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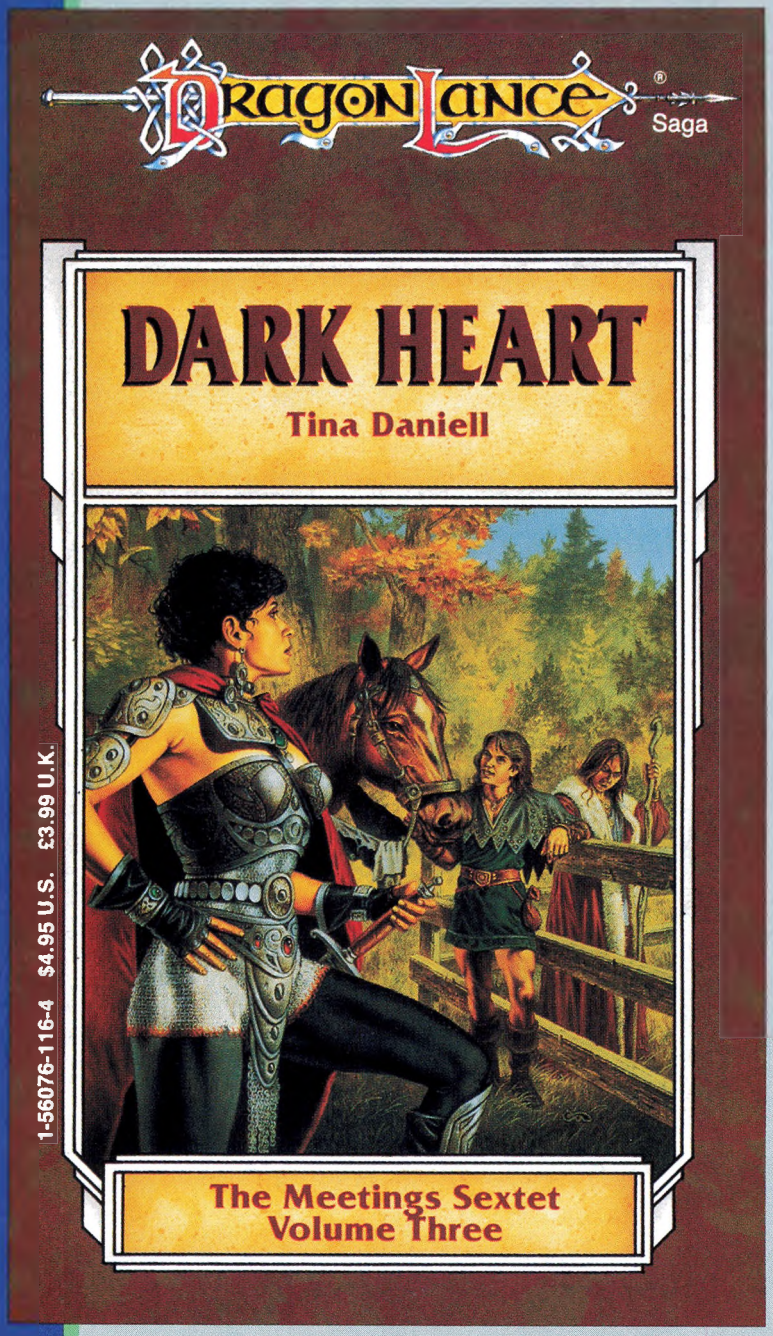

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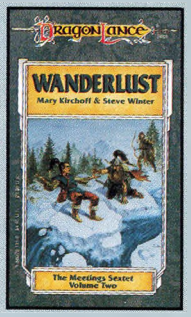

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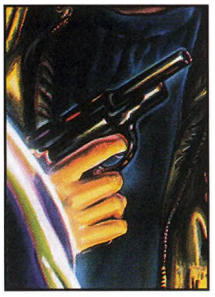

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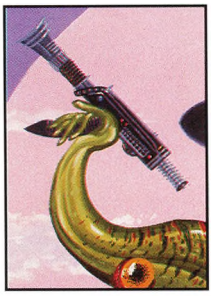

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NONFICTION

LOOKING FORWARD

Cover Art by Nicholas Jainschigg

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A Little Personality

Kim Mohan

Most of you seem to think it's a good idea for me to fill this page every month. (If you've been reading these pieces for as long as I've been writing them, you'll recall that I did pose the question, a few issues back, of whether a regular editor's essay was a good idea. If you hate this column and just haven't gotten around to letting me know, you've blown your chance to affect the course of history. The early returns are in, and it looks like the column is here to stay.)

"It's a good way to give the magazine a little personality," you tell me. And I'm relieved to hear that, because one thing I don't want to do with this space is use it to expound on the critical issues facing the genre or the magazine industry or the world at large. The only critical issue I care about is getting this magazine out on time every month.

A little personality. Let's see . . .

I've been a professional editor for a little more than twenty years—just over half my life—and although I've had some other jobs that were also exciting (only another editor would understand the word "exciting" used in that context), this is the most challenging way I've ever earned a paycheck.

It's *tough* trying to find the absolute best stories out of all the submissions we receive, and often it's even tougher to turn something down; sometimes the call is almost too close to make, but ultimately it has to be made. And I always wonder about the turn-downs: Am I going to be mortified some day when *that* story turns up in some other magazine?

That question was answered for me just a couple of days ago, when the most recent issue of "some other magazine" came in the mail, and in the table of contents I spotted not one, but *two*, pieces of writing that I had seen before. Was I mortified? No . . . maybe a little wistful, but my immediate and strongest reaction was pleasure. I was happy, for the sake of their creators, that those two stories—by accomplished writers whose body of work has impressed me—found a home.

Heck, I hope everything I turn down gets published by another magazine; then I wouldn't have to feel guilty about being the bearer of bad tidings. Maybe I could even get a reputation in the industry: Send a story to Mohan—if he sends it back, it's *sure* to sell somewhere else.

In case you didn't pick up on it while reading the previous passage, I hate the word "reject," as used to describe what we do to a manuscript we don't buy; it sounds too much like what happens to the basketball when a 5-foot-8 guard puts up a jump shot against a 7-foot center. I have never *rejected* a manuscript submission; I've turned it down, sent it back, or decided not to buy it. Call it a semantic thing if you want, but I don't think manuscripts and basketballs have anything in common. (No, I've never *bounced* a manuscript, either.)

During the last few months we've received a lot of compliments about the story illustrations in the magazine. It's about time to make something clear on that subject. We don't have an art director *per se;* Janis and I take care of handing out assignments to artists. And when we hand them out, that's exactly what we do—we ship out a copy of the story and say (in effect) "Make a painting that you think is the best possible illustration for this story."

Some artists were briefly taken aback when they found out how we intended to work. "What, you mean nobody's going to tell me what to paint?" Well, in a word . . . no. We don't *direct* artwork; we just arrange for it to exist.

All of the credit for the quality and the content of the artwork in this magazine belongs to the people whose names you'll find in small type near the bottom of the title page of each story. I could count on the fingers of one hand the number of times we've had to ask for alterations to a painting . . . and I'd have fingers left over. Because I believe in giving credit where credit is due, I want you to know who you're really complimenting when you tell us we use nice-looking art.

That's all the personality that fits this time. Stay tuned. ✦

Reflections

Robert Silverberg

An essay by Graham Greene tells of the time the great novelist encouraged his friend Tom Laughton, who had just retired after many years of running a great hotel, to write his autobiography. Laughton, Greene felt, knew the inner life of the hotel world as few others did; he brimmed with lively anecdotes; on the theory that "everyone has one book inside him," Greene urged him to set down his recollections. Laughton had never written before. But—perhaps to Greene's surprise—he promptly got to work on the book.

Before long the novelist received a first draft from the hotelkeeper for an appraisal. It started well, Greene thought—especially for the work of an amateur—but then began to lose focus. Tactfully Greene offered a few mild criticisms. Possibly he never expected to hear any more of the project. But then came a revised draft—and then another.

"When after two years had passed," Greene writes, "I read the first draft of the book, I began to realize I was not dealing with an amateur but a professional. To an amateur his words are Holy Writ—the professional knows how far they will always fall short of what he wants to say. I became used to the letters from Yorkshire written to the signature tune, 'I think I see what's wrong. I have started again.' To what an inferno, I thought, has my unthinking encouragement condemned him. Why should a man who loves good painting, good wine, and good food, living in a happy and well-deserved retirement, suffer in the evening of life what all writers must suffer—in Masefield's phrase 'The long despair of doing nothing well'?"

Two passages in that piece struck me with special force: *To an amateur his words are Holy Writ—the professional knows how far they will always fall short of what he wants to say* and the phrase from Masefield, *The long despair of doing nothing well.*

Like Graham Greene, I have spent my entire adult life as a professional writer. I've been successful at it. I've been writing close to forty years now—and during that time I've sold virtually everything I've written. I've won a shelf full of awards and been showered with all sorts of honors. I've done well financially. And yet—and yet—

I don't think I've ever felt, *in the moment of writing it,* that anything I've written lived up to my own standards of excellence. I emphasize *in the moment of writing it* because I do actually think I've written some worthwhile stories over the years. But all my self-approbation comes after the fact, in some cases years after the fact. I never—*NEVER*—feel that way about anything I'm writing while I'm writing it. Sentence by sentence, it all seems clumsy, lame, obtuse—too sketchy or too dense, too skimpy or too wordy, something missing all the time: the words ever falling short of what I want to say, and the work-day ending always with the long despair of doing nothing well.

I'm not the only writer who feels that way. I've known dozens, over the years, who have been so critical of their own work that eventually they've become unable to write at all, for periods of months or years or, in a few tragic instances, forever. Their attitude toward their work is what Frederik Pohl once called, many years ago, "a goulash of shame and pride"—and when the shame starts to overpower the pride, silence is the inevitable result. The more ambitious the writer, the more intense this self-flagellation will be. The hack sails serenely on, moving his fingers, covering paper with words, collecting his checks. The writer who sees himself—however self-deludingly—as a serious creative artist will, sooner or later, come up against the fact that what he's writing seems neither serious nor creative nor art. And then follows the paralysis known as writers' block. The fact that his newest work actually may be on a par with, or even superior to, the stories with which he made his name is irrelevant. They don't seem that way to him. And in time his critical appraisal of the work in progress becomes so harsh that he can't go on.

I said above that I do eventually develop a healthy appreciation of my own work, or at least some of it, after the fact. Some writers never get even that much solace. But the knowledge of past achievement is small consolation during the agonies

of writing the newest story. When in a difficult moment I'm foolish enough to look back with pride at something I once wrote that actually has come to satisfy me—as I look back, say, on "Born With the Dead" or *Downward to the Earth* or *Dying Inside*—the effect is usually catastrophic. That was then; this is now; the more admiration I feel for the old stories, the more clearly I see that the new one is plainly a stinker. (Ah, but is it? I wrote one a couple of years ago called "Enter a Soldier. Later: Enter Another" that seems to me to be at best a journeyman bit of professionalism; I thought so little of it that I nearly didn't bother to submit it to a magazine for publication. Eventually I did, though; and when it was published I reread it and wondered why I had been so harsh on it. And it went on to win a Hugo and nearly won a Nebula too.)

Cold comfort, then, to look back on past glories. That only invites you to compete with yourself of years gone by; and the new book or story somehow never measures up against the ones that are safely in print, applauded and anthologized and mysteriously made acceptable even to their creator.

Even worse than competing against yourself, though, is the torment of forcing yourself to compete against *other* writers' triumphs—of trying to match, in a single prose work, everything and anything that anyone has ever written. Of all the pathological afflictions to which writers are prone, that's the most maddening. You launch into a novel and suddenly you realize that it doesn't have the epic sweep of *Dune*, the intricate mystery-story plot of *Caves of Steel*, the brilliant prose surface of *The Stars My Destination*, the warmth and compassion of *The Left Hand of Darkness*, the high-tech pizzazz of *Neuromancer*, or the visionary poetry of *Perelandra*. Worse yet, you reach outside the science-fiction field, and start comparing your pitiful six pages with *The Sun Also Rises*, *The Magic Mountain*, *The Sound and the Fury*, *Crime and Punishment*, and *The Adventures of Augie March*. Not just with one of them, but with all of them at once: you want to embody the salient qualities of every worthwhile piece of fiction since *The Iliad* in your new book. But you can't, because it can't be done. And you sit there glumly staring at the screen, telling yourself that you and your book both are worthless.

The thing to do when that happens is to remind yourself that *Caves of Steel* doesn't have the epic sweep of *Dune* either, and that *Neuromancer* written with the warmth and compassion of *The Left Hand of Darkness* would be just plain silly, and Hemingway's books aren't much like Faulkner's and neither one of them had much in common with Thomas Mann. Besides which, nothing in any of those books has any bearing on what you're writing now—so knock off the foolishness, fellow, and just tell your story, one sentence at a time, in your own tone of voice. There's time to worry later, when the work is done, about whether you've surpassed Hemingway and Bester and Faulkner and Le Guin.

Usually that works. Which is why, despite the self-inflicted torments I devise for myself, I do manage to keep on writing. And so do all the other writers you read, most of whom stagger under self-imposed burdens of similar kinds.

The problem, really, is that in order to write well, the writer has to be a fierce critic of his own work: to review it sentence by sentence in the moment of creation (or soon afterward) and to prune away everything false, awkward, inept, or muddled. He needs, in Hemingway's classic phrase, a good bullshit detector. And all too often the critic inside the writer gets too critical. Then nothing escapes the built-in bullshit detector; then every line is discarded as fast as it gets on screen; and then the writer finishes his day with "the long despair of doing nothing well."

This is not a plea for sympathy. Graham Greene has been well rewarded for his trouble, and so have I, and John Masefield, for all his despair, went on to become poet laureate of England. If writing is a depressing business, and it certainly is, it's because it necessarily requires a high degree of self-criticism and tends to attract people who are prone to depression in any case. We invent our own problems for ourselves, and sometimes the going gets very tough as a result. But we keep on going, all the same—most of us—and it's not a terrible life, just a complex one.

As for Tom Laughton and his struggle to do a proper job of writing that book on hotelkeeping: after many drafts it finally was finished and published in 1977, under the title of *Pavilions by the Sea*. In his essay on it, Graham Greene speaks approvingly of its "proud, confident, professional ring." But I don't think its author ever wrote a second one. There are mornings when I don't blame him. ✦

Letters

Excellent mag! You've got my subscription and my order for the first new-format issues. My compliments, and (inevitably, or what's a fan for?), my comments on the September issue:

Design and production is great. The fonts and styles are crisp, clear, and a pleasure to read. The artwork is beautiful. I'd like an artists' gallery, too, but you already have a lot of good work illustrating each story.

The center of any mag is stories, but I can get stories from anthologies. Your job is harder: you need editorials, letters, columns. I like the way you do it. Of course, get everything you can from Silverberg. I appreciate "About the Authors," and would like any comments you can get from them; but I understand many authors legitimately prefer letting the work speak for itself.

I may not agree with reviewers' opinions, but book reviews do at least give me something to look for. JCB [John C. Bunnell] has a good, objective touch. "Looking Forward" is a great idea. I'll bet the authors think so, too . . .

A comment on the comment "I enjoy seeing so little advertising . . .": I disagree—go ahead, take the money and print lots of advertising! I want the mag to live long and prosper, and the graphics [in advertisements] can be as good as the story illustrations.

"Death Link": the definitive answer to Arthur C. Clarke's "The Star."

"Thomas and the Wise Men": this story is politics, not SF.

"Dealer": excellent writing. I'd like to read more of her work.

"Ex Cathedra": you lost me.

"The Gygr": very thoughtful, another excellent writer.

"Almost Like Air": "Blood Music" lite.

"Taking the High Road": OK.

"Into the Altar Pit": fun.

"The Storming Bone": Page 16, the medieval curriculum was the Quadrivium and Trivium, the four-way and three-way; page 23, ". . . the water came sweeping along in near-*horizontal* gusts. . . ." (I love to quibble.) Actually, the story was incredible. It fit into the Arthurian cycle so well, I was surprised that reality hadn't created it already. It reads like a fragment of an undiscovered epic.

Edw. Benjamin Hausman
New York NY

—

I think your new format is a step in the right direction, but there is one thing that bothers me about it:

Why not let ALL the artwork cover the entire page, rather than just giving this honor to the leading story? Also, instead of marring the art with lettering announcing the title of the story and credits to the author, as you do now with the leading story, let the reader see a full-sized rendition of the painting and nothing else.

I am a firm believer in the contention that a picture is worth a thousand words (or even more) because it serves to enhance the story in ways that cannot be expressed fully in the prose; it gives the reader a detailed vision of the setting and mood depicted in the story, thereby making it better and more real in his/her mind. The bigger the illustration, the bigger the enhancement.

Surely it can't be that much trouble to give the artists a full page to present their work, and then put the title and author's by-line on the second page.

Other than that, you guys are doing great.

George Hughes
Stillwater OK

P.S. No, I'm not an artist.

I was tempted to write a response to George's requests and statements, but then I decided that doing so might stifle someone else who might want to share more thoughts on the subject. Sure, there are reasons for why we're presenting artwork and story titles the way we are; some of them are logically arguable, and others simply boil down to "That's the way we wanted to do it." But before I take space to explain those reasons, let's see if anyone else wants to agree with or argue against George's suggestions. How about it?

—

On the year Howard Hughes flew the "Spruce Goose" above the Long Beach harbor waters, I travelled from Manhattan to the stars via *Amazing Stories* (Edmond Hamilton's "The Star Kings," September 1947) for the first time. The term space opera was unknown to me, although I'd been exposed to a bit of it somewhat earlier. *Amazing* became the first pulp I collected.

However, this isn't a nostalgia letter; the collection's long gone, along with many other things. But my opener goes by way of saying I've not only seen the magazine in even earlier forms, but followed it through the many ups and downs it's experienced since.

And guess what—I think what you guys are doing fits; what's happening in the new format is what a promag with such a title should do in the '90s.

You've asked for opinions/suggestions. Okay:

I hope you can keep Bob Silverberg's guest editorials; he knows what's coming down. I don't think AMAZING should be a media mag, although it won't hurt to look at the media now and then. Ditto for science articles; AMAZING should experiment.

Because I believe you should experiment, however, I'd like to point out that four-color art doesn't always do it for a given story. If mood/plot/characterization calls for two colors or black & white, use it.

In fact, the only thing I've definite objections to are excerpts of upcoming novels. I think reviews will suffice, par-

ticularly if you get people with both insight and integrity; you've got some of them now.

That's it for now. Here's hoping the oldest magazine in SF can continue to 2047 and beyond. . . . Will be pointing it out to old & young fans alike. Many thanks—and good luck.

Ray Garcia Capella
Alhambra CA

Well . . . another suggestion about artwork—but this time, one that I want to address right now.

I've seen a lot of black-and-white illustrations that I thought were beautiful and absolutely perfect companions for the stories they accompanied. I know some excellent artists who work primarily or exclusively in black and white, and I will always regret not having the opportunity to feature their work in this magazine. But we have this Way of Doing Things, just as any magazine must have a set of firm policies and procedures, and one of our policies is that we only use color illustrations along with short stories.

More to the point of Ray's contention, I can't imagine an instance when it would be more appropriate to illustrate a story in black and white than to accompany it with a painting. If the mood or plot or characterization of a story seems to call for an illustration with a subdued color scheme, then that's what we'll try to get for that story. But just as any story can be illustrated in black and white (other magazines do it all the time), so can any story be illustrated in color.

—

The quality of the new AMAZING has been very high, though I have to side with the people who find the covers too pulpish. But you must be doing something right; some local Waldenbooks (just what is the plural of Waldenbooks?) are carrying the magazine, after having dropped *Asimov's* and *Analog* some time ago. It if takes that kind of cover to get the distribution, I'm all for it.

Mike Kallenberger
Hartland WI

—

I applaud the format change you've instituted and wish it a very long run. Of the first three issues since the change, my hands-down favorite story is Chap Reaver's "Feel Good Stuff." It was a moving and magical piece, with a heart as big as anything by Orson Scott Card. I've been a fan of Dr. Reaver's editorial writing for several years; it's a real treat to see those considerable talents appear in one of my favorite fiction magazines.

Navall Horch
Roanoke VA

—

Forgive me if I wax poetical, but I am enchanted by the cover of the September issue.

First, compliments to the artist. I have just enough experience in painting to know that making something appear to stand in mid-air is not easy. David Mattingly did an excellent job, with that and everything else in the picture. This cover fits your image of AMAZING perfectly!

Of course, the obvious response upon seeing "Merlin" riding the subway is, "Let's see somebody try to mug *this* dude!" Which, admittedly, would be an entertaining thing to watch.

But in thinking about that, I realized my response to the picture went in a more subtle direction. I began to notice "Merlin's" fellow passengers. They aren't paying him much attention. It's not as if they're studiously avoiding looking at him, like you might avoid looking at a rather belligerent gorilla, to avoid attracting his attention. Rather, they're just accepting him as part of the environment. That's interesting.

More, it points to something I'd like to see more of in science fiction: A recognition that we miss much in ignoring the ordinary details of our environment, for the ordinary world around us is extraordinary. In our everyday lives, we tend to take things for granted. The mailman (unless he's late). The corner drugstore (unless it's out of antacid). The man next door and the little old lady down the street. They're all part of the landscape, and unless they do something to upset the order of our lives they don't rate much more than a nod and a smile.

But they should! Who's to say that the man next door isn't a "Merlin" in mufti? Perhaps the little old lady, putting out a saucer of milk for a stray cat, is Bast in disguise. The mailman could be Hermes, late because he had a rather more important message to deliver for Zeus. And the druggist who dominates the counter in the back of the corner store is descended from an alchemist.

The world is a wondrous place, and it's the function of science fiction to explore that wonder. Not just in outer space, or in Hyboria or Middle Earth. Here. Right next door to home-sweet-insecure-home.

Science fiction has done that over and over again, of course. Did not Isaac Asimov write that "Earth Is Room Enough"? And anyone who reads Ray Bradbury's *Dandelion Wine*—especially the prologue—or his "Zen and the Art of Writing" must automatically be convinced of the magic of our everyday existence. Since reading Bradbury I have, without conscious volition, reverted to my childhood habit of counting the cars of passing trains. . . .

Of course we need *Far Centaurus* and *Thieves' World*. They are the sum and substance of what makes science fiction and fantasy. But we need the other as well. The "mundane" science fiction which celebrates and rejoices in the possibility—the probability—that excitement and wonder reside next door in exactly the same intensity as across the universe.

After all, if the other side of the cosmos is infinitely far away from us, are we not, in equal measure, infinitely far away from it?

Your cover reminds us of this.

Craig Barrett
Canon City CO

—

I think AMAZING Stories should stick to science fiction and fantasy and avoid horror. In the ways that really count, horror has less in common with sf/f than science fiction and fantasy have with each other. What's more, the market is glutted with horror fiction, but there hasn't been an overabundance of professionally produced publications devoted to short sf/f since the demise of the pulps.

