it out, because it *had* to reach the present in its current state. And its current state was beyond stamping out. 'I've an idea. Will your control stretch as far as the fire? Say a hundred and fifty yards?'

'I doubt it, unlinked. Explain to my daughter. If we join forces—'

'Got it! Will she understand me?'

'I believe so. She's only a child, but—yes, she's no fool.'

'Good.' Murray ran to the crate and explained the situation. 'Your father says join forces. Time-control. A link-up, I suppose.' An uncertain voice gave uncertain affirmative. He returned to the hole. 'Take everything back to before the fire. We can't change where people were standing, but I can try and convince those nearest to the blaze—which won't have started—that it's *about* to start! Tell them to be ready to grab extinguishers. Condition them to *expect* the blaze, save a few seconds and—'

'Unsound theory,' the Pravian interrupted. 'You yourself won't be there.'



You'll be under here, pinned.' He paused for thought. 'Only thing you can do is get through the flames *now*, in the present. Tell workers in the storehouse to expect a time-flip and be ready not just to snatch extinguishers but also to start shifting the dangerous stuff. That'll save very few seconds, but it may turn the tide. In addition, find out *now* who was near the blaze *before*. Then you've done all you can; I'll do my bit and we'll have to sit it out down here.'

'Will do!' Murray raced across the reception-area, began shouting at the group keeping people inside. Explanations weren't simple; they sounded foolish. Somebody called him an idiot and he snapped, 'Look, man, have you felt anything wrong lately? Any flip-flops of time since the crash? Three flip-flops?'

'Yeah, three, but—'

'Then get busy! Do as I say: spread it round and make sure everyone near here before the crash starts thinking in terms

of the extinguisher.' The group had all been in the vicinity. They admitted it but looked dubious. Murray said, 'There's a fourth replay coming soon. Be ready!' He set off for the store; they didn't try to stop him. The man in front of the fire did. Murray saw him moving to head him off. There simply wasn't time for more talk, so he barged right into the man and thumped him on the jaw. Resistance ceased.

He edged along a wall, avoiding the fire as much as possible. It burned him now and then, but he made it into the cargo-store singed and smarting. Here, it wasn't anything like easy to explain. The cargo-handlers hadn't experienced any backtracks, since they'd been beyond the Pravian's reach. They didn't believe Murray. He told them they'd believe soon enough—or get blown to hell for not doing!

Time twitched. Just a little replay, casting Murray to the other side of the flames again. He decided it must be the Pravian and his daughter experimenting with their joint power. He edged along the wall a second time and the handlers were more inclined to have faith. They seemed reluctant to admit anything odd occurred, but they listened carefully as he gave orders. Sullenly, they promised to expect the chance of another try at the fire, forewarned.

He left, dashed back to and through the first group. Their numbers had swelled and there were many glances askance at him. They didn't bother him, so long as the message stuck in a few brains. He shouted into the hole, 'It's done. Over to you.'

Time jumped backwards through limbo. He saw the illuminated board, heard the whine of the crashing ship, headed for a shelter—then woke up under a beam and a stone. A huge bloodshot eyeball stared at him. He talked to its owner about time, which meanwhile performed three small miracles. A tentacle dragged the beam and the stone off him. He looked into a crate and shuddered. Then he was up in the reception-area, a scene of horror—across to another crate, return to the hole, talk of temporal anomalies. And trying to explain them to a group, then to a second group beyond a fire. Something whipped him back and he had to negotiate the fire again. He got burned and got a slightly better reception to his speech.

He raced back through the first group and shouted into the hole, 'It's done. Over to you.' And time jumped backwards through limbo. Now it was *now* once more.

'Any improvement?' a voice asked from below.

'I'll see.' He went across to the exit from the reception-area. The group which had been there wasn't. It had moved to the fire. Instead of guarding the exit, it fought the blaze. Instead of stopping people spreading into the flames, it was

trying to stop the flames spreading further into the cargo space. It seemed to be succeeding.

Somebody said, 'You again?' The tone held new respect.

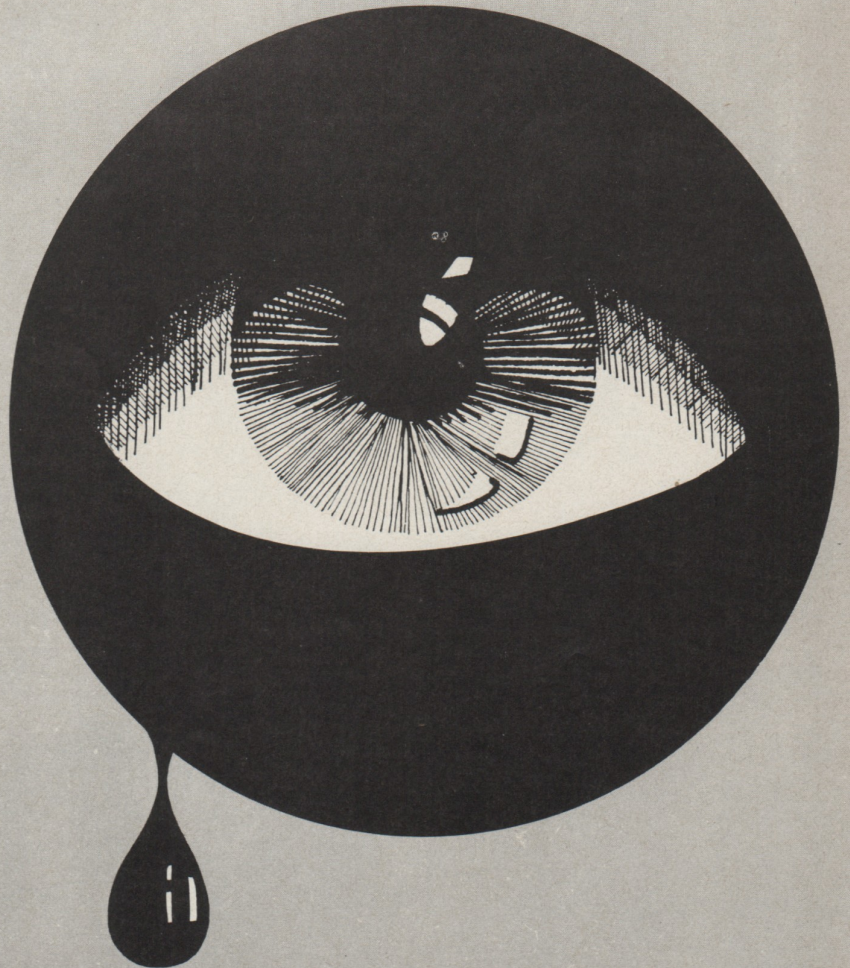
'Yes, me again.' Murray entered the storehouse—an appreciably simpler task this time—and saw workers scurrying about rapidly increasing the distance between the fire and the explosives. Someone had thought to switch off the electricity in the building—just one more of the benefits of prescience, he realised. The fire should soon be under control, but only because a creature in a steel box had had *time* under control.

Murray grieved over the Pravian's family, four of them horribly dead. The child would perhaps never recover from the shock of learning of the tragedy. Would the Pravian himself? No, he'd never recover completely, but he'd be able to live with it. He'd lived with the dreadful know-

ledge on his mind even as he was manipulating time. He'd saved hundreds of lives, knowing of four close deaths.

It must have taken some doing, Murray thought, going into the ruined building and its scenes of blood and slaughter. He'd better get to work digging him out. A lot of people owed him a lot of gratitude. He might be green and ugly, but he'd definitely pulled *his* weight recently—and plenty more people's besides!

Murray paused a moment before embarking on the job. He allowed himself a final glance around. Steadily, he gazed at the scores of corpses mercifully reduced to mere outlines by blood-soaked sheets. Resolutely, he let his eyes linger a while on the moaning, maimed, mutilated bodies that might not survive the next hour. He swallowed, yet he succeeded in accepting the sights manfully. But when he looked at the four squashed crates, he just broke down and cried.