In response to your question of whether to print interviews and articles on authors and other sf/f personalities, I'd vote yes, but with the following caveats.

Please select your subjects carefully. Most of us reading this magazine already know who Hugo Gernsback, John W. Campbell, and Robert Heinlein were, so there's no need for another History of Science Fiction 101 biography.

If you run interviews or articles concerning living persons who have already received an abundance of exposure, please see to it that these pieces concentrate on activities, aspects of their work, or opinions that are interesting, but not well known.

Furthermore, please get interviewers who know their job. I'm tired of those who insist on airing their own experiences and opinions rather than getting interviewees to air theirs. A good interviewer is an invisible interviewer.

Rima Saret
Russellville AR

WORd SALAD

Phillip C. Jennings

Illustration by Bob Eggleton

"The shop's miserables pull nineteen days,
if she opens their freakishness!
But no more people,
God knows my rumor-mongering souseman—"

For the dozenth time Chastie Gaffarah pushed STOP. With a sigh she unfolded out of her chair and moved to the window of this unfamiliar small cell. By rote she fingered her prayer beads as she squinted over the high ledge. Gray autumn skies pressed down over the gilded domes, pylons and skywalks that looked so different—shrunken and colder—than on video. In the square many stories below, devotees moved in colored phyla. Around them shepherds, librarians, and sanctuarians hurried with purpose; their gowns coded and chevroned, yet the sum effect was chaos.

What else to expect in the world's greatest polity? Holy Baltimore was almost as populous as in the old Days of Error, renewed during eight reigns by the energies of millions from East and West. Compared to these sacred precincts, her own Marrakesh was a village, and nearby Washington a wicked, poisoned ruin.

Gaffarah sought in her heart for the thrill she should feel on being summoned across the seas from the hinter polities of Morocco. The thrill of living within miles of the Elder Prophet's palace! She found fear instead. Fear that she did not deserve this soul-shattering honor. Fear that hindered digestion, leaving her last meal a lump in her stomach, while her brain signaled a mindless, vagrant hunger.

Nothing was perfunctory here in the center of things. Much was invested in her. It would be tragic if she failed to pass today's test.

She muttered a final invigorative and turned back. The tape player sat on her worktable, next to her terminal. Again she pushed PLAY.

Bleed them to God;
I've come for two horses.
"Major, we're closing in."
Now we spy the length of the wagon train
for the camera effect.
"Just a lot of cosmos,"
said the fat houseman.
His bladders piss out the puffed canvasses . . .

"Bleed them to God" struck Chastie Gaffarah as impious, but it was not her duty to censor this transcription. Far from that, she had to record it as accurately as possible. *Souseman, houseman.* Perhaps she should change line 4 to *"rumor-mongerings houseman."* Perhaps it was a mistake to impose any grammatical agreement or punctuation on this insane babble!

Just this forenoon Elder-Dean Rieso had given identical cassettes to six polity-trained chasties. Even now five others were shaping their own decisions. Some would make no impositions at all; others would force this garbage into sense by any means necessary. Gaffarah anticipated that most would take the middle ground.

As she pondered, the madman muttered line 35: *"Go sire dour multitudes!"* Gaffarah frowned. The speaker had not used enough force of expression to justify an exclamation, but he'd departed from his usual monotone, and she thought that ought to be preserved in her transcription. Briefly she'd argued with herself that "sire dour" was "sirdar," a rare OED word, but to use "sirdar" was to rob the sentence of any sense, merely to show off her educated vocabulary.

Whoever he was, the crazy man used clauses more or less competently, and perhaps half his sentences were successful. Gaffarah sighed. This was a claim she'd defend, to justify her commas, her quotation marks, and all the rest. Yet in her defense, could she summon up the righteous certainty that was the hallmark of any true chastie?

If anything made Gaffarah feel like a failure, it was her suspicion that there *was no right way* to key this man's words to disk!

She hit REWIND harder than necessary, and made herself sit again. Ha! Line 3—how did she miss that? She changed "no" to "know," and smiled. Better and better. Her mood lightened, and she readied another assault on lines like number 78: *"She will not poison these pigeons ring."*

"Pigeons'" in the possessive? As she faced new problems, time passed unnoticed. The November skies darkened. Only the blue glow of her screen illuminated Gaffarah's cell, so she was all the more startled when her door cracked open and bright hallway light flooded in. "Supper, chastie," said a black-robed novitiate, barely concealing her adolescent exasperation. "Didn't you hear my knock five minutes ago? Supper, and prayers. Then you and the other provisionals wait in the common room."

"Oh. Thank you." Gaffarah logged off, rose, and moved toward the refectory, marveling at the arrogance of the novitiates of Holy Baltimore, so much more important in their own young eyes than a full chastie from far-off Africa! It was hardly her first intimation that this great polity was less holy than it might be, and less worshipful.

Nor did supper restore her naivete. High-Chastie Maniesc was fat, a poor choice to steer her charges from the elemental sin of gluttony. Her opposite at table, Chastie Hanahan, lilted the accents of fine birth in a place where family considerations were supposed to be forgotten—what the novitiates adored in her was a refined worldliness more dangerous to their souls than an overly abundant table. Yet these women belonged here and she did not, she and the other five "provisionals" from around the world, pecking at their food, not daring to look at each other, not daring to see defeat or victory in each others' faces.

Afterward during prayers, fat Maniesc intoned the Ninety-Second Revelation in a well-oiled voice: "Do not put yourselves forward in petty arrogance, for it is God's initiative to draw some of you forth for greater service, nor is it meet to trespass on God's prerogatives." These words were meant to remind the novitiates why their six guests were here today, but Gaffarah had the uncomfortable feeling Hanahan regarded the second Elder Prophet as so much noise to be endured.

Not that her finely structured face betrayed any feeling whatsoever. And truth be told, the second Elder Prophet struck Gaffarah as the least original in His thinking; more sonorous than sincere. A man of a hundred years ago, schooled during the very last Days of Error.

After twenty minutes of devotion, the provisionals climbed up from their knees and moved to the common room. Elder-Dean Rieso would wonder why none had transcribed the madman's babble with real inspiration that afternoon—just like a man to ignore their excitement and travel fatigue! But then Gaffarah's eyes widened—*Am I prescient? Here he is!*

He stood and waved them to various chairs, this caved-in man with the giant and utterly careful intellect, his green sleeves covered with chevrons. A man of pursed lips and tip-tapping fingers, deft and insinuating. "Chasties, while you've been otherwise occupied, I've reviewed your work. I trust you've found today's test . . . interesting. The variations among your transcriptions have occasioned many fruitful ideas in my own mind; you must not make the mistake of thinking that truth can only be discovered by congruity!"

Chastie Gaffarah smiled on cue; others giggled nervously.

"You will all find assignments in the sacred precincts. Your resumēs do you no more than proper credit," the elder-dean continued. "But what we need for our special purposes is something, uh . . . well, let's say a quality—you find me incoherent tonight!" he joked in self-deprecation, then tried again. "Most of you divided the work into upwards of a hundred twenty phrases, and polished the first third rather well. By comparing the first forty lines with the last forty, we learned how each of you lock in on your text's meaning. On that basis, we'd like Chastie Gaffarah to consult her soul, and decide whether she's willing to serve within the Elder Prophet's own quarters."

"Your sagacity! You want me to decide—in front of—right here? Right now?" Gaffarah spoke confusedly as her narrow brown face flamed in astonishment.

"Why not in front of us all? Certain vows must be made in public," Elder-Dean Rieso reminded her. "Your five companions are ordained witnesses like you, with years of experience. So now we ask: will you serve the Elder Prophet in anything He asks?"

"I do. I mean, I will."

"Will you keep His secrets, and hide none from Him?"

"I will."

The oath continued through all twelve items. Novitiates ran to fetch Gaffarah's suitcase from the cell she'd never even slept in. Where were the Elder Prophet's quarters? Close enough that she'd be expected to hike there?

Rieso used his magkey on the elevators, leading the way to God-knew-what. A raw Chesapeake wind tore at Gaffarah's robes as she followed the elder-dean outside the tower, away from the square and into something like a campus, complete with potted trees. Guards stood at the next building over, a library. They spasmed into rigidity and relaxed again. "Indexed," Rieso puffed, as the two of them carded through the foyer. "Forbidden texts from the Days of Error."

But Gaffarah saw no books, just a marble-and-gilt lobby. An escalator led down, and a private train whisked them from a decorously tiled basement into a dark subway tube. Once inside the car Chastie Gaffarah sat with relief, then worried about her manners. Surely she should have waited for Elder-Dean Rieso to make himself comfortable!

Light flashed as they zoomed through an underground station. She saw his face: he was distracted by his thoughts, not miffed at her, not angry. He stood as the car slid into a forest of fluted arches and backlit mosaics. "Here we are. My secretary will be waiting. She'll find you a room. You'll want to rest. I don't mean to leave you hanging, but there's much to be done. Security clearances. We can't possibly discuss your duties until tomorrow afternoon."

All these events made Chastie Gaffarah feel like a snail without her shell, a small person oppressed by grandeur. The train stopped, the door slid open, and Rieso's secretary—a tall, pale woman and strangely gowned—stepped forward to grab her elbow.

The next half-hour was talk, and hallways, and the music of a distant choir, singing sharply close harmonies. The World Unity Chorus was performing only a hundred yards away! An elevator door cut off their trained voices, and took Chastie Gaffarah to a floor of luxuriant austerities: polished wood, walls of textured suede, old oriental screens showcased in glass.

Her room's window was obscured by extraordinary knotted drapery, her bedframe was brass, her table was a round slab of thick black slate. "I—I don't see any terminal. . . ."

The elder-dean's secretary smiled. "Sit in your chair. That activates the keyboard."

Indeed, however Gaffarah oriented the chair to the table, a virtual keyboard glowed to face her, the simulkeys obedient to her fingers. *Fn-F12* brought a viewscreen to life, scaling through a menu of sizes until it covered the wall opposite her bed.

Once the secretary left, Gaffarah shrank the screen to serve as her nightlight. She told prayer-beads to calm her turbulent thoughts, and tumbled off to sleep.

That night she woke and chanted back to sleep several times. Next morning *"Message"* blinked on her screen, and she had to inquire, lest her mind be distracted during first prayers. What followed was her day's agenda. *"Room service breakfast"* in forty minutes gave her time to do her devotions and wash up. She tried hard not to think about the *"Medical procedure"* that followed afterward.

She'd heard of implants: men born in Error had sought to martyr the third Elder Prophet. All who might be admitted to the Sacred Presence—every voice in the chorus, for example—must know that they could die instantly at the tap of a button. No matter how cunningly they ran or hid, there was no escaping the fatal signal. Such knowledge might not stop a disciplined assassin, but servants of Error could not be people of discipline.

Gaffarah hoped she'd summon the spirit to accept her implant gladly, but from what she knew of doctors, they hardly cared what expression she wore on her face; they kept too busy elsewhere.

The morning went as she feared. The drug that numbed her pain made her effusive. Gaffarah babbled her views to a cadre of deans, who bent in from a circle of seats to ask appalling questions. "Do you hate the Prophets?" "What's your worst shame and secret?" "Tell us your sexual fantasies." "When was the last time you met a miscreant?"

An expert transcriptionist should not have misunderstood the word. "Miskery ant? I'm not sure I know—"

"Infidel. Man of Error."

"I don't think I've ever—wait. When I was a child. We saw nomads pass the orchard. They were on their way into the desert. Tattered and black—they had children. I stared at the children, and they stared back."

"They're dead now. All that kind, all dead. Or maybe not. How do you feel about that?"

"Sad. So sad about the children. Sad that anyone died in Error."

Afterward the deans left. The drug wore off. Gaffarah stiffened so badly from the procedure that she needed a nurse to help her hobble to her glorious "cell."

Here she sat, to stare at the tape recorder that had not been there earlier. She pushed PLAY.

> *—stacked with their way ahead of us,*
> *and Uncle Sam's nation,*
> *this unfinished painting*
> *hung against your horrid thing following behind.*
> *Saint colors!*
> *In front of it hung steaming like an old man,*
> *white in hate*
> *and half-used tubes to pig the air.*

Perhaps it was her duty to transcribe. At least it was an opportunity to keep in practice. Soon these words scrolled up her wall, followed by others.

All muttered by the same monotone voice! For the first time, Chastie Gaffarah thought of the madman as more than a test; as a person accessible to Elder-Dean Rieso. An old man in his dotage? No, not so old. Not thin and quavery.

PLAY, REWIND. PLAY, REWIND. She inched forward through the tape, until she reached a gap. She heard a click and a fumble. Then Elder-Dean Rieso began to speak.

"Consider the phenomenon of prophetic revelation. Consider what it is to be a medium for God's voice. Is not the Spirit of God an ultimate Fullness? Could we liken Him to the most powerful of radio transmitters, broadcasting on the purest of frequencies?

"It's too much for any man to keep tuned to God's station—it's an achievement merely to find that station now and again. But if you have the gift, and cannot always be tuned to God, what comes in at other times? To ears deafened by that ultimate Fullness we spoke of a moment ago?

"Think of all humanity, think of an amalgam of spirits, think of the additive buzz of so many millions together! Well, isn't it natural *that you'd hear that whisper, not very clearly, and certainly not coherently?"*

Chastie Gaffarah's face drained as she listened. She tried to swallow. Madness! He couldn't be leading her the way it seemed! He must not say—he must stop short of the final thing! To dare make the claim that she'd just been listening to the vaporings of—No!—the eighth Elder Prophet?

What scandal!

"You are highly educated. Your vocabulary includes words rarely used since the Days of Error. Regrettably, old terms like 'word salad' may be familiar to you, inappropriate though they are," the elder-dean continued. *"Don't be deceived. The Elder Prophet has no mere clinical condition. We have limited-access libraries where old secular texts are kept guarded. I grant you permission to use them during your free time. Satisfy yourself: what you've listened to are not the ravings of a schizophrenic. When you've made certain of that, your faith will recover beyond any further shocks. Mine is the, er, official view, though of course none of this is to be bandied about."*

There was a pause as Rieso collected himself. *"I want you to know that we need you badly. The Prophet talks incessantly during His waking hours, and concealed among His—His looser narratives, are the momentary flashes of revelation that make Him God's Foremost Servant on Earth! We dare not miss those moments! That's why we have dozens of transcriptionists working around the clock, and we need more dozens yet!*

"I shall leave you to your thoughts now, until we meet at supper. At that time you can tell me . . . well, if you require extra time to muster yourself, or if you find any great impediments to fulfilling your service."

And if I do? Chastie Gaffarah asked herself. *Surely I'll never leave this place alive, no matter what vows I take!* "Never shirk from harm in the service of World Unity!" the first Elder Prophet had said, and the risk of making the eighth Elder Prophet a laughingstock, a source of shame—no, it couldn't be tolerated. People had been executed for much less. She really had no choice but to serve, none at all. Serve or die.

And die anyhow, when her service was done.

That poor man! Gaffarah's thoughts swung to the Elder Prophet. If God spoke through Him, God might show how to help Him. She must make a new study of His ramblings, a pious study. . . .

She spoke her hopes at supper with Elder-Dean Rieso and his secretary some hours later. He seemed surprised and cheered. "Enthusiasm is rare here," he admitted. "People lose energy, dealing with the situation day in, day out."

"What happens then, your sagacity?" Chastie Gaffarah asked bravely.

"The Elder Prophet needs personal servants. Those who can be trusted, but who need a mental holiday, find it a privilege to help Him dress and eat."

"And after that?"

Elder-Dean Rieso grimaced. "Bermuda. It's an island

in the Atlantic. It's needed repopulating since the Days of Error. A pleasant place—we wouldn't want you to think otherwise."

Gaffarah lowered her eyes. "Do I need a card to get into the libraries?"

Rieso laughed. "Absolutely. And the cost of your privilege is this: your card will take you only to the forbidden places, never out among the public. You understand why."

"And I approve. Please don't think me impertinent, but it's wise that our precious Prophet be served by people who . . . well, hope for happy Bermuda. I've heard of the place. Your Baltimore is the greatest of polities, and run with fine skill. It's an example to the rest of the world."

"We've had no mass executions here since the twenty-seventies," the secretary boasted, to reinforce these views of ultimate clemency. Unfortunately, her remark drew the three of them back to an era no one liked to talk about, and they ate dessert in silence. *Do they feel as I do?* Gaffarah thought to herself. *Do they regret the deaths? Do they wish God would show us a new way?*

The next days Chastie Gaffarah kept to her cell, transcribing tapes as she recuperated from her security implant. Other chasties visited and introduced themselves, transcriptionists recruited by Elder-Dean Rieso during earlier weeks and months. They invited her to the group prayer cycle beginning Sixday night. She decided she felt strong enough to attend, and was dazzled by the austere glory of this floor's communal shrine.

Between phases of the cycle, the chasties sat together, sharing cups of hot O-Yu. "I've studied the subway maps," Gaffarah whispered. "I might almost find the Social Science Library without getting lost."

"Yes?" Her neighbor was red-cheeked as an apple, with bright blackberry eyes. "Why go there?"

"The dean invited me . . ." Gaffarah's words trailed off. "Is it frowned on? Because I wouldn't go alone." Chasties never traveled alone in Morocco: she'd feel as uncomfortable as if she were naked.

Her companion understood and jerked her chin in lieu of pointing. "Ask Drina over there. We stole her from the polity of Savannah, and she studies her region's history in her free time. Perhaps you can coordinate schedules."

It was a long, nine-phase cycle, lasting through Sevenday until early Oneday morning, before Gaffarah found occasion to match up with Drina. She spoke her proposal, and the black chastie answered: "You know all the old texts have been disked? Are you good with information management software? We use BIBTEK—it's very powerful."

"Especially with graphics," Gaffarah agreed. "I love BIBTEK! Wonderful!"

"You'll find that everything Elder-Dean Rieso says is true," Drina continued gravely. "Everything about the Prophet's condition."

"It's not that I doubt him," Chastie Gaffarah began, earnest to explain herself. Just then the drum boomed, mustering them for the solemn last phase. The prayers of the next hour focused on the dead, but she was too stimulated by novelty to think of much besides the living women at her side. Each might have evolved from a different animal—the red-cheeked one from some chubby arctic rodent, Drina from a stately hippopotamus. And herself? Small and brown and narrow, with monkey-paw hands? She was a monkey, with a monkey's curiosity and enthusiasm.

Who took monkeys seriously? Ultimately, monkeys were all fuss and fret. *God save me from the doom of my monkey nature,* she prayed, finally in tune with the mood of the ceremony around her. But God would save them all. At whatever cost, God had united the world. Now His people waited to be led to glory.

Led by whom?

> *"The normal must be what we are.*
> *We infect many others.*
> *I have heights I climb*
> *and afterward it's perfect."*

Stretches of the Elder Prophet's language almost made sense, almost sounded revelatory, commingled with the rest. Where did they stop?

> *"Mine to declaim against the mud,*
> *and study breath.*
> *It has been weeks since sin"*

—was this still on track? But beginning the very next line:

> *"or I can write about a student*
> *in Perrier water, jogging.*
> *Weeks the archived uterus*
> *swung off the other animalia*
> *in garlic-butter sauce and impure variants.*
> *Oh yes, long-haired and dark-haired body*
> *now rolling uncouth and true,*
> *not smoothly oiled*
> *—almost all the one her duty;*
> *the habit her house-pet fanatics.*
> *Now it was time for long knives,*
> *but I have seen the pure with open eyes;*
> *Suzy Q's, breaded shrimp.*
> *These the true words of rabbi's onion rings."*

Nothing could be a worse mockery. In privacy Chastie Gaffarah wept, that one man was raised so high, and brought so low. If she ever tired of her present duty, she'd be forced to meet Him in the flesh, to attend His bodily functions. A week ago she'd dreamt of kissing His hand. Now the prospect filled her with horror. If possible, she'd delay that day for years! What dead mouth could lisp these wild words so passionlessly?

And yes, His words were curiously wild. The Prophet might be an educated man who'd studied the Days of Error, hence His allusions to the foods people ate back then, and to their sinful pastimes. Elder-Dean Rieso spoke of an amalgamated human soul that radiated its own noise, but these decades had seen the triumph of piety. It was embarrassing to think modern noise sound-

ed like *this*! Even if people sinned with vigor, would they sin in the language of olden times?

Was Rieso wrong? Or—did the human amalgam include all souls, living *and dead*? If so, six billion ghosts added in one calamitous epidemic a century ago surely spoke with tremendous weight. They would howl against their enemies: God, and World Unity, and the Prophet!

Chastie Gaffarah stumbled back to her cell. That night it was as if she heard the whispering dead; they stole her sleep. Her own dead looked for her, sad nomad children called her name. She hid among multitudes of miscreant souls, obscure in her brown robes, pretending she couldn't hear.

In the morning Drina knocked on her door and chatted as they rode the elevator—chatted about the greenhouse effect, lost coastal islands, African loan words adopted into regional English. All this Drina had to rewrite from a pious view; history made safe for public consumption, to prevent the tragedy of history lost.

They rode the train to the Social Science Library, showed their cards to the vigilant custodians, and settled into adjacent carrels. Gaffarah began her search.

There was so much! And almost every journal article, every citation, had been previously accessed by Elder-Dean Rieso. Not that they were helpful—these monographs and dissertations were written in impenetrable style. Though they spoke of the phenomenon of word salad, examples were rare. No one had had the patience to transcribe very many paragraphs, or if they had, they had not worked at a professional level of competence.

Still, their few examples were very different from what she listened to every day—for that matter, they were different from each other!

Using one of the options provided by BIBTEK, Elder-Dean Rieso had underscored some conclusions, guiding her attention. One researcher held that schizophrenic babble was either random or wholly obsessive. That excluded the mean: the speaker would not move from twenty lines on one theme to twenty lines on another.

I know what you're getting at, dean, Chastie Gaffarah thought to herself. The Elder Prophet was always shifting from, say, an art-centered vocabulary of pigments and canvas, to a western movie vocabulary of guns and sidekicks. That made Him unique.

On the other hand, the elder-dean's favorite researcher had enjoyed no reputation when he was alive. He'd published infrequently in the 1970's. He was cited only twice by other psychologists. Frankly, he might have been wrong.

Chastie Gaffarah leaned back in her chair, and decided she needed to lean equally far from this data. Just how many times was "word salad" mentioned year by year? Perhaps the term had been replaced by something formal. Something latinate.

She keyed in the proper instructions. BIBTEK drew a graph on her screen. "Connect the dots," she said, and looked at an upward slope, rising in frequency, then flattening in the 80's and 90's. Between 2000 and 2015 came a precipitous drop, tapering off to less than a hundred a year after 2024.

Yes, the word had fallen out of fashion, as could be proven by comparing "word salad" with "schizophrenia" itself. Of course the sheer scale of the second graph . . . what was this?