ON PILES



The Child of the Snows

OF JUNK, FLYING POTATO PEELERS

AND OTHER RELATED MATTERS

An interview with Eddie Jones
by Hilary Davidson



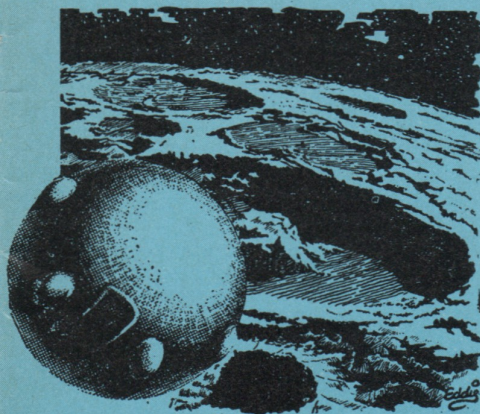
Eddie Jones is the current VORTEX cover artist. His work will be instantly recognizable to many SF readers. A full time SF illustrator since 1970, he has since then produced over 600 book and magazine covers, including covers for the German magazines ORION and TERRA ASTRA, which he illustrates every week.

I was born in Bootle in 1935. I was educated at Bootle grammar school, but I left at sixteen to work at an ad agency. I was a trainee artist for two to three months, but I soon went off fridges and shirts, and decided to have a go at production. I went into the production department as a trainee and stayed for ten years. I then joined the RAF, but came out quickly and returned to the agency as a production manager/print buyer.

Around 1956 to 57 I began to illustrate for fanzines in my spare time, and I also submitted many illustrations to the British SF magazines of the day, which were *Nebula*, *New Worlds* and *Science Fantasy*. This went well—up to 1969 I was selling the odd cover and interior illustration per year.

In 1969 I won the Trans-Atlantic Fan Fund, and with that award I went to St. Louis for the 29th World SF Convention.

The year before that, I'd been offered the position of art editor for a new British monthly magazine. In 1970, things became rather hectic, I was doing too much and something had to go. So I packed up the ad agency and became totally freelance. At more or less the same time, a friend in Germany became an SF agent, and I became his first artist. I was introduced to some German publishers at the Heidelberg convention, and was immediately commissioned to launch a new magazine, *Terra Astra*. I've been working on that publication ever since.



With reference to the changes in SF since you began illustrating, which feature do you think has changed the most?

The artwork has changed more than the actual fiction. The writing has changed, of course, but there are still many novels on the bookshelves which were around when I started reading SF.

The art has changed dramatically. When I started, a rocket ship was a cigar with fins, or a ball, or two balls connected. Today, it's more like a scrapyard in space. Between the two, the artwork went through a phase when everybody was doing photographic abstracts. That was when I was first thinking seriously about illustration, and I went out and took some abstract Photographs. That's how I first came into illustration, through the lens of a camera.

Nowadays, there's the Chris Foss influence, with flying cement mixers in space. Actually, Chris didn't start it all on his own—landing a LEM on the moon did that, because the LEM was so unlike the artist's conception of a spaceship. It looked like a pile of junk, and so everybody started painting piles of junk. I was told by publishers that I *must* paint piles of junk and spiky spaceships. I'm just wondering if the artists who came into being by painting piles of junk will survive if junk piles go out of fashion and figures come back in. Luckily, I think I would survive, because I can adapt to anything that's required by publishers.

Are you keen to see any particular changes?

I don't know what's going to happen in the future. I'd like to see balloons in space, and my wife has suggested the return of the flying potato peeler.

What are your artistic influences?

The good artists in SF have influenced me. You can go right back to the old pulp days; they all influenced me. I don't think that people like Chris Foss influence me, but I know that they have a winning formulas. I wouldn't now put a cigar with fins on a cover, because it's not what the publishers or the readers want.



Terra Astra 264



The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction

Why do you paint SF, and why do you think authors write it?

For me, it's the most interesting form of commercial illustrating. I can do more or less what I want to do. For example, if I've got to do an alien, I can represent it any way I wish, whereas a cowboy is a cowboy and a horse is a horse.

I like to think that I can produce some fine art, but I'm a commercial illustrator as opposed to an artist, and SF gives me more free rein, it's more creative than any other type of commercial work.

How do you go about producing things like the VORTEX covers, where you have read no fiction to inspire you?

This was a nice assignment where the editor just said: do what you like. I knew that I was going to enjoy it. So I sat down with a blank piece of board and played about with shape and colour, and the ideas came as the paint went down. I decided along the way that it was to be fantasy. I thought of fantasy themes and added them in as they came to mind.

I like covers which carry a story. The pictures which you've done for VORTEX do this, which presumably means that you think in story technique.

This cover for the Magazine Of Fantasy And Science Fiction, with the winged horse and chariot flying over sand dunes and monolithic rocks, has a story behind it. Originally, I did a painting very similar, but involving an icy landscape, all done in blues. That was on show at St. Louis, and six months later the author Lester del Rey indirectly phoned me from America and asked me if I'd produce it for him. I told him that I'd do it in different colours. So I painted it, sent it to Lester, and he wrote a story around the artwork.

This has happened to me a few times, because I like to tell a story in the painting. In answer to the question which you're going to ask me: No, I couldn't become a writer, even if I had to.

Which author do you like illustrating the most?

Quite a lot of them. I like the 'pictorial' authors, the ones who give the artist a good grip of the novel, something the artist can grab onto and illustrate.

I do not enjoy illustrating authors like Barry Malzburg, who has no pictorial sense at all. I once had to do a cover for a novel called 'Beyond Apollo', in which everything takes place on Earth, in The Com-pound. It was one of these psychological SF books. I managed to produce a very good cover from one line in that book, a sentence in which somebody said: 'He escaped from a penal colony on Venus.'

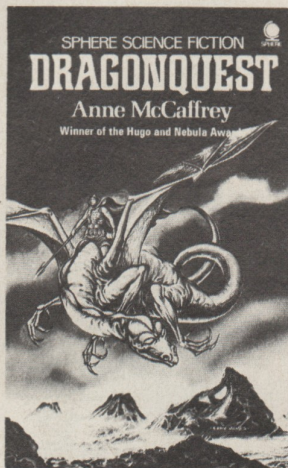
I'd like to do more Sword-and-Sorcery than I do at the present time.

Do you keep a sketchbook of ideas which you refer to at any time?

No, I never sketch out a cover to any detail beforehand. I paint straight onto the board.

I read a novel pictorially, so in a sense, when I come to do the illustration, I've already seen it. My inspiration comes from the fiction itself, so in most cases I'm relying solely on the authors.

I also get inspiration from the most unusual things, such as looking at strangely shaped clouds, and looking through photographic magazines.

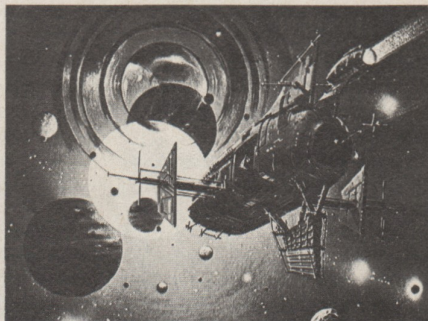


Dragonquest (Sphere)

Do you have a creative theme of your own which you use recurrently?

Every cover that I produce is a new idea based upon a specific story. In the two series which I do in Germany, the publishers have instructed me that no four covers are to be the same, in fact they can't even be of the same colour, for the reason that they may all be on the shelves at the same time.

I do, however, have certain themes in my private work, such as deep holes, dark spaces and mountain ranges which go on forever.



Cover illustration for Gordon R. Dickson's L'Impero Degli Eletti (Futuro Biblioteca di Fantascienza, Fanucci)

Do any of your pictures evoke emotions or feelings?

It depends on who's looking at them, of course. Some people who have collections of my work will tell me how emotionally involved they are with the pictures, but I never see it.

I am emotionally involved in the conceptualization, but afterwards it's simply another painting. People who buy them and hang them in their living room often say that they feel things in them, and that's very satisfying, but I can never see anything myself.

What makes you decide that you're not going to finish something?

I pack it in if it's not going the way I want it to go. About once a month, I get half-way through a painting and find that it's just not working. Then I stop and do it again, from another angle.

I think that I simply get browned off; all of a sudden I just become uninspired.

How much do you work during the day?

I work from 10.00 to 4.00. Only six times in the last four years have I worked later than 5.00. I class this as a job, and most people in their work start at 9.00 and finish at 5.00. Therefore, I think that I should do the same.