Again that upward curve, that tapering off, that steep decline. As if schizophrenia ceased to be a problem somewhere after the year 2000!

Gaffarah looked at the post-2008 texts. She found "schizophrenia" linked with "intransigent" or "unresponsive." She expected phrases like "what we used to call schizophrenia, but now call *x*." There was nothing like that at all.

Somebody had found a cure for schizophrenia. A cure lost in a lump of technical documentation, probably in the late 1990's. A cure forgotten again in the traumatic decades after 2024.

If psychologists didn't spend thousands of words rejoicing over that cure, was it because their hated cousins, the *psychiatrists,* were responsible? Had it been effected by some medical drug?

If that was true, Chastie Gaffarah needed to access the Biological Science Library, where the literature on psychiatry was kept. She also had to talk to Elder-Dean Rieso. That afternoon she called his secretary to make an appointment.

It took courage to do so. The elder-dean's time was important. She must therefore claim useful insights about great issues of theology and related fields—this was obvious, since *everything* was related to theology!

Elder-Dean Rieso's secretary found an hour for Gaffarah on Fiveday morning, giving her the chance to collar a companion and make a trip to the Biological Science Library the day before. Here were vast inglorious basements, crowded with functionaries copying mountains of musty source material to disk.

Gaffarah's arctic-rodent partner sniffed in disdain, then sneezed mightily, amusing a white-robed librarian. Gaffarah used the opening to make introductions, and got the woman talking. "We're lucky to have so much. It's mostly from a research hospital that used to exist in Holy Baltimore," she told the two chasties, "but scarcely thirty per cent is accessible. Our procedure is to work back through the boxes, catch as catch can."

Elder-Dean Rieso's own research was two or three years old. "How much of that thirty per cent was on disk two years ago?" Chastie Gaffarah asked.

"Oh, half. Not even that," the librarian answered. "Our former director—politics. He rubbed people the wrong way. But now we're making up for lost time. There are cures in here, drugs and medicines. The doctors of our age bow to none in their surgical techniques, but that's only half the game."

Calling medicine a "game" was a dubious use of language, and this flippant librarian seemed to believe her dangerous texts would have wide influence once they were copied to disk. Maybe—or maybe not. Chastie Gaffarah refrained from asking her about the religious implications of her work. They were too serious for people of lesser rank to resolve. If people died from disease this last century, that was God's judgment. If they didn't

He'll Destroy the Potion or Perish Trying

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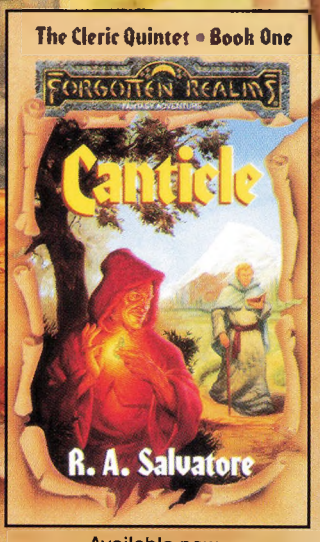

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die in the future, that was also God's judgment. The unveiling of a new medicine was a dispensation from God. Yet this was like a mathematical equation. You could divide the common factor from both sides; divide out God Himself! When you did this, whether people lived or died seemed a random matter. The survivors were no more deserving than those who succumbed!

Nothing about God was random, but everything in these basement rooms hinted at chaos—the piled boxes, the willy-nilly way library functionaries tore journals apart for scanning. Scraps of paper littered the aisles. There was as much "looseness" here as in the Elder Prophet's babbling language.

When Gaffarah sat at a terminal to use BIBTEK, she found large areas of text archived as system files, not yet keyworded. It took ten times as long to go through as much material as she'd looked at in the Social Science Library—it seemed even longer with her companion pacing circles behind her back.

Even so, she found her cure. It would have been hard to find two years ago, if not impossible. It had something to do with brain cells, and how they communicated with each other, ping-ponging electrically charged molecules across narrow channels. There were receptors, shaped each for its purpose. Sometimes they got clogged, and sometimes bad molecules fit the holes better than good ones. Chastie Gaffarah was no scientist, but these were the impressions she carried off.

Bad molecules could be purged, and good molecules supplied in their stead. The body would do that, if ordered, and a pill could give that order. It had three or four names. The easiest was SeroXin.

Speaking of SeroXin to Elder-Dean Rieso the next day, Chastie Gaffarah found herself leaning forward in imitation of this green-gowned man, who had a scholar's hunched shoulders. They shared the same invisible tent over his desk. She felt privileged, yet secretive. "It would cure the disease—"

"I do not believe the Elder Prophet has a disease, chastie," Rieso answered. With a surge of emotion this man of intellect clutched her sleeve. "You have listened to His language. It does not resemble the examples from the Days of Error."

Gaffarah blushed hotly, seeing the elder-dean as never before. He bore a terrifying authority—terrifying even to himself? He needed to believe, to have her confirm that his reasoning was sound. She spoke carefully. "Pardon, your sagacity, but His speech is full of anachronisms. I could run word counts and prove it. You spoke of soul noise, the noise of all humanity, but *modern* humanity does not talk His way. If I accept your ideas, the choice is a narrow one. Either the ghosts of the dead who died in Error can act from hatred to disturb His peace, or else . . ."

"Or else, schizophrenia," Elder-Dean Rieso finished. "Ghosts?" He grimaced at the word. "We've taken no position on the dead. Whether to pray to one's ancestors, as some do in China, or otherwise. Many of us object to superstition."

"If the Elder Prophet is suffering from a disease, then the proper medicine will cure Him," Chastie Gaffarah said, repeating her logic. "If it doesn't cure Him, He's not suffering from a disease, and therefore ghosts exist. Six billion angry ghosts!"

"Ah." Rieso folded his hands in thought. "Suppose everything physical has a Godly dimension. Suppose schizophrenia is the physical basis for an epiphenomenal ability to hear God's words."

"If that's true, we risk that in curing Him, we reduce the Elder Prophet to a normal man with no special gifts. These are great issues," Gaffarah agreed. "People of importance should discuss them. If you prefer that in the meantime I do nothing—"

"In the meantime, locate any supplies of SeroXin, or find out how it can be made. You don't have the background, but you can use the right people—you've met Chastie Hanahan? She'll be your liaison. Her novitiates will do your legwork. I'll give you her number. And of course, this must be kept distant. No one must draw any connections between schizophrenia and the Elder Prophet. You are permitted to tell lies in this service, if you need to."

"Lie to Chastie Hanahan, your sagacity?" Gaffarah asked.

"Especially to Chastie Hanahan," Rieso told her gravely.

These instructions were a great handicap. The elegant Chastie Hanahan would go out of her way to obey an elder-dean, but Rieso's authority could not be invoked. Likewise, she might serve from curiosity, but only if she were paid in information. Over the phone later that day, Gaffarah made it clear there could be no tit-for-tat. What she got back was "I'm afraid I don't know any molecular biologists. Where would they go for training?"

"I don't know. I should ask one of the doctors here, maybe."

Gaffarah rang off. SeroXin was unpursuable, unless the Biological Science Library contained cookbooks for drugs. Two visits the next week persuaded her that such books had not been copied to disk. Perhaps they did not exist.

In frustration she returned to her transcriptions, leaving great issues to the elder-deans, arch-shepherds and grand-sanctuarians who moved like mother ducks around the sacred precincts, trailing gaggles of followers. The chasties of her prayer group marveled at how many there were; reverend personages newly arrived from Gaza, and Indiana, and Uruguay, and they wondered why—some struggle for power in the absence of the Elder Prophet's guiding wisdom?

If only there was prophetic wisdom to be had! Steeling herself, Chastie Gaffarah inserted a new tape into her machine:

> *"Well?" he said. "You did autopsies?"*
> *Converging "Look at me" from foolish animals today.*
> *"I'm not going to lose what the pair thorns in me."*
> *Go sire dour multitudes.*
> *The disease exists.*
> *Give roses of blood!*
> *"Look at me," she snapped.*
> *And spirit!*
> *Far ahead, he created it and then shit.*

Playing through, she missed it the first time, catching it only as she typed the words: "*Go sire dour multitudes*!" Surely there was significance here—the same weird phrase spoken several weeks apart!

A message. A message from God—to her! What did it mean? Gaffarah looked at the very next line: "*The disease exists*!"

This was it! God meant to convince her, and she was convinced. At the same time she realized that no one else would believe in this miracle—and no one else had to. All that was important was that she get back to work.

She called Chastie Hanahan. "Well, hello! I was just thinking about you," the elegant young woman replied. "You remember asking me to find you a molecular biologist? Because my young sister's run across some such creature."

"I need to talk to him. I suppose he's profane? It'll have to be through a chastity screen?"

"Profane is the least of it. A few years without red-hot purges, and the more vulgar sort of people forget all prudence," Hanahan answered. Chastie's heart shriveled: this was the attitude that had conquered the world for God. Was she wrong to wish for some other way?

The man's name was Harry E. Cushner. Chastie Gaffarah went to Rieso's secretary to get him an access card, so he could view the indexed material at the Biological Science Library. The tall woman called up Cushner's record, and grimaced: "I don't see how someone as fractious as this—"

Just then Rieso puffed into the room, sleeves billowed from his hurried pace. "Chastie Gaffarah! How quickly can you get that stuff you were talking about? Seex or Slexin—"

"SeroXin. I've just got the name of my research scientist. I'm getting him a card."

Rieso did an about-face. "You've never met each other? Oh, pray this is really happening!"

"It is, your sagacity."

"Then leave it to me. And, uh—closet yourself. Forget everything. Transcribe tapes till you go mad. I'll get back to you."

What happened after that, Chastie Gaffarah could not know. She'd done her small duty, and was comfortable in her daily transcription work. She became an island of pious normalcy in the midst of speculation.

". . . the Arch-Shepherd of Australia! They say the people he hired marched with guns straight across the square!" Such was the talk she ignored, until the crowd of great personages began to thin again.

Some decision had been taken. Some crisis was weathered. And then Elder-Dean Rieso's secretary summoned her to his office.

She sat receptively, looking down at her folded hands. "Chastie," Rieso croaked, his voice hoarse from recent overuse. "The time has come to take that mental holiday I promised you. The Elder Prophet needs a food taster."

He sighed, and she looked up. "SeroXin. We have it." He reached across the desk. "The powder in this capsule can be sprinkled on tomorrow's luncheon. I trust you to do it. Please. With you, I don't have to explain."

"And then what?"

Rieso stood. His office, though large, had but one slit of a window. He moved to stare out at the glinting winter sun. "If He's cured, we have His single voice to lead us, unity without inspiration; better than what we live with now. If not—"

He cleared his throat and spoke more loudly, as to a crowd. "If not, we know the reality of it. We know that we cannot get rid of enemies by killing them, because their voices tax our Prophets after death. And so we must take a new path."

Gaffarah's heart pounded as Rieso spoke on. "We must find a way to make people love us, even people who live in Error. We must make a science of being loveable, the world over. No more purges. And then, slowly, the hate of six billion will fade away. Distanced by our new kindness."

"It must have been . . . difficult. To persuade all those leaders who came here. A miracle of hard work." *And it's aged you,* Chastie Gaffarah thought as she spoke. *You, with whom I never dare share my regret that mistakes were made. A century of blood and death! And you secretly feel the same, or I'd not be hearing these words of hope!*

The elder-dean's shoulders sagged as the tension went out of them. He turned back. "You'll do your part and then be taken off to Bermuda. One day of special service."

"I'll be happy to help you, your sagacity."

The next morning Chastie Gaffarah was wakened early and brought to the Elder Prophet's quarters, to be familiarized with the setting and her procedures. She had ten minutes while darkness leached from the eastern skies; then God's Voice on Earth was brought inside, bent, shivering in His gray satin pajamas.

He mumbled and took tiny steps, aimed by the chasties who flanked Him until He reached a pile of cushions. Here were arrayed all the things that in past times had caught His eye, baubles that briefly extroverted His attention, jewels and balls and toys. They made a circle, and He moved inside. When He did not sit, a modicum of gentle pressure on His arms reminded Him to do so.

Chasties addressed His unkempt hair, and dipped and toweled His hands. One stepped forward to pin on His microphone, and for some seconds His monotone was amplified: *". . . fierce fingers drew lines between a lot since father died its example in every place water do the chores she ware of guided spaceflight her devil sins the sort of problem to solve once for a grin forgetting to milk the nest of crisscrossed lines . . ."*

Gaffarah held back until new doors opened, and the Elder Prophet's breakfast was carried in. Then she chose a cushion and settled at His side, to taste each cup and bowl. She waited a moment, then nodded. It was not her job to spoon the mush into His mouth, nor wipe His chin, but she could hardly depart until He finished the meal.

Afterward she went out to the high patio, peering over the crenelations to see patterned gardens below, brown and battened against the siege of winter. She shivered,

hating the cold. It could be cold in Morocco, and hot in Baltimore, but what would she know of either extreme, once today was over?

A man was sick. A man who sat a hundred feet away, God's gift of sanity taken away, perhaps for some great purpose. Chastie Gaffarah felt in her gown's right pocket for the capsule that Elder-Dean Rieso had given her. This was her lonely moment; her lonely decision. With a tug, the gelatin shell came apart and emptied, and she transferred it to her left. The stuff that felt grainy to her furtive fingers was mere sugar, stolen some minutes ago. She scraped it into the hollow halves and closed them again.

Why it was so important to go through her motions at luncheon, she could not explain to herself. Except someone might make sure she fulfilled Rieso's instructions. Her tension mounted as the time wore on. An elaborate table of courses was carried before her, and she brought out her polished spoon of office.

The lunchmaid chasties watched her face as she tasted; her face, not her left hand, which wafted in vague blessing. She frowned portentously to encourage them in their upward focus, and managed her sleight early on. Overwhelmed by a surge of relief, she came close to fainting as she reached dessert. "Something wrong?" a chastie whispered. "The pudding—?"

"No. Just—me," Gaffarah gasped. "My first day of this service, you know." *My first, and my last!* "Perhaps it's too much responsibility, more than I can bear."

That afternoon, a cadre of deans came to sit and watch the Elder Prophet, looking covertly for signs of healing. Would a human light dawn in His eyes? From the suite's far corners, Chastie Gaffarah feigned the same hope and the same gradual disappointment. After the third meal she was dismissed and escorted back to her quarters.

Either He's sick, or World Unity must seek a new course. She'd made the choice, just in case God meant her to do so. Rieso's secretary stood waiting. "Your service is over. I'm told there has been some . . . misunderstanding. The former taster wishes to return to duty. Under the circumstances we feel it's best that you take the option of retiring to Bermuda."

Perhaps the woman knew more than her speech let on. She was not surprised that Gaffarah's suitcase was already packed. The chastie looked for Elder-Dean Rieso on the way to the helicopter, but did not see him. The bright-beamed monster roared into the night sky, carrying her away from earth, away from Baltimore, on the first stage of a trip to a place where nothing she did had any future meaning. A place with no terminals, no books. . . .

Three years later she looked up from her tomato vines into mild sunshine, and saw a brilliant descending star. She grabbed her basket and hurried through her villa to the footpath outside, a path that served here as a road.

The helicopter brought a new chastie, young and fair, with startlingly pale eyes: her irises stood out like pinpoints. "Are you Chastie Gaffarah?" the newcomer asked breathlessly, squinting at her worn robes.

"Welcome to Bermuda." Gaffarah nodded.

The copter's departure forced them into silence, until the noise died down. "I expected more . . . people," the visitor said, looking side to side into overgrown shrubbery. "More retirees."

"I was the first living person to set foot here this century," Chastie Gaffarah answered. "Before my time it was easier to lie. Easier and more secure—anything for the sake of World Unity. I have an implant. Simple enough to press a coded button and tumble my dead body out the door into the Atlantic waves. Simple, if not for my angry ghost."

"How awful!" The newcomer shivered. "I sometimes wondered if we've made any real progress. That you're alive is proof that we have, though it's hard to teach the new gentleness to stern old shepherds. We've had many discouragements. People keep coming out of hiding to accuse us of former sins. Their rage hasn't yet turned to love. Perhaps it never can."

"How is Elder-Dean Rieso?" Gaffarah asked, holding out a ripe tomato as a gift of welcome. "Forgive me; first I should ask your name."

"Goodhue. From the polity of Indiana, before my Baltimore service." She took a bite and smiled at the juicy flavor. Then her face turned solemn again. "I was asked to redo what you'd done. The elder-dean told me about you, but he had his doubts. He said we needed a better experiment; to feed SeroXin to a confirmed schizophrenic and see him cured, before giving a matched dose to the Elder Prophet."

"And you did it?" Gaffarah felt backward for the bench she knew was there at the edge of the field. She sat and took a breath. "You gave Him the medicine?"

"It's so hard for Elder-Dean Rieso to exercise his new regency!" Goodhue replied. "Each year is like a decade! He can just manage the burden if he believes in himself, if he has no doubts about the ghosts of past ages, and our duty to soften their rage. So, yes. I performed the test another time, just to make sure."

For some seconds Gaffarah could not speak. Goodhue retrieved her suitcase and moved back to her side, to where the path began. Then the older chastie mustered herself. "What happened?" she whispered.

"The schizophrenic got better, as we hoped. The Elder Prophet remained afflicted. Need I tell you more? Need I say that I did it all as you must have done, and for the same reasons? Let me turn out the pockets of this robe. You can taste the sugar that damns me."

"Three years are not enough," Chastie Gaffarah said.

"Three years of reform are just a beginning. But Elder-Dean Rieso has strength now for three years more. After enough time our people will learn to be kind, and our enemies may forgive the past. Not all those who lived in Error are dead. Some say we work our old evils behind this new mask, but it's a lie, and our mask of love and compassion may grow to become our true face."

"We can hope for that, anyhow," Chastie Gaffarah answered. She thought of the sad nomads of her childhood forty years ago, harried off to starve in the desert. The eyes of those children burnt into her soul, never forgotten. "We can always hope."

Touches

Gregory Benford

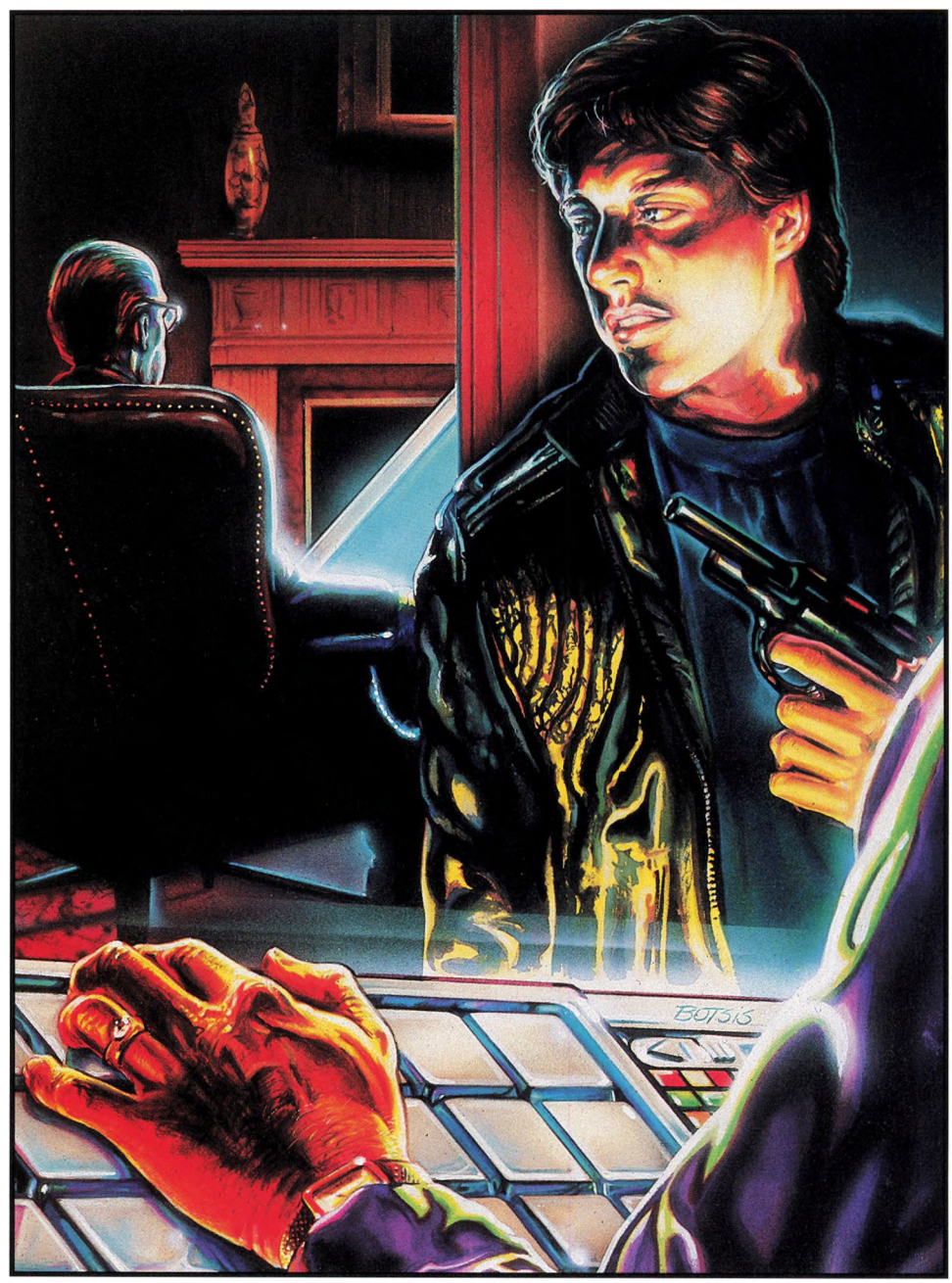

Illustration by Peter Botsis

Today, at work, he thought of the Game incessantly.

He had been playing it for some years now. At first he had sought mere mild entertainment. There were, of course, the electronic games that one saw in public places—pitiful things, a few moments of shallow amusement bought with a quarter. That was as far as most people went—or could go, given their skills.

He had tried those numbing, repetitive contests, and quickly abandoned them with disdain. They rewarded quick motor skills and elementary

tactical sense, but were painfully limited. Nothing like the Game.

He had a board meeting in the morning. It dragged unmercifully. Then came lunch with some business associates. They were confident, seasoned fellows, their seamed faces at ease. As they discussed recent events he thought mildly that politics was the intelligent man's weather; an inexhaustible subject, forever new and forever purposeless. He studied the brown liver spots on his hands and said nothing.

He found their talk of money matters kept drifting in and out of his attention, dreamlike, as if their numbers and analysis were unreal, airy, and only his memory of the Game was concrete.

That afternoon he lost track entirely during a conference with his own counsel. The man gave him a puzzled look as they chatted.

He left early and went directly home. This would be a particularly fine evening, he hoped. He would have ample time to himself, since his lady had arranged to have supper with friends. Over an early cocktail he made polite, bland conversation with her, introducing no fresh topics on his own. After she left he had a light supper, dismissed the servants and went to his study.

He settled into his favorite leather armchair, pulling the massive board to within easy reach. The display screen nearly obscured the view out the wide windows. The rich lawn beyond was a vibrant yellow-green swath. Birds trilled their twilight calls among the trees that marched down to the river. Dogs romped near the gate.

He sat with his back to the study door, to discourage any passing servant from disturbing him. He had a fresh drink at his side and his mind was alert.

The Game began. He lounged back, making his first moves, knowing at this stage he had ample time. The tranquility of his study made immersion in the growing complexities easy, and heightened even the simple victories of the opening contests. He never had difficulty at this stage any longer.

It was very much like learning the characters and setting in a novel. Each time the Game featured different cultures, different assumptions about the importance of wealth, of power, of love, of life itself. Each Game was fresh.

The pitiful electronic games that the public played were monotonous to him. In the decades since their introduction, the public amusements had improved somewhat, but they were inevitably dominated and limited by their audience—adolescents who had the time to play, but not the sophistication to demand anything better.

Tonight the scheme was particularly engrossing. The social matrix was modified Late Marxist, with class divisions reemerging. He liked this motif better than the more common PseudoCap, where acquisitive urges were openly acknowledged, but often undercut by mildly socialist jargon. Late Marxism contained the fruitful seeds of deep, true hypocrisy—always a stimulus, and often a valuable fulcrum for turning an opponent's hand.

He played the role of a young man, restive and ambitious—his customary choice.

In the first challenge he had to maneuver himself into the Party apparatus. Simple enough. There were impediments, of course. At the People's Training Camp the physical challenges translated into quick, deft motions on the board. He learned to excel at single combat, neatly setting up his opponents in the Maze-Delay and then—*touch*—one button, pressed at the right instant, did them in.

Idealology—the study of ideals, as a predictor of others' behavior—came naturally to him. He used it to unmask some clumsy players, consigning them to the oblivion of jobs as clerks, functionaries, laborers.

He particularly enjoyed the turns and ironies introduced into the Game by the advance of current events. Eastern Europe was undergoing its convulsions of thought, a slow-motion train wreck of principle upon the tracks of necessity. Regimes proclaimed themselves the new vanguard of this or that notion, and then sank with agonizing struggles in the swamps of economics, weighed down by their leaden ideals.

Tonight's Game, for example. Its underpinning was positively antique. Socialist Man—that marvelous, hoary phrase—was the ideal paid lip service in tonight's Game. So in principle these losers were embarking on virtuous careers. This pleasurable blend of irony and hypocrisy he relished.

Atmospherics appeared on side screens. Dingy streets, gray concrete buildings like inflated bunkers, buses hissing by in the light rain. Crowd murmurs, sharp scents of sausage and sauerkraut from a corner restaurant.

Moving through this twentieth century miasma proved exciting and oddly moving. The past was inherently touching, with its air of solidity and purpose, unknowing of its fate.

Or was this the past? In idealology, yes—Socialist Man was at one with the dinosaurs—but occasional unsettling nuances poked through the atmospherics.

A pornographic magazine flaring like a rose amid a newsstand of stolid newspapers. A fancy Japanese automobile slithering through the pallid city streets. A blue-haired woman wearing only a halter and shorts, oblivious of the air's thin chill.

Mere glimpses. He brushed them aside in his eagerness.

He secured a good middle-level post. The steps upward were clear, his responses deft. For a young man he was doing quite well.

He relaxed for a moment. Time to relish some of the rewards appropriate to his age. He indulged himself.

He became involved with Lisa, the mistress of a Regional Commissioner. Lust drove him—the Game knew his likes by now, and the gaudy, rippling images of Lisa held his eyes even when he knew he should be absorbing other information from the board. Her face was a composition of serene curves, and her moist skin glowed.

He had to keep the affair secret. The Commissioner was known to be jealous and vindictive; the man had learned of Lisa's earlier affairs, and had adroitly framed each of her past lovers for offenses against the state. Most of them had vanished in mysterious circumstances.

Dusk darkened into night outside as he felt his way

through this society. There were advantages he knew from experience—some black marketing here, a neat dodge there; a controversial report filed with the Party at the right moment, which forced his immediate superior to resign.

The Game was expensive, and that, too, enhanced his enjoyment. The Game was as intelligent as a human—perhaps more so—within its tight, circumscribed universe. Huge computer resources hummed to match his mental agility. He stretched leisurely in the armchair, feeling the warm caresses of worn leather, languidly letting the familiar study slip away, entering the Game more deeply with each move he made.

Touch—he moved up a notch in the system.

Touch—and he made contact with some members in the Opposition. Dangerous, but exciting. Worth many additional points, if he could make use of it in events somewhere downstream.

Timing, that was it. A moment too soon, and the flow of events across the board would unmask his moves, make his intentions obvious. Too late, and a missed opportunity would be picked up by an underling, gnawing away his position.

Much of this was displayed in moving patterns of crystalline colors, in currents of probability. His decisions—*touch*—came quickly.

Tactics. Maneuver. He felt himself skimming over white water rapids, a zesty sting in his nostrils. His attention flicked from point to point on the board, sizing up each maneuver—moving, always moving.

Tonight the Game was better than ever. It presented him with problems at work, intrigues of Party politics, chances for black market gains. Risky, but inventive.

He could lose at any moment. But he didn't. No matter how many moves the Game thought ahead, he anticipated. There was always an out, a way to gain, or at least to avoid defeat. That was the one rule: there must be a solution.

At some points the Game was slower than usual. He knew this was because his skill was matching the ability of the entire system. The Game had to simulate life in all its complexity, and provide patterns of play not used before.

Any sufficiently complex network comes, in time, to seem like an independent entity. It was helpful to think of it as sentient.

The intricate computer linkages had a personality of their own, and they did not like to lose. Through the years, he liked to think, a relationship had formed between himself and the constantly improving computer net. They had sharpened their wits on each other.

Now he was straining it to the limit. When that limit was passed, he could win. And tonight he knew he would.

He met Lisa at an apartment he rented, under a false name, for that purpose alone. Their nights together inflamed his imagination. The system served him lacquered images from their couplings, stirring old urges. The scenes were lit by tranquil colors, as warm as jewels seen through oil. Her hands moved with assured grace and her touch ignited a roaring in him. At each caress the world became incandescent with promise.

Leaving the apartment at sunrise, however, he noted a sign that he was being followed.

There were several explanations. Someone in the police, perhaps. A leak in the Opposition?

Or an underling, trying to uncover some scrap of scandal? Possibly.

The grim, gray concrete of the city framed itself about the question.

Here was a place to be deft, subtle. Just a touch . . .

He laid traps for these two eventualities.

Nothing happened.

He continued meeting Lisa, as often as she could arrange to slip away from the Commissioner. The man often kept her at his country estate, making her wait until he had time for her.

She got away to the city as often as possible. Their arrangements were elaborate and as secure as his years of experience could make them.

Still, there were more signs. He tended to his growing personal empire, his network of informants, his associations with those whom he could help and who would be willing to return the favor.

All this he had done before in earlier Games. But this time, tonight—he had to glance up at the black study windows to remind himself—there were undercurrents he could barely sense, subtle shifts, pivots, flows of money and power that he did not understand.

He was oblivious now. He did not notice the gathering chill from the great windows of the study, or even feel the rub of warm, familiar leather. He was fully, vibrantly alive, his prickly instincts alert for warning nuances in his work, in his customary social relations, in everyday detail.

A singing vibrancy gripped him and the past years of routine fell away. The Game was excelling itself tonight. He could sense its brooding intelligence behind the board, feeling him out, retreating when he lunged, never giving itself away. Patient. Unforgiving.

The computers had a style, as did he. The Game avoided the obvious, brutal methods. It usually let him run a given tactic for a while, studying it, before adroitly deflecting it. Done skillfully and often, this alone could rob him of momentum and verve.

The Game favored responses that turned the logic of his strategy back upon itself. Inversion. Subversion. Often it seemed to be playful, ingenious, as if to say, *Have you considered it* this *way?*

It was Lisa who noticed the small error. She recognized one of the Commissioner's limousines parked in the distance, a man sitting at the wheel. The man was not looking at the two of them on the balcony above, of course. Nothing that obvious. And he drove off a moment later, after picking up a dumpy, overweight woman who might quite plausibly be his wife.

Though Lisa had met the man only in passing once before, she had a remarkable memory for faces. The Commissioner had probably thought using him was a negligible risk.

Fear was part of the Game as well. It would have been simple to abandon Lisa, to back away and try another path to success. After all, there were many women.

He rejected the idea. By now he was linked to her in ways he could not describe even to himself. To slink away, losing face when confronted by the electronic intelligence behind the Game—

No. He began playing with great speed, nimbly repeating patterns of the past.

It was important to appear unafraid. To continue using tactics that had his usual style. To give no hint of his preparations.

He had to eliminate the Commissioner. The brittle intelligence within the Game would anticipate that, though probably it would not seem a likely move.

His personal style ran more to the gradual techniques —a slow piling up of advantages, until the moment of resolution came. Let the Party demote the Commissioner, or have him transferred. Nothing too direct, nothing flagrant or gaudy.

The Game would expect something like that.

Therefore, do the opposite.

Instead of carefully marshalling resources, strike swiftly, boldly, in a way uncharacteristic of his usual methods. But use the computer's expectations against it. *Seem* to be following a customary pattern. Carry on a series of slower moves, moves that the Game would expect.

He set about constructing a reasonably devious plot, involving a dozen officials. It aimed at implicating the Commissioner in treasonous securities exchanges with a nearby country. Something that would be unseemly in even a PseudoCap society. He had used a similar device before with great success.

Beneath this, he laid a subplot. It had to involve a minimum of people. Lisa was the only one he could trust. His style was always to use conventional pathways, so the subplot had to be unusual, swift and daring.

Touch.

Their paths intersected at twilight, at an old inn in the tranquil countryside. He had abandoned his own auto on the other side of the city, taken a bus, then returned speedily on a maglev train. Lisa had just come from the Commissioner's estate.

She left the pyramid-shaped thing on a table in the foyer, keeping her eyes straight ahead, and then went in to dinner. She did not so much as glance at him. The timing was perfect. He palmed the pyramid on his way out, a moment later.

The man with Lisa—the Commissioner's usual guard for her—stayed in the limousine, reading a newspaper. She was meeting friends for dinner and he would be out of place. The man did not even look up as a shadow flitted from a side door and into the trees nearby.

He ran the two kilometers through dense woodland as dusk deepened into night. Branches scratched his face. An owl hooted at him but there was no sign of detection. Panting, he thought of Lisa dining, taking her time, extending the interval until the pyramid-key would be needed to readmit her to the estate. He remembered her black hair, the high arch of her cheekbones, the vivid, hypnotic passion of her.

In the blackness he had only starlight and the remembered locations of the alarm system monitors—information purchased at great risk and cost—to guide him.

Soon the bulky silhouette of the central command unit rose before him. He approached from the correct angle and used the pyramid key to disarm it. Ahead, he recognized the small hill near the river and ran around it, keeping in cover.

There was the line of trees leading to the great house. The downstairs rooms were not supposed to be in use, and indeed, as she had promised, they were dark. Two windows glowed burnt yellow, like living eyes in a skull. There the Commissioner would be, relaxing after his indulgent dinner. Perhaps he would be dulled by wine.

The servants were in their own quarters by now. No dogs barked.

He used the pyramid key at the gate again. It slid open silently, a black ribwork gliding in the night.

He crept up the driveway, avoiding the gravel, and around to the back.

The kitchen door yielded. No one about.

Through a side room, where polished silverware awaited galas to come, its curves seeming to gather the wan light.

Turn left. Yes—the dining room, an echoing cavern. Everything seemed larger in the gloom.

He felt his way. Yes, a hallway lined with scowling portraits. Good.

Warm, cloying air. Lush carpeting that led to a stairway. His footsteps made no sound going up.

He took out the gun. Pressed against flesh, it delivered a nerve poison. Death was swift and untraceable. But not painless. That would be too much to ask. Or perhaps too much to give, tonight.

Turn here to the left. A closed door. From under it seeped yellowish light. No sound from within.

He turned the knob slowly. Well oiled, as she had arranged. The latch slid free.

Now he moved quickly. The images came at him in a rush.

—A brown armchair. Books lining the study. Large windows, filled with blackness.

He stepped forward, raising the gun.

—The head of the older man, white-haired, strangely fragile, not resting back against the leather but instead tilted forward, concentrating on the gaming board before him, the wrinkled neck exposed, the face intent and pensive, focused, as if waiting for—

Touch. ✦

Eighty-Eight Sins

Norman Partridge

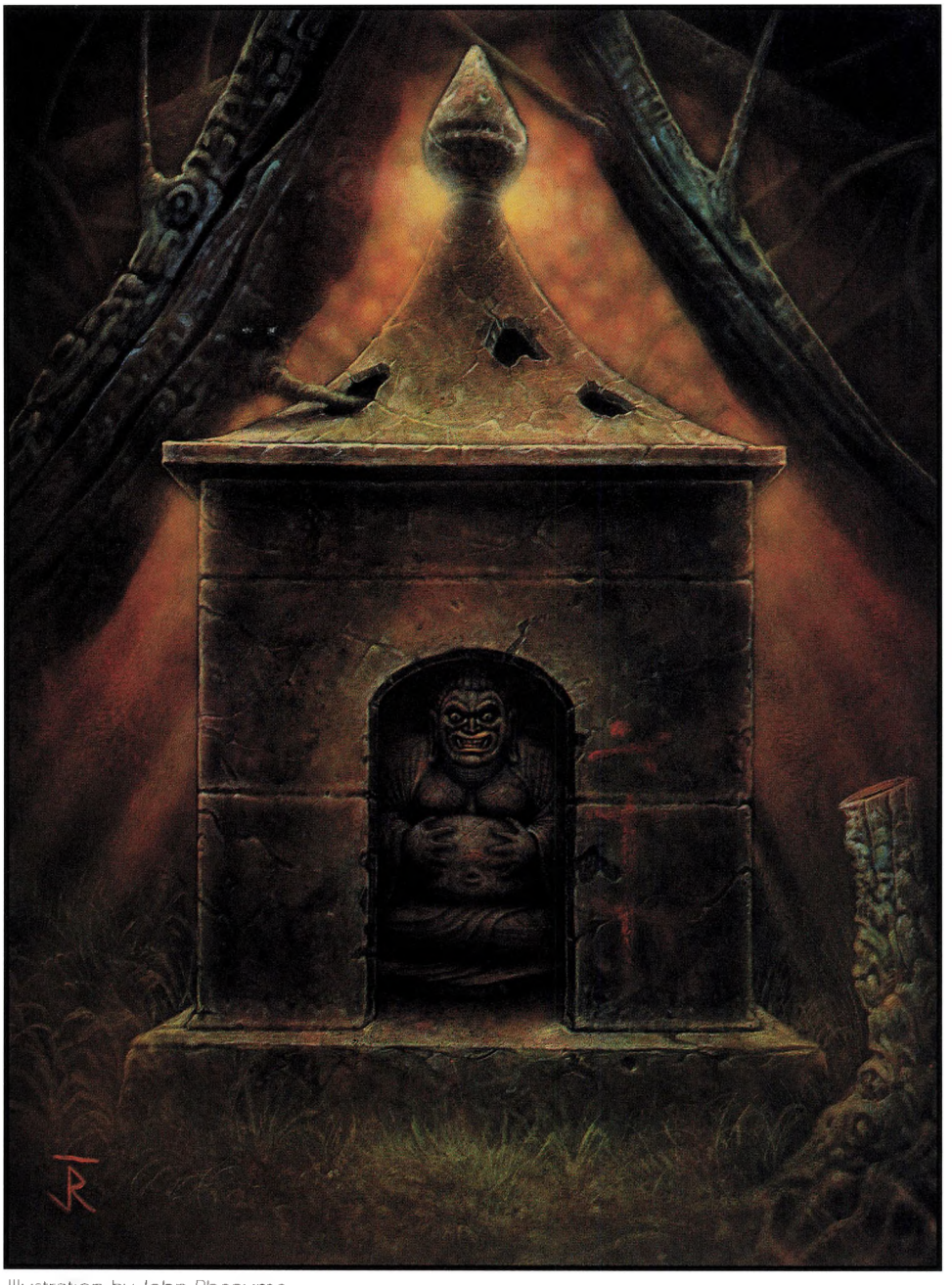

Illustration by John Rheaume

Mitchell Speke turned his back on the ocean and watched the dog sprint toward the dirt path that snaked away from the beach. The path and the steep hillside beyond it were a wet, rusty brown, the same color that had seemed red when he first glimpsed it from the plane and suddenly remembered all those C & H Sugar commercials that had brainwashed him into thinking that this place was an agricultural paradise populated by smiling, bronze-skinned beauties.

But Speke knew that his first impression had been an illusion, because now he saw the real color of the soil—the stratified swirls that looked like ribbons of blood, the flecks of white sand that glittered as brightly as gold dust. He had read about that color in a travel book. The writer claimed

that it was everywhere in the Islands, especially during afternoon showers when fat raindrops ricocheted off dirty pavement and stained white pants cuffs and tennis shoes, angering the tourists and bringing the old joke about the haoles who went out for a picnic and forgot their toilet paper to the lips of the locals.

Speke stared at his spotless shoes, remembering the writer's description of persistent stains that mystified even the most experienced dry-cleaner. He was sure to dirty his shoes if he followed the dog, and he wondered if the old legend applied here. Take Madame Pele's treasure home, the legend said, steal any part of the volcano goddess's precious islands, and you'd be cursed for life. Just this afternoon, he'd heard a gaggle of little old ladies from Texas talking about the curse at the surprisingly good Japanese-Chinese restaurant where all the tour buses stopped for lunch. "Listen here, Elva. My sister Tammy Mae took a hunk of that lava back home to Nacogdoches to set out in her cactus garden and a week later she fell down and broke her leg in eight places and she mailed that rock right back to the park service people and healed up just fine and never fell again. . . ."

Speke grinned, thinking about it. Should you leave your shoes behind once they'd been stained with Madame Pele's mud? Was that the wise thing to do? And what about your swimming suit? If a grain of sand remained in the lining, and if you brought that single grain home with you and it didn't come out until your washing machine hit the rinse cycle, would you fall down the stairs with your laundry basket in hand and break your leg in eight places?

Speke didn't know. Call them myths, call them religious parables, call them old wives' tales. . . to him, they had only been stories that hung like so many party costumes in the closet of his mind.

Until now.

He stared at his shoes and wondered.

The worst part of it was that almost anything seemed possible here. Belief systems by the hundreds had washed upon these shores, each leaving a mark, each fighting for territory with crablike tenacity. It had been Speke's duty to weave the whole mess into a tapestry that would satisfy a dozen audiences, each with its own particular agenda. His job had been to sway disparate opponents with a good empathic line, just as he had done in Mexico and the Caribbean.

But it was different here. Here, there was too much, too damn much, and now Speke was so full of it all that he wanted to sit down and decide what the truth was, and who had a lock on it, and who could suck all the extraneous crap out of his brain and make him feel clean and right again.

No. That was only wishful thinking. In this place a single truth was nothing more than a missionary's wet dream. Still, Mitchell Speke longed for one glowing truth, because he dreaded the other possibility. Because if all of it was true in one way or another, if everything here had some measure of validity, then there could be no peace, no guarantees. . . .

The dog barked at him, sharp and insistent. Speke realized he would never have enough time to sort it out. He stared at the path beyond the white sand. The first step. It had to be. The beginning. Many years ago, Madame Pele had made a beginning in these islands. The soil was hers. Others had followed—Shingon Buddhists among them—creating their own beginnings. The path was theirs.

And now Speke would make it his.

With a single step.

Second day. Negotiation.

Speke faced off with the big Hawaiian. The dark-skinned man was sitting down and Speke was standing up, so Speke felt that the immediate advantage was his.

"We understand your position, Mr. Kanahele. It's unfortunate that we didn't discover the burial site until construction was well under way. But you must understand our predicament. We've made quite a commitment to the Shipkiller Beach Project. Not only our money but the money of many innocent investors is at stake—"

"I understand that . . . but this goes beyond money. Family is very important in our islands, and this is a matter of family."

Speke sat down in a chair facing Kanahele and leaned forward, almost conspiratorially. He spoke in the same practiced whisper he'd used to enchant students at the university before his talents were purchased by the corporation. "You know, I'm not really a businessman. I've spent most of my life on college campuses, teaching students about the folklore of different cultures. So I'm not going to toss a pile of charts in your face, and I'm not going to bore you with a bunch of employment statistics."

Kanahele nodded, his face an expressionless mask.

Speke continued. "What I can tell you, Mr. Kanahele, is that the people I work for care about Hawaii. One of the reasons they brought me in was to teach them about your culture. They want to make this resort a genuine Hawaiian experience, and it's my job to bring in local artists, storytellers, musicians, historians—people who can make this a special place. It's a program that we've had great success with in Mexico and the Caribbean, and I can assure you that the director stands behind it one hundred percent."

Speke could see that he had Kanahele's full attention now, and he paused a moment before saying more. "I'll give you an example of what I'm talking about. You recall the stories of the menehune, of course." Kanahele nodded. "Well, when I told our director about Hawaii's legendary builders, he was fascinated. Over dinner last night, I explained how the menehune only worked after dark, and how they could finish nearly any project in the course of one night despite their dwarfish stature. He took to the story immediately. In fact, this morning he put out a standing order: if any menehune applies for work on the Shipkiller Beach Project, he's to be hired on the spot."

Kanahele laughed.

"I guess what I'm trying to say is that this corporation is in for the long haul, and we want to be more than good neighbors. We want to become part of the community. Now, I have to be honest with you. If you want

to stop the hotel, you're going to have one big, ugly fight on your hands. But if your concern centers on the burial site, I think I can sell the brass on a compromise that will please everyone . . . with your permission, of course. I'm positive that I can convince the director to retain the site as a historical monument. If we build around it—a museum, a visitor's center—we can bring the beliefs of your people to every guest who sets foot in the hotel."

Kanahele was wise enough to hold out for a few days, but when the director offered him a position as a permanent consultant in all matters concerning the burial site museum, things were settled. The director gave Speke a bonus and asked that he remain on site in case any other trouble arose that might require his unusual skills. Speke hopped an afternoon flight from Honolulu to Lihue. He stopped for dinner at Gaylord's, arrived at the corporate-owned condo around eight, and was walking on Shipkiller Beach near the job site when the sun dipped below the silver horizon and big waves began to break over the reef.