Being able to work at my own rate does mean that I can take a day off now and then, and I usually do that. I need it. Every month there are ten covers to be done, for foreign markets. These are contract work, and they have to be done, so I space them out over the month and the rest of the time I use to relax.

I don't have much of a problem stopping at 4.00, even when I know that I've only got to do two more hours work on a painting, because I like to watch children's television, which comes on at about 4.30.

Can you give any advice to those competent artists trying to break into the field, who might be reading this interview in VORTEX?

The job involves a lot of work. You're not painting for yourself, but for commercial purposes. The best place to start is probably an ad agency, where you learn the basics of commercial art.

It's the old Catch-22 formula—publishers only want you if you're well-known, so how do you become well-known? If there were more magazines on the market, the younger artists would stand a better chance than they do at the moment.

A number of budding artists have come to me for advice, and I've tried to guide them as best I can. I've shown them how to paint commercially, and one artist in particular has had a lot of success painting commercially in his own style. He's selling quite well in Germany. Up until two years ago, he'd had nothing published. Edward Blair Wilkins is his name, and he's going to be one of the tops in a few years.

There's another problem. If you're good, and your work sells, publishers will use you on everything they can. All of a sudden, every paperback cover looks the same. An example—an American artist, Richard Powers, was producing fantastically organic, Daliesque covers, and everybody was using him. Then suddenly he was dropped, because all the competitors' books had his work on the cover. So, if you can do every cover differently, you've got a better chance, or else deliberately restrict yourself to a limited number of publishers.

What are you working on at the moment?

Oh, I'm just carrying on as I do day to day. I have the usual four German covers to do this month, there'll be another four German covers next month, plus four German covers for another magazine, plus anything else that comes in. I'm constantly working on things which come in. I'm doing nothing for myself.

Is there anything which you would particularly like to get into?

I'd like to do more Fine art, gallery work and 'real' painting. But I think I'll always be doing what I'm doing now. If the bottom should drop out of the SF market, I'll go on to do Westerns.

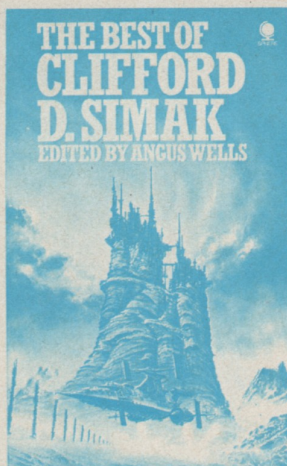
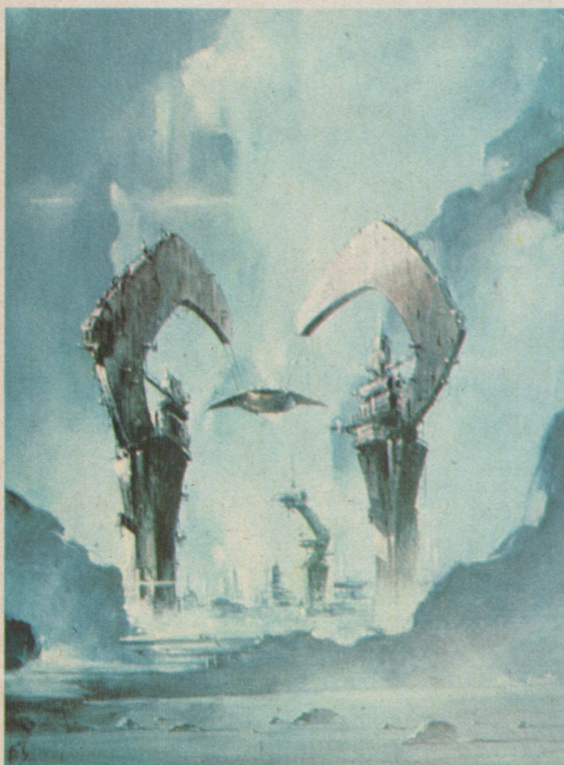


In your opinion, what is your best achievement?

I get most satisfaction from seeing my work at conventions, hearing it being praised or criticised by SF readers and artists whom I respect. At these conventions, the artists always group around the bar, praising each other.