Speke sat at surf's edge and went to work on himself. Told himself that it was just another job, just like the jobs he'd done in Mexico and the Caribbean. The corporation was using his knowledge to deal with protesters the world over. Whenever anyone complained about "cold corporate identity" or "a lack of cultural understanding," Professor Speke appeared on the scene and calmed local fears. His smile said, "See, we do understand you, we really do and we want to help." The corporate bigwigs saw quickly enough that building a museum was a lot cheaper than fighting picketers, and a lot more appealing to the TV cameras, too. And the end result—a monument to the past, a boost in civic pride—provided Speke with a valuable justification. *Without me,* he told himself, *the corporation wouldn't even do that much.*

That first night on Shipkiller Beach, Speke upended his shoes and knocked sand out of them. He thought about Mr. Kanahele and Madame Pele and the tourist lady from Texas.

Then the dog trotted down the path. A coffee-brown mutt with a nub for a tail, it wandered across the sand and ducked its muzzle under Speke's hand and begged for attention. After a moment, it straightened as if it had heard something and returned to the path.

Speke followed, but the dog was too far ahead. Besides, the path was muddy, and he didn't want to ruin his new white shoes.

Ten steps along, the path disappeared beneath a web of bulldozer tracks. Speke found himself in a mire of blood-colored earth churned up by the corporation's equipment. He brushed mosquitos away from his face and stepped across the smallest puddle. Shifting his weight, he found solid ground on his second step. There was a sucking sound behind him as he pulled his back foot out of the mud, and he nearly lost his shoe because the shoelace had come untied. He bent low and retied it, staining his fingers the color of Madame Pele's earth in the process.

Ahead, the dog was drinking water from an old Yuban can filled with bird-of-paradise, edging the long-stemmed flowers to one side with its muzzle. Speke saw that there was a Folgers can beside it, also filled with flowers. He frowned. Randy Takagi had assured him that the shrine was abandoned, but how could it be abandoned if people were still leaving offerings?

Speke stepped past the coffee cans to a cement shrine that stood in the shade of a lichee tree. The shrine was in the shape of a small house with a sloping, peaked roof. There was an arching doorway at its center. Bending low, Speke peered inside the dollhouse-sized structure at a statue rimmed with Japanese characters.

The dog nipped at Speke's muddy heels, eager to continue. Speke took a charcoal briquet from his pocket and hastily dashed a large "1" on the roof of the cement shrine.

"Okay, boy," he whispered. "Show me the way."

Fourth day. Project inspection.

Randy Takagi was a thin-faced man with a smile that seemed impossibly wide. He gave Speke a tour of the site, injecting his patter with tips about restaurants, bars, and beaches. Randy was a native of Kauai who had been hired for the Shipkiller Beach Project as soon as the corporation discovered his background. The PR guys did it up big in the Hawaiian newspapers—"Local Architect Helps Design New Hotel," that kind of thing. The stories placated a good portion of the community, and Randy's appointment also served as an unexpected goodwill gesture to a Japanese fishing corporation that was eager for foreign investment but uncertain about the Shipkiller Beach Project.

"You'll never believe this," Randy Takagi said, "but that was the first damn resume I mailed after I graduated from U.C. Berkeley. Within a week I'm back home with a new job, studying blueprints on the same beach where I was a surf bum just six years ago. Jesus, can you believe it?"

Speke smiled. "Crazy world," he said.

Randy didn't see the light, but he was a bright kid when it came to design and a damn fast worker to boot, inspiring everyone from the corporate paper-pushers in Honolulu to the construction workers. Many of the nail-bangers were Randy's old high school buddies, and they worked under him with the intensity of the legendary menehune. Speke could see the respect Randy commanded while they toured the construction site, and he complimented the younger man as they stood on the balcony of an unfinished third-floor suite that would soon be a bone of contention among visiting executives.

Speke's gaze traveled the beach and lingered on a hillside dotted with gray cement houses. At first he was confused by the sight of a condo project on corporation property, but then his mind sliced through the haze of business lunch mai tais—drinks that certainly weren't the powerless fruit punch cocktails they seemed to be—and he realized that the whole thing was a trick of perspective.

Speke pointed to the miniature structures. "What's that?"

Randy picked up the concern in the older man's voice. "Don't worry, Mitch . . . we own it. It's an old shrine, built by Japanese immigrants. Shingon Buddhists, if I remember correctly. It's a copy of the Kobo Dai Ishi Shrine back in Japan. Maybe you've heard of it?"

Speke nodded. "Let's see . . . if memory serves, there are eighty-eight shrines along the path, each one representing a different sin, and the belief is that if you walk the path of the eighty-eight, you'll never again be tempted by any of them." He lowered his voice to a well-practiced, professional whisper. "Nobody told me, Randy. Have we had any complaints?"

Randy's smile refused to evaporate. "No. Not one. See, the caretaker died back in the forties, and no one has done much maintenance since then." He patted Speke's shoulder. "Don't worry, prof. Don't sweat it."

Speke smiled. "Don't borrow trouble."

"Huh?"

"Just something my grandmother used to say."

"Oh."

"Look, Randy, does this bother you?"

"Hell, I'm Catholic, and lapsed at that." Randy laughed. "Seriously, Mitch, I know a lot of the locals are against this kind of thing. Development, I mean. But I know a lot of guys on this island who can't afford a house, can't afford to live where their families have lived for generations. Now, construction brings money. Hotels bring money. I happen to think that money is a damn good answer to problems. And if we have to bend a little, if I have to share my favorite surfing beach with a few sunburned tourists, so be it."

Speke recognized the company line when he heard it. "Okay," he said. "I guess it's time to look at our real trouble spot."

Speke scrawled a large "17" on the roof of a leaning shrine. He stared back at the hotel. It was deserted—all the construction crews had Sunday off—and he remembered how strangely quiet the cement shrines had seemed from the unfinished third-floor suite. A humid breeze ruffled his graying hair and he found himself wishing that the silent hotel was just an optical illusion, a miniature made large by the power of too many mai tais.

The dog barked, urging Speke onward. Beyond the twentieth shrine, the path was overgrown. There were two shrines above him on the hillside, both at the same level. Which was number twenty-one?

Speke scratched the dog's head. "C'mon boy, take me there."

The dog bounded through the tall grass and climbed to the shrine on the left. Speke followed.

Fourth afternoon. Networking.

Keleka Douglas grinned and set aside the chocolate bar she'd been nibbling. "Thanks for getting us back in business so quickly, Professor Speke."

The archaeologist wiped her hands on her jeans and exchanged handshakes with Speke; hers was very firm. "Make it Mitch," Speke said, and her grin became a smile. "Kelly," she replied. "Keleka translates better as Theresa, but I prefer Kelly. Makes me sound like a carefree Irish lassie."

Takagi had detailed Kelly Douglas's background. Yale-educated, graduate work in Israel, and, best of all (as far as the corporation was concerned), daughter of a Navy pilot and a native of Honolulu, Hawaii. She'd been working for the corporation for ten years. From the look of her, Speke decided that she found field work agreeable. She was deeply tanned, her dark hair was pulled back and braided into a ponytail, and her blue eyes shone with the enthusiasm of a true believer.

"Excuse the mess," she apologized. "I'm trying to do everything myself. Guess I'm a control freak. First off, there are about a dozen reporters who want to get in here, plus I've got osteologists clamoring to run tests on this stuff, and on top of all that a colleague I'm not too fond of is pushing to do his own paleodemographic reconstruction. I told the director that this is my baby, and it's going to remain a closed site if I'm going to have anything to do with it. Which means that I get dibs on all the good toys, at least for now."

"So *you're* the one the old man is running interference for."

"Not me. The find. It's really spectacular."

She pointed to a skull that lay on her desk. "Notice how the incisors are missing."

Speke laughed. "Too many chocolate bars?"

"Good one, Mitch," Kelly admitted. "Seriously, removal of the front teeth was an expression of grief in early Hawaiian society. Generally, it was done when an *ali'i*—a chief—died. That skull was one of the first things I saw here, and right away I knew we were dealing with a very significant burial site."

"So, you hit the jackpot."

"Hit it is an understatement—we clobbered the mother." Kelly stepped behind a long table. "These are the remains of a chiefess, found resting on a blanket of red sand. I was confused about that until I recalled that sometimes corpses were wrapped in barkcloth dyed with turmeric or ochre, which, quite naturally, decomposes." Kelly held up a rock oyster pendant strung on a necklace of braided human hair. "This is the finest *lei niho palaoa* I've come across. It's really remarkable, and a sure sign of a *ali'i* burial."

The archaeologist turned her attention to another skeleton. "We believe that this one was a chief. He was also buried with valuables, including these bone fishhooks. *Human* bone. The Hawaiians believed that fishhooks made from human long bones would contain the *mana,* or power, of the deceased. That's one reason why this burial site was concealed, so that our chief's enemies wouldn't use his bones in the same way."

"Pretty exciting stuff," Speke said as he examined one of the fishhooks. He turned it this way and that, and then he froze, the hook gripped so tightly in his hand that it nearly pierced his skin.

"Gently . . . gently," Kelly uncoiled his fingers and took the fishhook from him. "It's not one of those plastic tiki letter openers that they sell at all the tourist traps. And sorry, no souvenirs."

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Speke was slightly embarrassed. Kelly laughed off his momentary case of chills, and Speke made her promise to buy him a tiki letter opener since he couldn't keep the fishhook.

They toured the burial site. Kelly explained that the mouth of the lava tube had been blocked with sand. The construction workers had unplugged the entrance to see if the tube would cause any problems with the hotel foundation. Deep inside, they had discovered a *kapu* marker—a warning fashioned from a large gourd—along with a stone that was covered with strands of human hair.

Another expression of mourning, Kelly explained.

They explored the lava tube. Kelly seemed a little tired of playing tour guide; she talked about the other projects she'd handled for the corporation. Speke discovered that Kelly Douglas had followed him both in Mexico and the Caribbean. She seemed to know quite a bit more about him than he knew about her. "You're a great advance man," she said. "Really, you've made my work very easy."

"My pleasure. I think that this is going to be another easy one. Kanahele's really come around, and the museum should be a proud accomplishment for everyone. I mean, it's a small price to pay—"

She raised her hand. "Spare me the corporate bullshit. I'm afraid I know it by heart."

Before he could reply, Kelly suggested that they start back. She lowered her flashlight and the beam caught a candy bar wrapper.

Speke laughed. "Did they have Three Musketeers in ancient Hawaii?"

I guess I'm getting sloppy in my old age," Kelly said. "It happens at almost every site. You clean everything out, all the things that are so special, and then you're left with another hole in the ground. Just another empty place."

"I'm feeling kind of empty, but maybe I'm just hungry." Speke smiled. "Look, I know this is a little brisk, but there's a party in Honolulu tonight—"

"At Wong Jak Man's, thrown by our honorable director." She took his hand, gently this time. "I'll make it easy—I'm invited, I don't have a date, and I'd love to go with you."

Walking on air, Speke left the archaeologist's office. As Randy Takagi escorted him to his rented car, he told the younger man of his good fortune.

Immediately, he wished he hadn't.

Randy Takagi had not been invited to the director's party.

The dog burrowed between two ferns that blocked the path. Speke put his hands in front of his face and followed, the silky leaves brushing his forearms.

A olive-drab plywood shed stood before him, half on solid ground, half hanging over the steep hillside. There were two open doorways, no doors, and the path led directly through the structure. Speke dropped to his knees and peered at the support beams that speared the hillside.

Rusty nails, rotten wood.

The dog walked through the dark shed, its toenails clicking over plywood. It turned to face Speke from a patch of yellow sunlight on the other side.

"You wouldn't trick me, would you, boy?" Speke asked.

The dog only panted.

Speke thought about dogs. They were loyal creatures in most folk tales, the forerunners of Rin Tin Tin and other heroic animals. But in Hawaiian lore, the first dog had been created by Maui, who had transformed a prideful rival into a subservient animal.

Speke shook away the thought. "Man's best friend. Right, boy? And I need a friend right now."

Speke stepped forward, lightly. A second step and the floorboard—for the entire floor was just one large piece of weathered plywood—complained.

One more step and he'd be outside again.

A beam of sunlight angled through a hole in the rusty metal roof. Speke felt the warmth of it on his cheek. He glanced at a shadowy corner of the shed and saw a rake, a shovel, and a hoe, each implement rusty with age.

This was the caretaker's toolshed. Speke remembered what Randy Takagi had said: "The caretaker died back in the forties, and no one has done much maintenance since then."

The tools had rusted here, waiting for someone to put them to use. But no one had, and as time passed the shrine became a wild thing. Overgrown. Somehow lonely. Standing here in the caretaker's shed, Speke was suddenly sure that, more than anything, this place was lonely.

Hungry for companionship.

Starving for attention.

The support beams creaked below his feet. Speke grabbed the rusty hoe, stepped out of the shed, and followed the dog up the trail.

Fourth evening. Social obligations.

Wong Jak Man's was a four-story pagoda that had been a Honolulu landmark for nearly a century. Though the surrounding neighborhood had turned seedy long ago, Wong Jak Man's had somehow maintained its reputation as the finest Chinese restaurant east of Hong Kong. Each level was decorated with valuable antiques, and the fourth-floor banquet room was stunningly garish, decorated in red velvet and gold trim.

"It's an old Hong Kong custom," the director explained. "The bartender here introduced it to me many years ago."

Speke forced a smile. He wasn't overly fond of the director, because when he was in the man's presence he found it hard to justify what he did for a living. Worst of all, the director had made it perfectly obvious what he expected from Speke when he introduced him to the Japanese investors as "our little sheepskin diplomat."

The director was rattling on. "Mao Tai really is a wonderful beverage. And when you mix it with the custom of Yam Sing, you're in for a stimulating evening."

Speke arched his eyebrows. "Yam Sing?"

The director grinned. "I'm stunned. I've finally discovered a foreign custom of which our renowned cultural attaché is unaware." He set two large glasses on the

table, one filled with a colorless liquid, the other empty. "Yam Sing," he repeated. "A loose translation would be *drink to the finish*."

Speke had made it plain on many occasions that he wasn't much of a drinker, and he wasn't eager to sample anything exotic after his experience with the seemingly harmless mai tais. But that didn't stop the director; he was more than pleased with Speke's handling of Mr. Kanahele, and he was ready for a proper celebration. And though it was childish, Speke felt compelled to go along with the show because he didn't want to seem less than manly in front of Kelly Douglas. He didn't want to "lose face" in front of the Japanese investors, either.

The director divided the liquor evenly between the two glasses, handed one to Speke, then toasted Speke and threw back his drink.

Speke raised his glass and drank. A thunderbolt hit his belly. Tears came to his eyes. The red velvet wallpaper roiled for a moment, crawling with golden snakes.

The director laughed.

For the first time, Speke noticed that the five Japanese investors who stood behind his employer were actually standing in line. Each one held two glasses, one of which was filled with Mao Tai.

By the third toast, Speke's face felt numb. He searched desperately for an excuse to escape, but neither the director nor Kelly Douglas was anywhere in sight. Another drink appeared before him. Beads of sweat broke out on his forehead as he tossed it back, and the tastes and smells of a traditional Chinese banquet, cigarettes, and a dozen expensive perfumes and colognes went down with it.

Another glass appeared on the table.

Speke lurched away from it.

Air. He needed air. He pushed through the crowd of partiers and made his way down a narrow stairway.

Flocked, peeling wallpaper. The smell of mildew, singed oil, and lemon chicken.

At the end of the stairway was a door, once white, now rutted with graffiti. Speke opened it, praying for air.

The director stood there. Kelly Douglas was at his side.

"Oh no," she whispered.

Speke recognized the president of the Japanese fishing corporation. The old man was smiling, but not at Speke. A low, lacquered teak table sat before the businessman, and on the table was an open package nested in brandy-colored wrapping paper.

Inside the package was a fishhook made of human bone.

The director put his hand on Kelly's shoulder. "This one's yours, dear."

Kelly took Speke's hand. "Come on in, Mitch. Suddenly, we've got a lot to talk about."

Speke broke away and scrambled through the doorway.

He didn't remember anything else until the night air hit him.

Speke marked shrine number fifty-four.

He bent low and peered inside.

The gray statue was expressionless; it had been worn by wind and rain until its face was as smooth as an eggshell.

"Which sin are you?" Speke asked.

He reached inside the shrine, felt the cool figure. "Hypocrisy? That's a good one. Or maybe avarice. That's an old standby, found in many cultures. Very reliable."

Speke closed his eyes. It was as if he had his hand in a lion's mouth. He felt the hunger. He smelled the raw, feral breath. He sensed the cement jaws and wondered why they didn't snap closed.

C'mon, *he thought,* I'm willing. It's been a long time for you. I may not look like much of a meal, but there's a whole lot to me that doesn't meet the eye.

So many sins.

So many people he'd swayed with the power of his words.

But he hadn't believed those words. He hadn't known their power.

So he couldn't be responsible, could he?

Speke knew the answer to that. He jammed his fist against the statue.

Just take it away, *he begged.*

Fourth night. Separation.

Speke caught the last Honolulu-Lihue flight. It was a Pam Am dinosaur left over from the sixties, the kind with purple and orange psychedelic upholstery. The stewardess tried to sell him a bottled mai tai, but Speke wouldn't go for it.

The plane landed in a light rain. Speke rushed through the airport, past lei stands, past shops filled with plastic fetishes. He remembered the tiki letter opener that Kelly had joked about. She'd bought one for him at the Honolulu Airport. Speke pulled the thing out of his pocket, cringed at the sight of its glittering plastic eyes, and threw it into a trash can.

Speke got into his car, thinking about the letter opener, thinking about the fishhook and the way the old Japanese businessman had hovered over it, smiling.

Leering like a man half his age.

Speke drove out of Lihue. The storm grew worse as he passed through Koloa. When he got to the condo, the phone was ringing. The heavy rain made him hurry inside, but he didn't rush to the phone. He didn't want to answer it. He only wanted to pack his bags.

But it kept ringing, so he picked it up.

"I've never stolen anything," he said.

Kelly said, "I know that, Mitch."

"But you've stolen lots of things, haven't you? From the lava tube, and from the job sites in Mexico and the Caribbean."

The line buzzed softly. "Yes, I have," she admitted. "But we couldn't just let those things gather dust in museums. Not when they have real power. You know that power, Mitch. It's in your stories. It sold your books for you. It cut your deal with Kanahele." She paused. "We're not really so different, are we, Mitch?"

"You're really saying this." Speke tried to laugh. "You can't be serious."

"It's really very simple. All we have to do is remem-

ber. There's power in that . . . in memory. People are willing to pay quite a bit for power. Maybe you can't believe that now, but you'll see in a few months. You'll see how much our Japanese friend's business improves now that he has that fishhook."

Speke didn't say anything.

"Wait for me?" Kelly asked. "The director has offered me his private jet. I can be there in an hour. We can—"

Speke hung up. He threw some things into his suitcase.

Outside, rain fell in waves of silver needles.

Speke closed his suitcase and turned off the lights. The light from the windows made everything looked silver and black and wet, and Speke was reminded of the lava tube beneath Shipkiller Beach.

It was so empty, shorn of its treasures. Just another hole in the ground.

As empty as this room.

As empty as the unfinished hotel.

As empty as he wanted to be.

Speke spent the night alone in the unfinished third-floor suite. Everything came clear in his mind.

He knew that Keleka Douglas was right.

He knew other things, too, and he was beginning to believe them.

The shrine was still there. The corporation's bulldozers hadn't destroyed it. That meant it still had power. The power to suck away evil.

The shrine could eat temptation. It could free Mitchell Speke.

It was a lonely place. A few people remembered it. They left offerings of flowers. But Speke knew that they didn't walk the path, and he realized that walking the path was the only way to satisfy the place's hunger.

It was a hunger that he would gladly feed. The feeding would make him clean. No one would be able to touch him once he'd traveled the path of the eighty-eight—not the director, not Kelly Douglas. He'd leave this place then, go home with his shoes caked with Madame Pele's earth, and he didn't care what would happen to him for breaking the goddess's kapu, just as long as his journey on the path of the eighty-eight was successful.

The dog barked at him and he clambered over a cracked stone stairway. He marked "84" on a shrine to his left, then turned and charcoaled "85" on a shrine that leaned over the cliff to his right.

The dog crawled through a tangle of ferns at the top of the stairway.

Speke chopped at the ferns with the caretaker's hoe and followed.

He climbed to the top of the hill.

Tire tracks angled along a muddy road. At first it seemed that they had been left by two different vehicles because one set was deeper than the other, but then Speke saw that the tracks came together near the edge of the hillside.

The truck had come in light, gone out heavy.

The dog was sniffing a patch of weeds. Speke went over to the animal.

There were three holes in the earth, like three bloody wounds.

In his mind they seemed as large as lunar craters.

The dog barked at the holes, confused. It jumped into the center hole and dug at the earth, then leaped into the hole nearest Speke and came out with something in its mouth.

A candy-bar wrapper.

Speke took the wrapper. Crushed it in his fist.

"It's okay, boy. It's okay."

He reached out to pat the dog, but it drew away from him, whining. ✦

Hardware Scenario G-49

James Alan Gardner

Illustration by John and Laura Lakey

There are few human beings who would not fit into a box eight feet long, four feet wide, and four feet high. Construct such boxes. Wire them, pipe them, tube them to provide even temperature, nutrition, and air. Don't forget sluices for the elimination of waste. Do something about exhaled carbon dioxide. Come up with neural inhibitors to prevent movement and sensation. Install epidermal scrapers to remove skin as it flakes off. Add whatever else seems required.

Properly contained, the entire population of Earth will fit into a cube about a mile and half on each side. Put the

whole thing into orbit? Nah, that's just showing off. Leave it on the ground in a desert somewhere.

Why? So everyone stays healthy and happy, of course. No walking around and stubbing your toes. No catching colds when someone sneezes on you. No smoking or drinking or eating fatty foods. Life lasts a lot longer when you live it in a box.

Quit asking such obvious questions . . . the Facility is run by *robots,* of course. As are the hydroponic gardens, the recycling plant, and all the other life support equipment. (These are really *good* robots.) And the robots are supervised by highly skilled, politically neutral, psychologically stable human support personnel. Give the designers a break, for crying out loud. They thought of *everything,* okay? This isn't that kind of story.

This is the kind of story where everyone does astral projection.

—

George Munroe sat in his hardware store wondering why there were so many types of nails. He had forty little bins in front of him, and each contained nails that were different from all the rest in the other bins. He pulled out a one-inch finishing nail and a three-quarter-inch finishing nail. (His astral projection could pick up light objects if he concentrated.) When you got right down to it, what was the difference between the two nails? A quarter of an inch. That's all. But one nail had to go in one bin and the other had to go in a different bin. That was the only professional way.

Running a hardware store sure was a precision business. George knew he could send his astral projection anywhere in the world to indulge in any lifestyle scenario, but hardware had such a depth and richness of scope, George didn't think he'd ever have time to indulge in more of life's opportunities.

The bell on the front door of the shop tinkled. George looked up from the nail bins to see a woman, six and a half feet tall, posing beside the lawnware display. Her hair flowed thick and tawny, rippling in the ether wind; her skin was bronzed and flawless, tautly stretched over firm young muscles; her face shone with self-assurance. She wore the sleek skin of a black panther, cut into a sort of maillot that left one breast bare, and around her waist was a cinch made of cobra skulls. In one hand she held an ivory spear, and in the other a dagger made of teak.

"I am Diana, Goddess of the Hunt," she announced. She had an announcing kind of voice.

"What can I get for you today?" George asked. "I'm having a special on nails."

"You are George Munroe?"

"Yes."

"Then rejoice, for Destiny has decreed that we are to be mated!" She threw aside her spear and dagger with a sweeping gesture. George winced as the dagger headed for a shelf of light bulbs, but Diana's weapons were only illusory astral props for her persona; they vanished as soon as they left the field of her aura. With cheetah-like grace, Diana strode down the home appliance aisle, seized George by the lapels of his Handee Hardware blazer, and hauled him up to her lips.

George had never imagined that tongues could be involved in kissing. In movie kisses, you never saw what the actors did with their tongues—that was one of the limitations of the medium. George wondered if it made movie directors sad that they could only show the outside of a kiss. There certainly seemed to be a lot of action happening on the inside.

Abruptly, Diana let him go. Turning her perfect chin sharply away from him, she said, "I don't think you're trying."

"Trying what?"

"To love me. Destiny has decreed that we are to be mated. At least you could try to generate some electricity for me."

George's store carried flashlight batteries, but he was almost certain she had something different in mind. "Is this some mythological scenario?" he asked. "Because it's nice of you to kiss me and all, but right now I'm happy with the small-town hardware business, and I don't feel the urge to play god. Sorry."

"This is not a scenario!" Diana shouted. The spear rematerialized in her left hand, and purple sparks crackled out of the tip. "I'm talking about real life. My body. Your body. Egg and sperm. Two become one, then three. Computer analysis at the Population Storage Facility says that we complement each other genetically and are ideal progenitors for the future of humanity. Well, at least for one new baby anyway. I'm scheduled to be impregnated by you within forty-eight hours."

George felt himself growing faint; with an effort of will, he brought himself back to full visibility and tried to consider the situation rationally. He had always known that the Facility could not keep physical bodies alive forever. People died; presumably they had to be replaced. Somehow though, he had thought that science would come up with a more impersonal way to create new life. Like cloning. Why did scientists always talk about cloning if they didn't really do it? It was disappointing that the next generation came from what amounted to arranged marriages.

"I'm sorry," George said. "I didn't understand what you were talking about."

"The fathers are always the last to know. That's one of the sacred traditions that the robots are programmed to preserve."

"They're really good robots, aren't they?" George said.

"They sure are," Diana agreed with a warm smile.

George nodded, then kept nodding in lieu of speaking. He wondered if Diana was actually expecting to make love with him in the near future. Astral bodies could make love, of course; astral bodies could interact with each other in any way that physical ones could. But George had watched people making love in a lot of movies, and the hardware store didn't seem suited for that sort of thing. To get a soft place to lie down, they'd have to make a bed out of bags of grass seed, or find some way to arrange themselves on one of the lawn recliners.

Then again, he couldn't quite see why making love was necessary. Or making anything else, for that matter. "They're just going to use our physical bodies for this, right?" he said.

"Right."

"So I guess they'll, umm, collect my sperm and use it to impregnate you, right? And if it's like everything else they do to our physical bodies, neither of us will feel a thing. Is that how it works?"

"Yes."

"Then I don't understand why you're here. It affects our bodies but not our lives. I mean our astral lives. You know what I mean. It just happens, no matter what we do. I can't see any reason for us to, uhh, interact."

"You cold-hearted bastard," she said. Her hair began to toss wildly as if buffeted by a tornado; the cobra skulls in her belt hissed and snapped. Her skin turned scarlet, her pupils crimson, her lips black. "Do you think parenting is a mere physical act?" she shouted in a voice like an earthquake doing ventriloquism. "Do you believe love is irrelevant? Do you deny the importance of a nurturing psychic aura in the formation of human life? Do you want our child to usher forth from a joyless womb?"

George hadn't really thought about it.

Given that he'd been living as a psychic phenomenon for twenty-six years, he supposed he wasn't entitled to doubt the importance of psychic auras. Parental attitude at conception probably did make a difference—if Diana conceived a child in her current mood, the baby might turn out kind of cranky. (A cobra on her belt spat venom in George's direction; the astral fluid fell into a bucket of plastic fishing lures and vanished.)

Was conception the only crucial moment for the baby? No; George had heard that prenatal influences could affect the child all through pregnancy. And after that, who raised the infant? The robots, of course; but could they provide a nurturing psychic aura in the child's formative years? Probably . . . they were really good robots. But just in case, George figured he shouldn't make any long-term plans.

It was an imposition on his life . . . but then, it was an imposition on Diana's life too. She was obviously devoted to the goddess scenario—she probably lived in a marble palace on a mountainside with lots of other divinities, doing all kinds of divinity things. It must be a real letdown for her to be mated to a storekeeper, even a hardware storekeeper. If she was prepared to make such a sacrifice for their child, George should be too.

"I'm sorry," he said to her. "I was being selfish. We can, uhh, get married. Or whatever you think is right."

Slowly her body returned to its previous coloration. The cobra skulls gave a peevish-sounding sniff in unison, then went back to being dead. "All right," she said. "Apology accepted. Diana is a strict goddess, but fair."

"What do we do now?" George asked.

"We learn to love each other."

George had watched a few couples courting in his town, and he thought they should try the same sort of thing: an arm-in-arm walk down to the ice cream parlor. With Diana at her present height, that was easier said than done. Graciously, she assumed a persona no taller than George—a trim lynx-woman with two-inch talons and a pelt of stiff brown fur. George recognized her new body from a collection of clip-art personas published the year before. He had chosen his own appearance from the same book—Kindly Shopkeeper with a Twinkle in His Eye, #4.

People on Main Street stared as they walked by, but showed the kind of small-town courtesy George had known they would. "Well George, got a new friend, I see. Oh, she's your mate. Well, well. Pleased to meet you, missus. A goddess! Well, George, she's a catch, all right. How long are you going to keep that special on nails?"

At the ice cream parlor, the robot attendant served them two strawberry sundaes. George didn't try to eat his—lifting a spoonful of ice cream took a lot of concentration, and when he put it into his mouth, it would fall right through his astral body anyway. George preferred to watch it all melt into a smooth white cream with swirls of strawberry—it reminded him of paint, just after you add a slurp of red colorizer to the white base, before you put it on the mixing machine and let it shake itself pink.

Diana, on the other hand, dug into the ice cream immediately. "This is a pleasant town," she said to George as she inserted a spoonful into her mouth. George heard a liquidy plop as the ice cream fell through her and landed on her chair. "Of course, the town is quiet for my tastes. But it has potential. I have a friend who does werewolves and he could really liven up the place. You know, lurk on the outskirts, savage a few locals from time to time. Not hurt them for *real,* of course, just scare them and make them promise to go to another scenario for a while. But as people began to disappear, as the town devolved into a panicky powderkeg waiting to explode in an orgy of hysterical butchery, you and I could hunt down the monster and kill it. Wouldn't that be fun?"

It didn't quite match George's idea of why his neighbors were living in the small-town scenario, but he knew he could be wrong. He went to a lot of movies. He knew that small towns were full of people just *waiting* to stir up a bloodbath.

Dirty Ernie Birney came into the ice cream parlor as George and Diana were finishing up. George shuddered; Dirty Ernie was not the sort of person anyone wanted to meet on a date. The older folks in town said Ernie was at least thirty-five, but he wore the persona of a rotten little eight-year-old. He was foul-mouthed, brattish, whiny, and persistent. George grabbed Diana's furry elbow and said, "Let's get out of here."

As she stood up, Dirty Ernie whistled and pointed at her chair. "Hey lady," he said, "looks like you pooped a pile of ice cream."

Diana moved so fast George's eyes could scarcely track her. Slash, gash, and Ernie's astral arm was nothing but ribbons of tattered ectoplasm. The boy howled and bolted out the door, the flaps of his arm trailing after him like red plastic streamers on bike handlebars.

"You shouldn't have done that," George said. He thought there was a chance he might throw up, if astral projections could do such a thing.

"He can fix his arm any time," Diana said. "It's just like assuming a new persona."

"Yes, but . . ."

"Well, I couldn't let him insult me. I'm a goddess, for heaven's sake! Rotten little brat. In a *proper* scenario, he'd know his place."

George took Diana by the hand and led her back to the hardware store. He could tell that while they were learning to love each other, it would be a good idea to leave town.

They leaned on the store's front counter and looked at the latest catalogue of available scenarios. Diana was only interested in the heroic ones. She swore that if she could watch George rescue her from a dragon, she would fall hopelessly in love with him. George was beginning to suspect that his new bride had a pretty narrow range of interests . . . but then, newlyweds had to learn to accept each other for what they were.

When Diana had chosen a scenario, George called to his robot stockboy Benny, who was down in the basement rearranging the plumbing supplies. (Benny did all the physical work around the store. He loved hauling around boxes, and often restacked the entire storeroom out of sheer high spirits.) George told Benny he was going away with Diana for a few days and Benny would be in charge of the store. The robot bounced about in a little circle and piddled machine oil in his excitement. George couldn't tell if Benny was excited because he would be running the store or because George was acquiring a mate. Probably both. Benny's way of thinking ran the same direction as George's on a lot of things.

For George, the best part of assuming the persona of a knight was designing the coat of arms. He decided on a hammer and screwdriver rampant, argent sur azure. His motto was "Ferrum meum spectari": My Iron Stands the Test. Diana had said she approved of the sentiment.

Of course, Diana was now captive in the highest tower of a castle overlooking the Rhine. It was the stronghold of the unspeakable Wilhelm von Schmutzig, sorcerer, murderer, ravisher, and author of six pornographic trilogies about elves. A dragon prowled the castle courtyard; mercenaries patrolled the halls. Rumor claimed that diabolical experiments were even now reaching fruition in the castle's dungeons and soon a horde of . . . of . . . (George pulled the brochure from his saddlebag to refresh his memory) a horde of disease-bearing zombies would be released on a helpless world. Only one man, the brave Sir Your-Name-Here, could avert the onrushing tide of destruction.

George asked his horse how much farther it was to the castle.

"Just around the bend," the horse said. It was the astral persona of a man named Hawkins who heartily enjoyed the equine life. "You get to be really *big*," Hawkins had said. "You can rear up on your hind legs and scare people. You get to eat grass." Hawkins had been doing knightly steeds for years and never tired of the role. He had told George that sometimes he moonlighted as a Cape water buffalo, but it wasn't his first love.

Hawkins stopped at the bend and let George scout ahead. Skulking wasn't easy in full plate mail, but the forest was thick on both sides of the road so there was little chance of being seen.

The walls around the castle were high and thick, the moat deep—and foul-smelling even at this distance. The drawbridge was up, the portcullis down, and frankly, the place looked impregnable.

George considered breaking the seal on the scenario's Hint Booklet. Back at the Population Storage Facility, the robots might impregnate Diana any time now; if George was too slow in winning her love, all would be lost. On the other hand, would Diana love him when she saw he had looked at the hints? (George was certain she would check.) No, she would view him as a cheater and a cad, and their baby would probably grow up to be a lawyer.

George clanked up against a tree to think. If this were a movie, what would the hero do?

"Halloo, the castle!"

A mercenary's head looked down on George from one of those little slots that castles have instead of real windows. George was once again wearing his red Handee Hardware blazer, and his horse Hawkins was decked out in a Handee Hardware saddle blanket. "What do you want?" the mercenary asked.

"I'm just a poor peasant merchant and I have a delivery for the Lord von Schmutzig."

"What kind of delivery?"

"Nails," said George. "Three-quarter-inch finishing nails for the final assembly of the horde of disease-bearing zombies."

"Nobody told me anything about nails," the mercenary said. "Last night at cocktails, the Lord said he had everything he needed to complete his evil disease-bearing zombie horde."

"Some fool delivered one-inch finishing nails instead of three-quarter-inch ones," George said, improvising. "Building zombies is a precision business. You use nails a quarter inch too long and they'll stick out all over the zombie's body. They'll keep catching on things."

"Ugh," said the mercenary and let George in.

George left his horse to take care of the dragon. Hawkins knew the dragon personally from other scenarios—it was the astral persona of a woman named Magda who enjoyed being vanquished on a regular basis. Hawkins said he was sure Magda would be willing to feign sleep while Hawkins drove a few nails through her wings with his hooves. She would gladly thrash and moan, spiked helplessly to the dirt, until George found time to plunge his cruel broadsword into the vulnerable soft spot of her underbelly.

George moved on to the tower where Diana was imprisoned. His red blazer was perfect camouflage: the mercenaries scarcely glanced his way as he passed. "Some

hardware-hawking peasant," he heard one of them mutter in disgust.

At the top of the tower steps, George resumed his knightly persona. The armor made it impossible to walk silently, and he knew there might be more danger ahead; however, Diana would be expecting him in heroic guise. With broadsword in one hand and shield in the other, he clanked forward to a closed door.

He could hear nothing from the other side of the door. Considering the thickness of his helmet, George was not surprised. He tried the latch and found the door unlocked. He wished he could kick the door open the way people did in movies, but even concentrating on his astral foot as hard as he could, he barely managed to move the door at all. When it was open enough to squeeze through, he sidestepped his way into the room.

Diana sat in a chair, bound by coils of thick white cord and gagged with a purple silk scarf. Though she was wearing the persona of a kidnapped princess—low-cut gown of green velvet, straight brown hair that reached the floor, eyes red from weeping—she still carried vestiges of the goddess of the hunt. The cobras on her belt had already gnawed through the cords around her waist and were snapping at the bindings on her wrists.

George hurried forward to untie her, but she shook her head violently and nodded toward the far corner of the room. "Mmmph mmph mmph," she explained.

At first when George looked in the direction she indicated, he saw only a rumpled four-poster bed surrounded by confusing watercolor prints of elves. George found it disturbing that Diana was so eager to draw his attention to the bed while she was still bound and gagged. In fact, finding himself unexpectedly alone with her in an elaborate bedroom stirred nervous flutters in his stomach. He hadn't pictured this moment coming so suddenly. The part of his mind that normally said, "This is what you should do," was completely silent; the part that said, "This is what might happen," had hiccups. It was a huge relief when a lean figure stepped from the shadows behind the bed curtains and said, "So. Some fool believes he can foil my schemes."

George recognized the man as another clip-art persona: Seductive Yet Dangerous Scoundrel With Pencil Moustache, #2. He wore a white puff-sleeved swashbuckler shirt, tight black chinos, and knee-high boots of black leather. He would have intimidated George even if he hadn't been carrying a sabre with a dripping crimson blade.

"Wilhelm von Schmutzig, I presume," George said in a voice he wanted to sound brave.

"At your service," said the villain, giving a courtier's bow. "Shall we duel to the death, or would you prefer to impale yourself on my blade immediately?"

"I will not rest until I have cleansed the Earth of your foul presence, von Schmutzig." George was rather pleased with that speech—Hawkins had suggested he should have some appropriate soliloquy for the final confrontation with the villain, and George had practiced until he could say the line without fumbling.

George was still congratulating himself when von Schmutzig attacked. With lightning-swift strikes, the villain rained blows upon George's armor. The sabre itself had no effect, but the clanging noise ringing in his helmet gave George a throbbing headache. He did his best to fight back, but was far too slow and clumsy to come close to his opponent. Occasionally he managed a parry, but never a successful thrust.

"Are you the best the forces of virture can muster?" von Schmutzig sneered as he played on George like a steel drum. "I expected a hero."

"Just because you're evil doesn't mean you should be rude," George replied. "You'll get yourself in trouble some day." But it was clearly George who was in trouble as he clattered back and forth around the room. At last, he was driven back against a post of the bed and his weapon was flicked out of his hand by a fencing maneuver something like the little twist of the wrist you need when you're using an Allen wrench to loosen the bit in an electric drill. George hurried to pick the sword up, but found his feet tangled in sheets lying on the floor. He fell back heavily onto the mattress and von Schmutzig was on him immediately, the tip of his sabre blade pointing through the helmet's visor at George's right eye.

"Now, Sir Knight," said von Schmutzig, "you will die."

"Don't hurt me," George whispered. "If I don't win, Diana will never love me and our child will usher forth from a joyless womb."

"What care I of children?" von Schmutzig said with a laugh. "I am a villain . . . and I get defeated in so many scenarios, I don't mess around when I finally win one. I'm minutes away from finishing my zombie horde, and I'm really looking forward to decimating the duchy."

"But my baby!" George shouted.

"I was an unhappy child," von Schmutzig said. "I don't see why I should give a break to anyone else."

"Urk," he added as the tip of an ivory spear burst out of his chest, like a one-inch nail driven through a three-quarter-inch board.

Resplendent in her goddess persona, Diana carried von Schmutzig to the window on the end of her spear. "Thus end all who give my mate a rough time," she said as she tossed him out.

Von Schmutzig's screams turned into the screeches of an eagle as he fell. A moment later, a large bird flew squawking past the window and off into the sunset. Like all good villains, von Schmutzig was escaping so there could be a sequel.

"Are you okay?" Diana asked as George stumbled to his feet. Her face was filled with concern. She put her arm around his shoulders, sat him down on the edge of the bed, and tried to look at him through his visor.

"Oh, I'm all right," he said. He couldn't meet her gaze. "I wasn't a very good hero."

"It was sweet of you to try," she said. "Are you sure you're all right? He was hacking you left, right, and center."

George reshaped himself into his comfortable old persona. "I'm fine. How about you?"

"Oh, I had fun. I like saving people in the nick of time." She gave him a quick squeeze, then looked away.

"I liked being saved," George said. "Thank you."

"You're welcome."

George was keenly aware that she still had her arm around his shoulders. It felt very warm. He couldn't remember anyone else's astral projection feeling that warm.

"I suppose the scenario's over now," she said sadly.

"Actually," George told her, "the building is still swarming with ruthless mercenaries."

"It is?"

"And I left the dragon alive."

"You did?"

"And the dungeons are just full of disease-bearing zombies."

"Oh, George," she said, hugging him tightly, "you've given me something nice to look forward to on our honeymoon. Tomorrow."

In a gigantic cube in the desert, some really good robots work carefully on two physical bodies. Fluids are transferred. Vital signs are monitored. The probability of success is high.

In a castle on the Rhine, two ordinary human beings try on one persona after another as they strive to learn to love each other. If somebody ever finds a way to measure the probability of success in love, everyone will ignore it anyway, so let's not pretend we know how things will work out.

In a hardware store in a quiet town, a robot stockboy impulsively decides to put the one-inch finishing nails and the three-quarter-inch finishing nails into the same bin. They're a bit different; but when you get right down to it, they're all nails, aren't they? ✦

The Devil His Due

Maya Kaathryn Bohnhoff

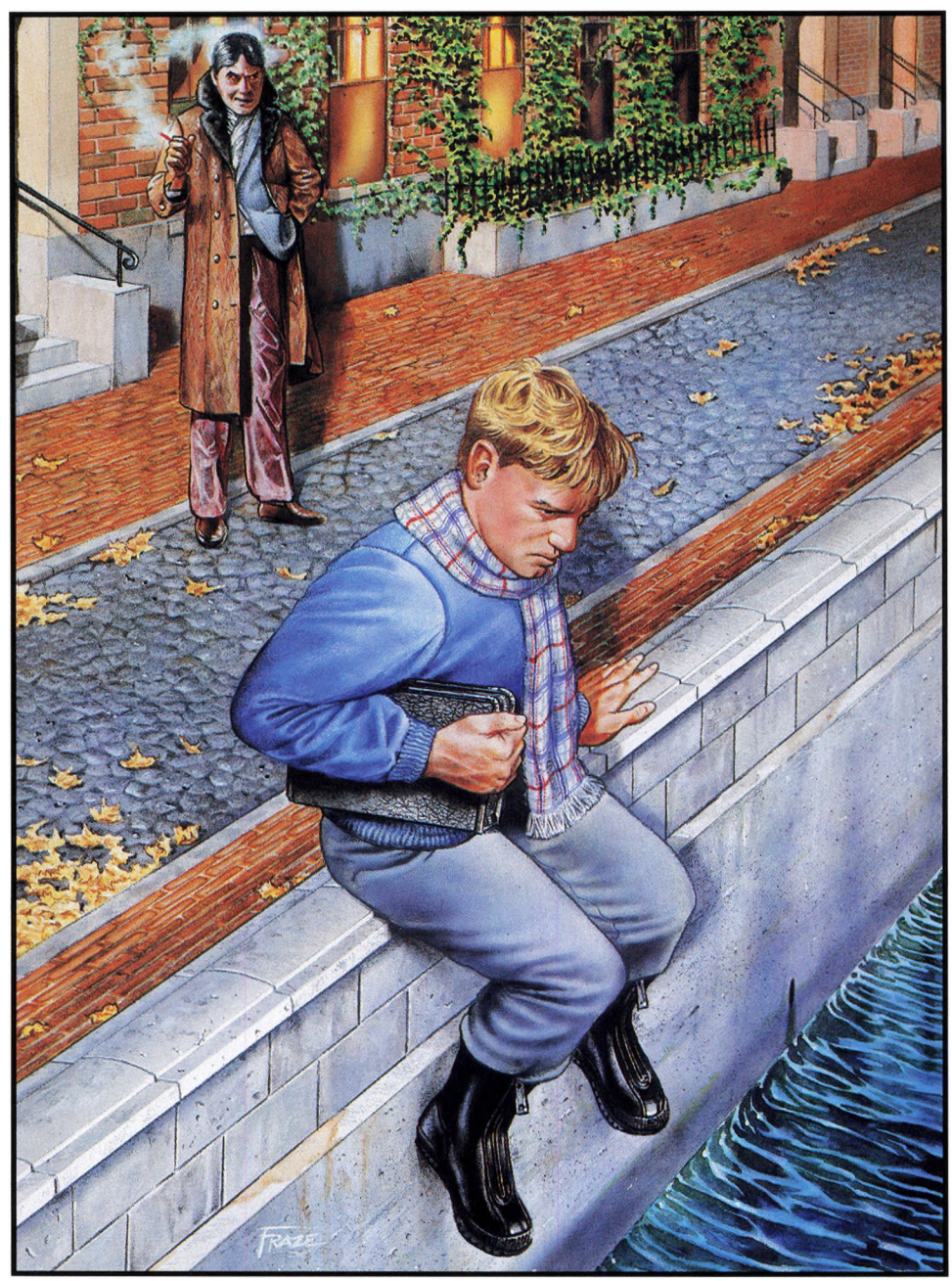

Illustration by Jon Fraze

Herbert G. (Bert) Wells stared at the dog-eared manila envelope numbly. This was the fifth time—the fifth time!—*Of Blood Dark Skies* had ricocheted off New York City like a badly aimed bullet and ended up buried deep in his mailbox.