I get no satisfaction from seeing my picture on a paperback cover. I get more satisfaction out of the cheque.

* * * *



The Best of Clifford
D. Simak (Sphere)

BOOK REVIEWS

Meanwhile- back in the jar

a review by JOHN GRUBBER of RICHARD BRAUTIGAN'S *The Hawkline Monster* - (Picador 1976, 75p), a Gothic Western.

No doubt some of you have read this book, since it was first published in 1975. But most of you probably haven't, and even if they have, who cares?

I'm not going to give away the monster's secret in this article, because that is up to the reader to find out. But I can tell you that it's the most original 'monster' story I've ever read. And also the funniest.

Because the chief aspect of this book is its humour; in fact, its ridiculous and bizarre theme could give it no other aspect. Brautigan's style, which is a simple and almost vocal narrative, adds to this humorous effect, in much the same way that Joseph Heller's technique makes *Catch-22* even better than its idea-content alone could make it.

So, on to the story:

Cameron and Greer are two gunmen in the wild west of 1902. We meet them on Hawaii, where they can't shoot a man they've been hired to kill, because he's teaching his kid how to ride a horse. So they forget the money, and Hawaii, which is a unique scenario for a Western, and probably wouldn't work. They head back to San Francisco, do a job, then go on to Portland, Oregon.

In Portland, they are met by an Indian girl called Magic Child who is very beautiful and bears a certain relationship to a certain Miss Hawkline. Magic Child takes Cameron and Greer to meet Miss Hawkline, who lives in Hawkline Mansion, in the dead centre of the Dead Hills of Eastern Oregon. On the way they meet a few people who bear no relation to the plot but without these people where would anyone be? They provide more humour, which is the purpose of the book. People such as the barbed-wire drummer, a man whose middle name is Cora. People such as the members of the Morning County Sheepshooters Association, who say that it's all right to shoot sheep.

As they reach Hawkline Mansion, coming to within a hundred yards of the building, there is a sudden drop in temperature of about forty degrees. The grass

is frozen, despite the fact that it is an ordinary desert summer, with temperatures up in the nineties. They learn from Miss Hawklane, who resembles Magic Child very much, that this fact is due to the Ice Caves below the house.

This is very interesting. The only problem is that the Ice Caves are inhabited by a monster, who has killed Miss Hawklane's father, who was a scientist called Professor Hawklane. Miss Hawklane wants Cameron and Greer to go down and kill the monster.

While this problem is being discussed, Magic Child dies. This death is one of the neatest and cleverest in modern fiction. Magic Child's place in the story is pretty adroitly taken up by Miss Hawklane, who is Miss Hawklane's sister.

Below the house, apart from the Ice Caves where the Hawklane monster lives, is a laboratory which used to be run by Professor Hawklane, until the monster got him. This laboratory is connected via a strong metal door to the Caves, and in the laboratory is The Chemicals, an experiment started by Professor Hawklane and presently being continued by his daughters, Miss Hawklane and Miss Hawklane. The Chemicals has the property of messing around with the thoughts in people's heads, and all sorts of other childish pranks. To Cameron and Greer this sounds more dangerous than the monster, but the Miss Hawklanes are adamant that The Chemicals will one day benefit mankind.

Cameron, Greer, Miss Hawklane and the other Miss Hawklane are on their way to kill the monster when the butler, who is seven feet two inches tall and weighs over three hundred pounds, is struck down dead. Then The Chemicals interferes with the thoughts of the Miss Hawklanes and they drag Cameron and Greer upstairs for a spot of love-making. They wonder how they're going to bury the seven foot, two inch tall butler; this problem is solved when they return downstairs to find him shrunk to thirty-one inches, and they bury him in a suitcase.

Finally, they return to kill the Hawklane Monster. But meanwhile, Cameron and Greer have come to a conclusion about the monster, which will remain unrevealed here, but puts a whole new complexion on the business of killing it. And also provides some hilariously ridiculous chapters like 'The Hawklane Monster in the gravy' and 'Meanwhile, back in the Jar'.

Cameron and Greer have a job, but eventually they persuade Miss Hawklane and the other Miss Hawklane to let them kill The Chemicals as well, since The Chemicals seems to be a pretty nasty threat. So off they go, finally, to kill a monster and a jar of chemicals.