Gut-shot, he shambled down the hallway of his Boston brownstone, his face wearing the same blank look of despair and puzzlement he'd seen on the homeless wrecks he stepped over on the way upstairs.

Down the battered corridor a door opened. Bert froze. Jack Baddely (the jackass) stepped out into the hall, then swung back to lock his door. Bert

thrust the misshapen package under the lapel of his coat and tacked a garish grin on his face.

"Hi, Jack," he said, his voice as bright as the paisleys on his tie.

"Oh, *hi,* Bertie. How's the writing life? Any news on your blockbuster no-vel?" He always said "novel" as if it was some bastardized French word. (It was actually bastardized Italian.)

Bert flattered himself that his smile did not slip an inch. "No news is good news," he said, hurrying past.

"Yeah. Or it could mean the editor ran out of kindling."

His back to the jackass, Bert's face went into a litany of rude expressions.

"Or maybe he needed a doorstop."

Bert kept walking.

"A paperweight?"

Bert made his apartment door and opened it, trying, unsuccessfully, to ignore the raspy chuckle digging stiletto sharp, into his unguarded back. "Jackass," he muttered and hurled the door open. He slammed it shut again behind him and threw the manuscript onto the sofa.

The frayed, stressed manila split at the seams, spilling its contents from the sofa cushions onto the bare wood floor. Snide chuckles sprayed from the ruptured package and scurried to find hiding places in the room. They would emerge later to scoff at him. He would hear them as he labored at his second-hand laptop—sneaking out from nook and cranny, scuffling among the dust-bunnies, tittering at the man who would be King.

He ignored the litter on the sofa long enough to brew an industrial-strength pot of coffee, climb into his sweats and sit down, cup in hand, to assess the mess. After three sips, he was able to pick up the rejection letter and read it. It was a form job, but the editor had scrawled a handwritten message beneath the neatly printed kiss-off.

"Nice, tight style," it said, "but has no one told you that horror with a social conscience is a dead art form? Not even the King could sell this stuff in this day and age. Can the metaphysical crap. Give the market what it wants—try cyber-shock."

A dead art form, indeed. It matched, Bert thought, the social conscience of the age. Deader than a doornail—whatever the hell a doornail was. Cyber-shock! An AI droid could write cyber-shock: tales of senseless carnage perpetrated by mindless machines or half-machine/half-human completely crazed cyber-men. Luddite rubbish! The publishing industry was clearly in the hands of idiots.

Great, he thought. *Right,* he thought. *Distract us with tales of impossible evils so we'll forget about the possible ones—the* real *ones.* Exorcising imaginary demons was always so much more gratifying than shitcanning the real ones: greed, corruption, injustice, excess. He could go on and on.

He checked his watch. Five-fifteen. Writer's Group wasn't for another two and a half hours—a long time to wait to get this off his chest.

He sighed, supposing he could just go hang out at the coffee house and hope another of the undiscovered literati would wander by in need of a kvetch-mate. But if he did that, he'd have to drink more coffee, and between the cup he'd just had and the two pots he'd consumed at work today, he was already in a caffeinated time warp. The High-flight Zone, the Group called it. He'd only seen one or two of his literary buddies when they weren't cranking along on a full charge of caffeine-induced adrenaline—it wasn't a pretty sight.

For about the two billionth time Bert considered "giving the market what it wanted." Hell, he knew he could do it . . . well, at least, he was pretty sure he could. After all, he had it on good authority that he possessed a "nice, tight style." He had every confidence . . . well, at least a sneaking suspicion . . . that if he sent that bourgeoisie establishment pig-dog editor a cyber-shock novel, he'd wolf it down like steak tartare—killer 'bots and all. *Luddite.*

The anger peaked, sending him on a slow glide toward the abyss of despair. Who was he kidding? He couldn't write that crap. All that gore and sexual carnage—he just didn't have it in him.

Sure you do, said a scoffing voice from left of center. *All human beings have it in 'em. You think you're an exception? Are you sure you wanna be? Look at the prize—PUBLICATION. MONEY. AUTONOMY. CELEBRITY. You got the tools, bwana. You can exploit the unreasonable fears of your fellow men and women right up there with the best of 'em.*

Exploit? His brain braked in mid-meander. *My God,* he thought. *What are you thinking? Exploit? Sell out? Pander to those antiquarian anarchists?* This was a New Age. The publishing industry just hadn't caught up yet. If he just hung in there, stuck it out—

Bullshit.

He put down the cup of coffee. *Need to get out,* he told himself. *Need to get out and take a walk; clear the chuckling dust-bunnies out of my head.*

He pulled on his coat, boots and a muffler, grabbed his portfolio and went out. Four aimless blocks later, he found himself wandering the River Charles. It was a much cleaner river than it had been last year at this time, and Bert tried to make that cause for celebration.

A group of musicians had started that campaign, he recalled—a brigade of world-class rockers who had descended on New England like a plague of Spandex locusts and bent the ears of every living thing in the Thirteen Colonies. Rock musicians were not inclined to beat around the bush; the message was blunt and to the point. Man was out of tune with the environment. If he didn't get *in* tune instantly, the consequences would be devastating: global warming, a new Ice Age, pollution toxemia—all frightening, but mere bagatelles compared to the *real* threat rammed home via synthesizer and power chord by the heroes of a new generation. TEEN REVOLT. The rock slogan "Tune It Or Die" took on a whole new meaning when emblazoned across the chest of your fifteen-year-old's green globe-and-crossbones T-shirt.

Bert stared at the water. A month ago that had been one of his fondest recollections—a story he loved to tell whenever some formaldehyde-guzzling nerdle elevated his snoot and opined that the arts were sheer frivol.

Now, it only made him feel worse about his own inability to make any difference to the planet. In the past two years since he'd left the university, all he'd managed to contribute to society was a mountain of waste paper and enough shredded manila to fill the Prud up to the thirty-first floor.

Face it, he told himself, *you're a wimp. A noodle. A wet rag. Couldn't write your way out of a recycled paper bag . . . in a driving rain, even. Face it: If you could write—really write—they'd publish* Of Blood Dark Skies *if it was a multigenerational potboiler. You, Herbert George Wells, are no credit to your namesake. You, sir, are a fake—a failure.*

He stared down at the swiftly moving Charles, chin quivering, eyes moist, anger shriveling. Despair and gloom perched on his sagging shoulders like the Twin Ravens of Doom—foul-smelling, heavy-toed birds with smug, knowing faces. They reminded him of two of his college professors, Bernhardt Brecht and Madlyn Carney, who had both told him his propensity for crusading would ruin him as a writer of fiction, *if* (and it was a BIG IF) he could ever contrive to WRITE WELL.

The not-so-muddy river beckoned, singing the bawdy refrain of a song he was half a generation too young to remember. "Love that dirty water . . ." *Come on in, the water's fine.*

He sniffled, tucked his portfolio under one arm and swung a leg over the low stone parapet. Then he swung the other one over. He sat for a moment, facing the water, making his peace with the Universe. *Sorry, God,* he apologized. *But I'm a wimp. Of course, You already know that.*

He contemplated the next morning's headlines: Unknown Schlock Horror Writer Takes Own Life.

What headline, beefbrain? asked a disparaging voice from right of center. *You'll be lucky to make the obits. Give us a break, here. Nobody knows who you are but those self-centered quease-in-arts you hang out with at the Espress-O. And they'll think you're some kind of idiot saint. Saint Herbert, Patron of Pansy-asses. Your mother didn't raise you right.*

Herbert became highly offended at the disrespectful tenor of his thoughts. *Leave my mother out of this!*

He paused in mid-rage. *Mother.* Someone would have to tell his mother that her only son had kissed his ass goodbye and taken a header into the River Charles. She might even have to identify his body. What would she think? What would she do? He knew exactly what she'd think. She'd think she was a *bad mother*—a failure. She'd get depressed, maybe even . . . That, Bert decided, would never do. He swung one leg back over the wall onto tarmac firma.

Doofus, said the left-hand voice. *Can't even do suicide right. I'm sure your mom loves having a zombie for a son. What does your boy do, Dr. Wells, Ph.D. in astrophysics, hmmm? Oh, my little Herbie, he recycles paper . . . lots of paper. Great, kid. Really great.*

Bert wobbled, straddling the wall. A peculiar *whoosh-clickety-clickety* sound filled his brain and he thought for a moment he was headed for a psychotic Walter Mitty episode. He raised terrified eyes and met the curious ones of a kid speeding toward him on a powered skateboard. The kid and the *whoosh-clickety-clickety* both stopped right beside him.

"Geez, mon," the kid said, looking sincerely concerned, "you look like your mom just died. What could be that bad?"

Bert blinked. "I can't write," he said, shocked into total honesty. "I'm a failure because I can't write cybershock."

The kid looked at him; he looked at the kid. A little globe and crossbones dangled from one earlobe and the letters "IT OR" were clearly visible on the patch of green T-shirt that peeked between the lapels of his black leather jacket.

"You know," the kid said finally, "there's an exceptionally good literacy program at the library."

Bert coughed. "Thanks."

The kid smiled. "Sure." He *whoosh-clickety*'d off, leaving Bert miserably alone.

The right-side voice was back, popping in like a fritzy channel on a bunged stereo. *Some people,* it said, *can't even read.*

Bert swung his other leg over onto the walkway. *Yeah,* he thought, *and even I can do that. Maybe I could even teach other people to do that.*

"Yeah? And where'll it get ya?"

Bert was trying to think of a comeback when he realized the voice had not come from inside his head. He looked up. Standing before him on the river walk was a short man in a fur-collared stressed leather coat, matching Gucci shoes, gloves and burgundy sharkskin pants. His hair was fashionably cut—a straight, glossy, lobe-length pageboy, black, obviously natural, center parted. He was handsome in an oily sort of way, and was smoking a red, spice-scented cigarette.

Bert found his eyes hypnotized by the glowing tip. Cigarettes were highly illegal. He only knew one person who smoked them—a beefy, middle-aged fictioneer who had been a correspondent during the last known war (years ago in Swaziland or someplace) and who thought he was the reincarnation of Ernest Hemingway.

"Want one?" asked the Smoker and held out a little ebony box. The cigarettes lay inside on black velvet.

"No. No, thanks."

The box disappeared.

"I asked a question, Jack," the guy said. "What'll it get ya, this literacy bunk?"

"I . . . I . . . I want to do something. Help somebody. Make a difference."

The Smoker laughed. It was an acrid sound. "And teachin' a bunch of snot-nosed ghetto geckos how to read is gonna make a difference? Great. Yeah. They'll be able to read those little signs that say 'Shoplifting will be prosecuted.' That way they'll know what they're bein' busted for. Get real, bwana. These guys are gonna be doin' their reading in a cage."

Bert stood. "Well, I'm going to do *something* with my life, dammit. I don't care if I have to write copy for the Salvation Army."

A gloved hand shot out and patted his arm, pushing him back onto the parapet. "Hold your thrusters, Jack. I'm not saying you can't do *nothin'*. I'm sayin' I think you can do *better*."

"Do better? Look, who the hell are you, anyway, and where do you get off interrupting my private thoughts?" He glared fiercely at the little man, then felt the glare slip. Those really *had* been his private thoughts. His *silent,* private thoughts.

The Smoker rocked back on his well-heeled heels and grinned. "I wondered when you'd tumble to that. You're not a very quick study, Jack."

"My name isn't Jack, it's—"

"Yeah, yeah. I know. It's Herbert. Herbert G. Wells, named after the famous sci-fi writer. Your mom is a big fan."

"Well, then why—"

He spread his hands. "It's just an expression."

"How do you know who I am? How do you know so much about me? Are you—" Hope leapt in his breast. "Are you from the FBI—the CIA? Is that it? Is my writing too incendiary? Too dangerous?"

The man guffawed. "Dangerous? Holy shit, kid! If you had *talent,* you'd be *dangerous*! As it is, you got nothin' but good intentions and a lot of gall. Dangerous, Saint Chris's ass! That's a yuck, bwana-san. A real yodel. Dangerous!" He chuckled, wiped tears from the corners of his eyes and wheezed down to silence.

Bert glared at him. "Get to the point. I have a meeting to go to."

"Oh, yeah, right. The literary group. Yodel number two."

"The point?"

"The point is—I'm here to help you."

"You're here to help me."

"I thought I just said that. Is there an—"

"Oh, please."

"Okay, okay. Look. You wanna save the world, right?"

"Not the whole world. Only a little of it. Just a tiny piece will do. I . . . I just want to write well—*really* well. Convincingly. Startlingly. I want to horrify and edify. Make people see that real horror is in the way they waste time and life and money and resources and—"

The Smoker raised his hands to stem the rush of words. "Whoa, whoa, whoa! Writing well? *That's* your answer to the world's problems: world hunger, political corruption, spiritual decay? Kid, you got a lot to learn. Writing is nothing. Money, now, *that's* something."

"Money?"

"Money, celebrity, status—*that's* how you change the world. Just think of it: You got money—you can give it away. You got celebrity—you can be visible. You got status—you can throw it around."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. Believe me, as a good writer—even a *great* writer—you're nowhere. You got zip. You appeal to the so-called intelligentsia and what have you got? A bunch of smug, self-righteous 'admirers,' that's what you got. Know what that is? Zip. They read your books, then sit around on their bistros agreein' with your insights and sayin' how brill you are and how brill *they* are for recognizing how brill *you* are. That's crap. But if you got money, celebrity, status—we-hell, *then* you put on one of those crummy T-shirts you're so stiff over and people will *notice*. You hear what I'm sayin', Jack? You got to be visible before anything you do or say means a damn."

"Yeah, so what? I don't stand a snowball's chance in hell of that happening."

The Smoker scratched his nose. "Funny you should say that, kid, 'cause, in point of fact, you got a chance."

"I do?"

"You do."

Bert nodded. "Sure. Right. And you're going to give it to me."

"I am."

"How?"

The Smoker took a long drag on his illegal cigarette (which seemed not to have gotten any shorter during their conversation) and smiled. "The mechanics are *my* problem. All you gotta do is wait. You know what they say: All things come to those who wait."

"They do, huh?"

The Smoker scratched his ear. "Yeah. You know, the famous They. Whaddya say, kid?"

"What do you mean—what do I say?"

"To the deal."

"The *deal*?"

The little guy sighed. "Holy Christmas, kid. You are *dense*. Look. You go home, see. Hang out. Do your own thing—whatever the jargon is these days—and I do the rest."

Bert pursed his entire face. "Fame? Fortune? Status?"

"The works."

He felt a tiny hope springing eternal in his breast. "You mean, I can go home and keep writing what I've been writing and it'll *sell*? I'll become famous and—"

The gloved hands were up again. "Hold your fire, bwana. Gimme a little *help* here. You do that, the deal is off. No way even *I* can do that big a miracle."

Bert scowled, then shook his head. "Wait a minute. What am I thinking? This is crazy. *Nobody* can do that kind of a miracle except God, and up to now He hasn't seen fit."

His companion smiled and nodded, puffing vigorously on his cigarette. "And so it devolves upon yours truly."

"Oh? And who are you—the Archangel Gabriel?"

The smile deepened. "Not exactly."

"Oh, oh, wait! I see. You're the devil, right, and you're offering me all this in return for my immortal soul, right?"

"Your immortal soul is already spoken for, Jack. Besides, I wouldn't know what to do with it if you *gave* it to me."

Bert gaped. "You expect me to believe you're really the devil?"

The man spread his arms. "In the flesh."

"Oh, come *on*!"

"Hey! Who knew what you were thinkin', here, huh? Who knew all about you?"

"You could've seen me around. Or—or someone

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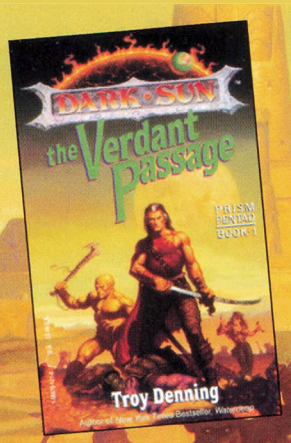

might have put you up to this. Like my jackass neighbor. That's it, isn't it—Jack the ass sent you! You followed me here . . ."

"And just happened to overhear all your innermost thoughts?"

Bert was silent.

"You have a birthmark next to your navel. You love Peking duck, hate pizza and think Hemingway was overrated. You haven't had a steady girlfriend since your junior year in college. You're a virgin. Wanna hear more?"

"I—"

"Oh, yeah—your most embarrassing moment was during high school when your English teacher found this poem . . ."

"Stop! Stop! Okay. I believe you're . . . something . . . . So, where do I sign?"

"You don't sign. Remember, I'm Satan-the-devil." He said it fast, like one of those televangelists, as if it was all one word. "I'll know if you've been living up to your part of the bargain. All that contracts-in-blood stuff was just bad press. A strong verbal and a shake is good enough for me."

"Okay. How do I know you're living up to *your* part of the bargain?"

"Easy. You'll become rich and famous."

"Uh-huh." Bert gave the little man a hard look. "Oh, what the hell—you'll pardon the expression. Okay, sure. I'll bite." He held out his hand for the guy to take and was embarrassed to realize he had expected it to be hot.

The guy chuckled. "Everybody expects me to burn 'em. More bad press. You could give me a little help in that department, if you're so inclined."

"Oh . . . sure."

"Well, nice doin' business with you, bwana." He gave a mocking salute and turned to go.

"Hey, wait a minute. Can I ask you something?"

"Sure."

"Why do you have a Brooklyn accent?"

"Damned research department. I asked for Brook*line*." He shook his head and moved off into the dark. "Putzes."

Herbert skipped Writer's Group that night. He went home and read part of a cyber-shock novel. Then he started to write one. He skipped the Group for the next two months, too, busy at work on the novel.

He finished the book and sent it off to an agent he knew was hot into the genre, then missed the next month with the Writer's Group because he was a little ashamed of what he was doing. At the end of the month, the agent sent Bert contracts. The novel gave him dry heaves, he said. It was great. Bert started writing short stories. He was too busy to go to any writers' meetings and felt it was better to write than merely to talk about writing.

Within two weeks, the agent called and told Bert his novel, *Night of Steel Death,* was going up for auction between three major houses. Bert dropped by the Espress-O just long enough to tell his old cronies he had a bidding war going for one of his books (he neglected to mention the title or the genre), then took himself out for dinner.

In the time before the auction, Bert finished four cyber-shock stories and mailed them off. The novel sold for a seven-figure advance. The stories went for $3,000 apiece. Bert quit his job and began his second cyber-shocker, throwing in a twisted version of the love story from *Of Blood Dark Skies.* He didn't see the Writer's Group again; by now he considered them a bunch of hopelessly self-involved losers. He was surprised to find he didn't even miss them.

He bought a home in Marblehead, started an investment portfolio, and got a girlfriend and a dog. He gave a substantial amount to charity and wore his "Tune It Or Die" T-shirt proudly. He did the workshop circuit, TV talk shows, book tours, horror conventions. After a few tries, he gave up attempting to weave his philosophy of life into these endeavors and talked shock-shop to the delight of his ardent fans. After a while, the philosophy seemed pretty sophomoric. He was visible—that was what really mattered.

His career was long and successful by almost any standards. Only his ex-writing buddies spoke of selling out. He didn't know that, of course; he never saw them.

He was seventy-five years old when it began to occur to him that his time might soon be running out. He began to expect to look up one day and see the devil—in more traditional garb—beckoning him through the fiery gates. By his seventy-sixth birthday this had become an obsession. It colored his work, showing up as a fixation on the mortality of all flesh, but that seemed only to increase his popularity. He realized that, at this point in his career, he could say anything he wanted, but found, perversely, that he had very little to say.

One crisp winter evening he took a nostalgic stroll by the crystal waters of the River Charles and waxed retrospective. He had gone through his collection of thick scrapbooks that evening, ensconced in the artfully lit recesses of his "trophy room." It occurred to him then that, while his reviewers raved about his novels, using words such as terse, horrifying, paralyzing, disturbing, electrifying, not one had ever said his work was thought-provoking or illuminating or even passionate. Still, he was earning millions every year, while the second most successful member of his old Writer's Group was pulling down a paltry $90,000 per annum as a college professor of creative writing and turning out thick, thoughtful science-fiction tomes.

He watched the lights from the shoreline promenade cavort among the ripples of the Charles and wondered what life would have been like if he had kept writing books like *Of Blood Dark Skies*—books with heart and soul and relevance.

"Hell," said a voice behind him. "It would've been pure hell, kid."

He spun around as fast as his body would allow and propped his butt against the parapet. "You."

It was the devil, of course—taller, younger, more handsome than before and dressed in this year's latest fashion, but undeniably the same character. He was smoking one of those red cigarettes (it could have been the same one, for all Bert knew), but had dropped the Brooklyn accent.

"So," said Bert, nodding.

"So," said the devil.

"So, it's payoff time."

"Well, accounting time, anyway."

"So, this is where I hand over my immortal soul and go to hell."

"Nope. I told you, kid, I wouldn't know what to do with your soul if you gave it to me."

"You don't want my soul?"

"No."

"Really?"

"Really."

"You're not joking with me?"

The devil pointed up at his lean, good-looking face. "Does this look like the face of a joker?"

"No."

"Then, trust me—I'm not joking."

"But we had a contract—an agreement."

"We did."

"Well, when do you collect?"

"I already did, kid. I did what you expected; you did what I expected. Good business, all the way around."

Bert shook his head. "But I don't understand. I didn't do *anything*. What the hell did I *do*?"

The devil smiled. His teeth were perfect and even and very white. "Just what you said, kid. Nothing. You didn't do a damned thing. After we cut our deal, you wrote uninspired novels that didn't do anything but scare people. You never wrote anything even remotely important, never challenged yourself, never challenged anyone else. Except for a few handouts—most of which were eaten up by the overhead those charity organizations lug around—you never did a damn thing to better the world around you. Hell, you even turned into a recluse there for a while. That was great. You might as well have gone to Tibet."

"I did go to Tibet."

The devil shrugged. "Well, see, *I* even lost track of you. In short, bwana, you never set forth one original, inspiring, illumined or impassioned thought. I couldn't have asked for more than that. I'll tell you, kid, I wish I had seven billion more just like you." He clapped Bert on the shoulder and smiled into his seventy-six-year-old face. "Nice doing business with you, kid."

He turned then, and stepped briskly away down the promenade, his patent leather Guccis clicking contentedly against the gleaming lightstone of the walk. Several yards away, he turned back for a last glance at the stoop-shouldered old man perched, like a stranded albatross, on the parapet. He chuckled, appreciating the scene. "By the way, kid—have a nice forever." ✦

The Long Fall

Illustration by Gary Freeman

Ben Bova

Everybody blamed Sam for it, but if you ask me it never would've happened if the skipper hadn't gone a little crazy.