The battle between the Hawklane Monster and Cameron and Greer is joined, and it is a terrible struggle; a third force, called The Shadow (actually the shadow of the Hawklane Monster), intervenes on

the side of the humans. Cameron kills the Chemicals by pouring whisky into the jar. The sparks which fly as a result of this threaten to burn the place down, so Cameron and Greer rush from the scene.

The Ice Cubes melt to form Lake Hawklane; the Hawklane Monster is killed and, as a result of its death, the evil that it has done is reversed. The Miss Hawklanes are reunited with their father, and the faithful butler is resurrected and returned to his former bulk — which event makes one hell of a hole in the ground. The mansion burns down and the Hawklane Monster's reign of terror is over.

As for whether or not they all lived happily ever after — that, also, is up to you to find out. And it's well worth the effort.

* * * *

Mishkin's engine part is found.

All that remains is to find it...

Anyone who has dreamed that they have woken up, and subsequently awoken to discover that their dream was a dream within a dream, will recognise the plight of the hapless Mishkin when the Malfunxion That Could Not Happen did, and he was stranded on the remote planet of Harmonia with an inoperative spaceship.

He found that he had only imagined opening his eyes. Therefore he opened his eyes. But had he really? He considered opening his eyes again, in case he had only imagined it again...

Options by Robert Sheckley (published by Pan) is a dream that becomes a nightmare sequence of unrelated incidents blossoming sporadically into fascinating cul-de-sacs of inconsequential sub-plots. ... *Having partaken of imaginary nourishment, that young man is about to have imaginary dreams.*

Mishkin's companion is an amiable, paternal robot whose job is to protect him from the dangers on Harmonia. Unfortunately it has been programmed for a different planet and, being deficient in human common sense and intuition, is less capable of dealing with the confusing situation than Mishkin himself.

Here the machines talk, the trees talk, and the native creatures talk, all in Modern American Idiomatic English.

'His speech is definitely late 1960's,' said the robot. 'Whereas this is the year 2138, or thereabouts. Somebody is conning somebody.'

Mishkin encounters monsters, visits an imaginary Castle, converses with a travelling magician, an invisible man and a debt collector, among others, but the necessary part for his ship tantalisingly eludes him. Other characters are introduced, other plots interwoven, new storylines begun and abandoned, but Mishkin and his engine part remain isolated from one another. Worlds apart, they belong to separate stories that refuse to converge. Even Mishkin's reliable Uncle Arnold cannot resolve the problem.

The Author is obliged to intervene as The Man of a Thousand Disguises who tells Mishkin that he has failed as the Hero, that the whole story is dramatically unsound and that it is time for some replacements. The new archetypal Hero turns out as useless as Mishkin who is compelled to resume his former role.

Q. What's going on around here? Why isn't anything working out?

A. Should I take you by the hand? Very well, but where will I lead you? ... Do you really want a guided tour through the formal gardens promised in the prospectus? Maybe that would be OK for you but how about me? I'm supposed to have some fun too.

The Author is entertaining himself, plainly. He admits it. he is his own critic.

Options speaks for itself as a collage of spontaneous ideas unadulterated by any such tedious complications as common logic and convention. Paradoxes are expounded, inconsistencies and irrelevances emphasised and loose ends deliberately unravelled.

To say that the characters are two dimensional, the plot unruly and inadequately resolved, the situation absurd and the whole concept self-indulgent, would be a fatuous and unnecessary acclamation, since Robert Sheckley makes sure that we have no doubts on that point. His introverted satire makes a mockery of further criticism. To ensure that no one will be offended, he even goes to the extent of a written apology to poor Mishkin who is left in the lurch without his vital engine part, facing the prospect of redundancy and relegation to the 'collective pool of the unconscious'. It is a delight to all who delight in the nonsensical and eccentric.

The result is no more nor less than is promised at the outset, where a Notice proclaims that 'The rules of normalcy will be temporarily suspended', and Mr Sheckley openly offers to 'take you for a ride', which could be a warning or an invitation.

Take it as it is, or whichever way you please. The option's yours.

JOCELYN ALMOND

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