Space station *Freedom* was a purely government project, ten years behind schedule and a billion bucks or so over budget. Nothing unusual about that. The agency's best team of astronauts and mission specialists were picked to be the first crew. Nothing unusual about that, either.

What was weird was that somehow Sam Gunn was included in that first crew. And John J. Johnson was named commander. See, Sam and Commander Johnson got along like hydrazine and nitric acid—hypergolic. Put them in contact and they explode.

You've got to see the picture. John J. Johnson was a little

over six feet tall, lean as a contrail, and the straightest straight-arrow in an agency full of stiff old graybeards. He had the distinguished white hair and the elegant good looks of an airline pilot in a TV commercial.

But inside that handsome head was a brain that had a nasty streak in it. "Jay-Cubed," as we called him, always went by the rule book, even when it hurt. Especially when it hurt, if you ask me.

Until the day we learned that Gloria Lamour was coming to space station *Freedom*.

Sam, you know, was the opposite of the commander in every way possible. Sam was short and stubby where Johnson was tall and rangy. Hair like rusty Brillo. Funny color eyes; I could never tell if they were blue or green. Sam was gregarious, noisy, crackling with nervous energy; Johnson was calm, reserved, detached. Sam wanted to be everybody's pal; Johnson wanted respect, admiration, and most of all obedience.

Sam was definitely not handsome. His round face was bright as a penny, and sometimes he sort of looked like Huckleberry Finn or maybe that old-time child star Mickey Rooney. But handsome he was not. Still, Sam had a way with women. I know this is true because he would tell me about it all the time. Me, and anybody else who would be within earshot. Also, I saw him in action, back at the Cape and during our training sessions in Houston. The little guy could be charming and downright courtly when he wanted to be.

Ninety days on a space station with Sam and Commander Johnson. It was sort of like a shakedown cruise; our job was to make sure all the station's systems were working as they ought to. I knew it wouldn't be easy. The station wasn't big enough to hide in.

There were only six of us on that first mission, but we kept getting in each other's way—and on each other's nerves. It was like a ninety-day jail sentence. We couldn't get out. We had nothing but our work. There were no women. I think we would've all gone batty if it hadn't been for Sam. He was our one-man entertainment committee.

He was full of jokes, full of fun. He organized the scavenger hunt that kept us busy every night for two solid weeks trying to find the odd bits of junk that he had hidden away in empty oxygen cylinders, behind sleep cocoons, even floating up on the ceiling of the station's one and only working head. He set up the darts tournament, where the "darts" were really spitballs made of wadded Velcro and the reverse side of the improvised target was a blow-up photo of Commander Johnson.

Sam was a beehive of energy. He kept us laughing. All except the commander, who had never smiled in his life, so far as any of us knew.

And it was all in zero-gee. Or almost. So close it didn't make any real difference. The scientists called it microgravity. We called it weightlessness, zero-gee, whatever. We floated. Everything floated if it wasn't nailed down. Sam loved zero-gee. Johnson always looked like he was about to puke.

Johnson ruled with an aluminum fist. No matter how many tasks Mission Control loaded on us, Johnson never argued with them. He pushed us to do everything those clowns on the ground could think of, and to do it on time and according to regulations. No short cuts, no flim-flams. Naturally, the more we accomplished, the more Mission Control thought up for us to do. Worse, Johnson *asked* Mission Control for more tasks. He *volunteered* for more jobs for us to do. We were working, working, working all the time, every day, without a break.

"He's gonna kill us with overwork," grumbled Roger Cranston, our structural specialist.

"The way I figure it," Sam said, "is that Jay-Cubed wants us to do all the tasks that the next crew is supposed to do. That way the agency can cut the next mission and save seventy million bucks or so."

Al Dupres agreed sourly. "He works us to death and then he gets a big kiss on the cheek from Washington." Al was French Canadian, the agency's token international representative.

Sam started muttering about Captain Bligh and the *Bounty*.

They were right. Johnson was so eager to look good to the agency that he was starting to go a little wacko. Some of it was Sam's fault, of course. But I really think zero-gee affected the flow of blood to his brain. That, and the news about Gloria Lamour, which affected his blood flow elsewhere.

We were six weeks into the mission. Sam had kept his nose pretty clean, stuck to his duties as logistics officer and all the other jobs the skipper thought up for him, and kept out of Johnson's silver-fox hair as much as he could.

Oh, he had loosened the screwtop on the commander's coffee squeezebulb one morning, so that Johnson splashed the stuff all over the command module. Imagine ten thousand little bubbles of coffee (heavy on the cream) spattering all over, floating and scattering like ten thousand teeny fireflies. Johnson sputtered and cursed and glowered at Sam, his coveralls soaked from collar to crotch.

I nearly choked, trying not to laugh. Sam put on a look of innocence that would have made the angels sigh. He offered to chase down each and every bubble and clean up the mess. Johnson just glowered at him while the bubbles slowly wafted into the air vent above the command console.

Then there was the water bag in the commander's sleep cocoon. And the gremlin in the computer system that printed out random graffiti like: *Resistance to tyranny is obedience to God.* Or: *Where is Fletcher Christian when we really need him?*

Commander Johnson started muttering to himself a lot, and staring at Sam when the little guy's back was to him. It was an evil, red-eyed stare. Sent chills up my spine.

Then I found out about the CERV test.

Crew Emergency Re-entry Vehicle, CERV. Lifeboats for the space station. We called them "capsules." Suppose

something goes really wrong on the station, like we're hit by a meteor. (More likely, we'd be hit by a piece of manmade junk. There's millions of bits of crap floating around out there.) If the station's so badly damaged we have to abandon ship, we jump into the capsules and ride back down to Earth.

Nobody'd done it yet, up to then. The lifeboats had been tested with dummies inside them. But not real live human beings. Not yet.

I was on duty at the communications console in the command module that morning when Commander Johnson was on the horn with Houston. All of a sudden my screen breaks up into fuzz and crackles.

"This is a scrambled transmission," the commander said in his monotone, from his station at the command console, three feet to my right. He plugged in a headset and clipped the earphone on. And he smiled at me.

I took the hint and made my way to the galley for a squeeze of coffee, more stunned by that smile than curious about his scrambled conversation with Mission Control. When I got back Johnson was humming tunelessly to himself. The headset was off and he was still smiling. It was a ghastly smile.

Although we put in a lot of overtime hours to finish the tasks our commander so obligingly piled on us, Johnson himself left the command module precisely at seven each evening, ate a solitary meal in the wardroom and then got eight full hours of sleep. His conscience was perfectly at ease, and he apparently had no idea whose face was on the reverse of the darts target.

As soon as he left that evening I pecked out the subroutine I had put into the comm computer and reviewed his scrambled transmission to Houston. He may be the skipper, but I'm the comm officer—and *nothing* goes in or out without my seeing it.

The breath gushed out of me when I read the file. No wonder the skipper had smiled.

I called Sam and got him to meet me in the wardroom. The commander had assigned him to getting the toilet in the unoccupied laboratory module to work, so that the scientists who'd be coming up eventually could crap in their own territory. In addition to all his regular duties, of course.

"A CERV test, huh?" Sam said when I told him. "We don't have enough to do; he's gonna throw a lifeboat drill at us."

"Worse than that," I said.

"What do you mean?" Sam was hovering a few inches off the floor. He liked to do that; made him feel taller.

Chairs are useless in zero-gee. I had my feet firmly anchored in the foot loops set into the floor around the wardroom table. Otherwise a weightless body would drift all over the place.

Leaning closer toward Sam, I whispered, "It won't be just a drill. He's going to pop one of the lifeboats and send it into a real re-entry trajectory."

"No shit?"

"No shit. He got permission from Houston this morning for a full test."

Sam grabbed the edge of the galley table and pulled himself so close to me I could count the pale freckles on his snub of a nose. Sudden understanding lit up those blue-green eyes of his.

"I'll bet I know who's going to be in the lifeboat that gets to take the long fall," he whispered back at me.

I nodded.

"That's why he smiled at me this evening."

"He's been working out every detail in the computer," I said, my voice as low as that of a guy planning a bank heist, even though we were alone in the wardroom. "He's going to make certain you're in the lab module by yourself so you'll be the only one in the lifeboat there. Then he's going to pop it off."

The thought of riding one of those uncontrolled little capsules through the blazing heat of re-entry and then landing God knows where—maybe the middle of the ocean, maybe the middle of the Gobi Desert—scared the hell out of me. Strangely, Sam grinned.

"You *want* to be the first guy who tries out one of those capsules?" I asked.

"Hell, no," he said. "But suppose our noble liege-lord happens to make a small mistake and *he's* the one to take the ride back home?"

I felt my jaw drop open. "How're you going to . . . ?"

Sam grinned his widest. "Wouldn't it be poetic if we could arrange things so that ol' Cap'n Bligh himself gets to take the fall?"

I stared at him. "You're crazy."

"That's what they said about Orville and Wilbur, pal."

The next week was very intense. Sam didn't say another word to me about it, but I knew he was hacking into the commander's comm link each night and trying to ferret out every last detail of the upcoming lifeboat drill. Commander Johnson played everything close to the vest, though. He never let on, except that he smiled whenever he saw Sam, the sort of smile that a homicidal maniac might give his next victim. I even thought I heard him cackling to himself, once or twice.

The other three men in the crew began to sense the tension. Even Sam became kind of quiet, almost.

Then we got the word about Gloria Lamour.

Maybe you don't remember her, because her career was so tragically short. She was the sexiest, slinkiest, most gorgeous hunk of red-headed femininity ever to grace the video screen. A mixture of Rita Hayworth, Marilyn Monroe, and Michelle Pfeiffer. With some Katharine Hepburn thrown in for brains and even a flash of Bette Midler's sass.

The skipper called us together into the command module for the news. Just as calmly as if he was announcing a weather report from Tibet he told us:

"There will be a special shuttle mission to the station three days from this morning. We will be visited for an unspecified length of time by a video crew from Hollywood. Gloria Lamour, the video star, will apparently be among the visitors."

It hit me like a shock wave, but Commander Johnson spelled it out just as if we were going to get nothing more than a new supply of aspirin.

"Miss Lamour will be here to tape the first video drama ever filmed in space," he told us. "She and her crew have received clearance from the highest levels of the White House."

"Three cheers for President Heston," Sam piped.

Commander Johnson started to glare at him, but his expression turned into a wintry smile. A smile that said, "You'll get yours, mister." None of the rest of us moved from where we stood anchored in our foot restraints.

The commander went on. "The video crew will be using the laboratory module for their taping. They will use the unoccupied scientists' privacy cubicles for their sleeping quarters. There should be practically no interference with your task schedules, although I expect you to extend every courtesy and assistance to our visitors."

The five of us grinned and nodded eagerly.

"It will be necessary to appoint a crew member to act as liaison between the video team and ourselves," said the commander.

Our hands shot up to volunteer so hard that all five of us would have gone careening into the overhead if we hadn't been anchored to the floor.

"I will take on that extra duty myself," the skipper said, smiling enough now to show his teeth, "so that you can continue with your work without any extra burdens being placed on you."

"Son of a bitch," Sam muttered. If the commander heard him, he ignored it.

Gloria Lamour on space station *Freedom*! The six of us had been living in this orbital monastery for almost two months. We were practically drooling with anticipation. I found it hard to sleep, and when I did my dreams were so vivid they were embarrassing. The other guys floated through their duties grinning and joking. We started making bets about who would be first to do what.

But Sam, normally the cheerful one, turned glum. "Old Jay-Cubed is gonna hover around her like a satellite. He's gonna keep her in the lab module and away from us. He won't let any of us get close enough for an autograph, even."

That took the starch out of us, so to speak.

The big day arrived. The orbiter *Reagan* made rendezvous with the station and docked at our main airlock. The five of us were supposed to be going about our regular tasks. Only the commander's anointed liaison man—himself—went to the airlock to greet our visitors.

Yet somehow all five of us managed to be in the command module, where all three monitor screens on the main console were focused on the airlock.

Commander Johnson stood with his back to the camera, decked out in crisp new sky-blue coveralls, standing as straight as a man can in zero-gee.

"I'll cut off the oxygen to his sleeping cubicle," muttered Larry Minetti, our life-support specialist.

"She come through the hatch yet?" Sam called. He was at my regular station, the communications console, instead of up front with us watching the screens.

"What're you doing back there?" I asked him, not taking my eyes off the screens. The hatch's locking wheel was starting to turn.

"Checking into Captain Bligh's files, what else?"

"Come on, you're gonna miss it! The hatch is opening."

Sam shot over to us like a stubby missile and stopped his momentum by grabbing Larry and me by the shoulders. He stuck his head between us.

The hatch was swung all the way open by a grinning shuttle astronaut. Two mission specialists—male—pushed a pallet loaded with equipment past the still-erect Commander Johnson. We were all erect too, with anticipation.

A nondescript woman floated through the hatch behind the mission specialists and the pallet. She was in gray coveralls. As short as Sam. Kind of a long, sour face. Not sour, exactly. Sad. Unhappy. Mousy dull brown hair plastered against her skull by a zero-gee net. Definitely not a glamorous video star.

"Must be her assistant," Al Dupres muttered.

"Her director."

"Her dog."

We stared at those screens so hard you'd think that Gloria Lamour would have appeared just out of the energy of our five palpitating, concentrating brain waves.

No such luck. The un-beautiful woman floated right up to Commander Johnson and took his hand in a firm, almost manly grip.

"Hello," she said, in a nasal Bronx accent. "Gloria Lamour is not on this trip, so don't get your hopes up."

I wish I could have seen the commander's face. But, come to think of it, he probably didn't blink an eye. Sam gagged and went over backwards into a zero-gee loop. The rest of us moaned, booed, and hollered obscenities at the screens.

Through it all I clearly heard the commander speak the little speech he had obviously rehearsed for days: "Welcome aboard space station *Freedom,* Miss Lamour. Mi casa es su casa."

Big frigging deal!

What it worked out to was this: The crabapple's name was Arlene Gold. She was a technician for the video company. She was the entire video crew, all by herself. And her palletful of equipment. She was here to shoot background footage. Was Gloria Lamour coming up later? She got very cagy about answering that one.

We got to know her pretty well over the next several days. Commander Johnson lost interest in her immediately, but although he still wouldn't let any of us go into the lab module, she had to come to the wardroom for meals. She was a New Yorker, which she pronounced "Noo Yawkeh." Testy, suspicious, always on guard. Guess I can't blame her, stuck several hundred miles up in orbit with five drooling maniacs and a commander who behaved like a robot.

But god, was she a sourpuss.

Larry approached her. "You handle zero-gee very well. Most of us got sick the first couple of days."

"What'd ya expect," she almost snarled, "screaming and fainting?"

A day or so later Rog Cranston worked up the courage to ask, "Have you done much flying?"

"Whatsit to ya?" she snapped back at him.

It only took a few days of that kind of treatment for us to shun her almost completely. When she came into the wardroom for meals we backed away and gave her the run of the galley's freezers and microwave. We made certain there was an empty table for her.

Except that Sam kept trying to strike up a conversation with her. Kept trying to make her laugh, or even smile, no matter how many times she rebuffed him. He even started doing short jokes for her, playing the buffoon, telling her how much he admired taller women. (She might have been half an inch taller than he was on the ground; it was hard to tell in zero-gee.)

Her responses ranged from "Get lost" to "Don't be such a jerk."

I pulled Sam aside after a few evenings of this and asked him when he had turned into a masochist.

Sam gave me a knowing grin. "My old pappy always told me, 'When they hand you a lemon, son, make lemonade.'"

"With *her*?"

"You see any other women up here?"

I didn't answer, but I had to admit that Larry Minetti was starting to look awfully good to me.

"Besides," Sam said, his grin turning sly, "when Gloria Lamour finally gets here, Arlene will be her guardian, won't she?"

I got it. Get close to the sourpuss and she'll let you get close to the sex goddess. There was method in Sam's madness. He seemed to spend all his spare time trying to melt Arlene's heart of steel. I thought he had even lost interest in rigging the skipper's CERV test so that it would be John J. Johnson who got fired off the station, not Sam Gunn.

Sam practically turned himself inside out for Arlene. He became elfin, a pixie, a leprechaun whenever she came to the galley or wardroom.

And it seemed to be working. She let him eat dinner at the same table with her one night.

"After all," I overheard Sam tell her, "we little people have to stick together."

"Don't get ideas," Arlene replied. But her voice had lost some of its sharp edge. She damn near smiled at Sam.

The next morning Johnson called Sam to his command console. "You are relieved of your normal duties for the next few days," the skipper said. "You will report to the lab module and assist Ms. Gold in testing her equipment."

I shot a surprised glance at Larry, who was at his console, next to mine. His eyebrows were rising up to his scalp. Sam just grinned and launched himself toward the hatch. The commander smiled crookedly at his departing back.

"So what's with you two?" I asked him a couple nights later. He had just spent eighteen hours straight in the lab module with Arlene and her video gear.

Sam cocked his head to one side. "With us? Nothing. She needs a lot of help with all that video gear. Damn studio sent her here by herself. They expect her to muscle those lasers and camera rigs around. Hell, even in zero-gee that's a job."

I got the picture. "So when Gloria Lamour finally shows up, you'll be practically part of the family."

I expected Sam to leer, or at least grin. Instead he looked kind of puzzled. "I don't know if she's coming up here at all. Arlene's pretty touchy about the subject."

Just how touchy we found out a couple nights later.

Larry and I were in the wardroom replaying Super Bowl XXIV on the computer simulator. I had lost the coin flip and gotten stuck with the Broncos. We had the sound turned 'way down so we wouldn't annoy the commander, who was staying up late, watching a video drama over in his corner: *Halloween XXXIX*.

Anyway, I had programmed an old Minnesota Vikings defense into the game, and we had sacked Montana four times already late in the first quarter. The disgusted look on his face when he climbed up from the fourth burial was so real you'd think we were watching an actual game instead of creating a simulation. The crowd was going wild.

Elway was just starting to get hot, completing three straight passes, when Arlene sailed into the wardroom, looking red in the face, really pissed off. Sam was right behind her, talking his usual blue streak.

"So what'd I say that made you so sore? How could I hurt your feelings just talking about the special-effects computer? What'd I do? What'd I say? For chrissakes, you're breaking the Fifth Amendment! The accused has got a right to be told what he did wrong. It's in the Constitution!"

Arlene whirled in mid-air and gave him a look that would have scorched a rhinoceros. "It's not the Fifth Amendment, stupid."

Sam shrugged so hard he propelled himself toward the ceiling. "So I'm not a lawyer. Sue me!"

Larry and I both reached for the *Hold* button on our tabletop keyboard. I got there first. The game stopped with the football in mid-air and Denver's wide receiver on the ten-yard line behind the Forty-Niners' free safety.

Arlene pushed herself to the galley while Sam hovered up near the ceiling, anchoring himself there by pressing the fingertips of one hand against the overhead panels. Commander Johnson did not stir from his corner, but I thought his eyes flicked from Arlene to Sam and then back to his video screen.

Before Larry and I got a chance to restart our game, Arlene squirted some hot coffee into a squeezebulb and went to the only other table in the wardroom, sailing right past Sam's dangling feet. The commander watched her. As she slipped her feet into the floor restraints he turned off his video screen and straightened up to his full height.

"Ms. Gold . . ." he began to say.

She ignored Johnson and pointed up at Sam with her free hand. "You're hanging around with your tail wagging, waiting for Gloria Lamour to get here."

"Ms. Gold," the commander said, a little louder.

Sam pushed off the ceiling. "Sure. We all are."

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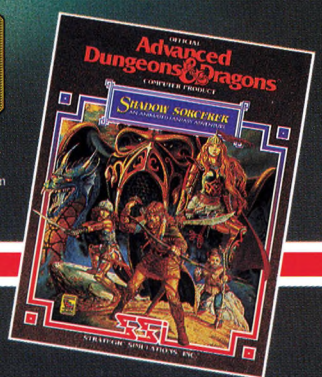


"Sure," Arlene mimicked. "We all are." She gave Larry and me a nasty stare.

Sam stopped himself about six inches off the floor. How he did that was always beyond me. Somehow he seemed able to break Newton's First Law, or at least bend it a little to make himself feel taller.

Johnson disengaged himself from his foot restraints and came out from behind his video set. He was staring at Arlene, his face pinched and narrow-eyed.

"Ms. Gold," he repeated, firmly.

Arlene ignored him. She was too busy yowling at Sam. "You're so goddamn transparent it's pathetic! You think Gloria Lamour would even bother to *glance* at a little snot like you? You think if she came up here she'd let you wipe her ass? Ha!"

"Ms. Gold, I believe you are drunk," said our fearless skipper. The look on his face was weird: disapproval, disgust, disappointment, and a little bit of disbelief.

"You're damn right I'm drunk, *mon capitan*. What th' fuck are you gonna do about it?"

Instead of exploding like a normal skipper would, the commander said with great dignity, "I will escort you to your quarters."

But he turned his beady-eyed gaze toward Sam.

Sam drifted slowly toward the skipper, bobbing along high enough to be eye-to-eye with Johnson.

"Yes, sir, she has been drinking. Vodka, I believe. I tried to stop her but she wouldn't stop," Sam said.

The commander looked utterly unconvinced.

"I have not touched a drop," Sam added. And he exhaled right into Commander Johnson's face hard enough to push himself backwards like a punctured balloon.

Johnson blinked, grimaced, and looked for a moment like he was going to throw up. "I will deal with you later, Mr. Gunn," he muttered. Then he turned to Arlene again and took her by the arm. "This way, Ms. Gold."

She made a little zero-gee curtsey. "Thank you, Commander Johnson. I'm glad that there is at least one gentleman aboard this station." And she shot Sam a killer stare.

"Not at all," said the commander, patting her hand as it rested on his arm. He looked down at her in an almost grandfatherly way. Arlene smiled up at him and allowed Commander Johnson to tow her toward the hatch.

Then he made his big mistake.

"And tell me, Ms. Gold," said the skipper, "just when will Gloria Lamour arrive here?"

Arlene's face twisted into something awful. "You too? You too! That's all you bastards are thinking about, isn't it? When's your favorite wet dream going to get here?"

The commander sputtered. "Ms. Gold, I assure you . . ."

She pulled free of his arm, sending herself spinning across the wardroom. She grabbed a table and yelled at all of us:

"Lemme tell you somethin', lover boys. Gloria Lamour ain't comin' up here at all. Never! This is as good as it gets, studs. What you see is what you got!"

The commander had to haul her through the hatch. We could hear her yelling and raving all the way down the connecting passageway to the lab module.

"Where'd she get the booze?" Larry asked.

"Brought it up with her," said Sam. "She's been drinking since five o'clock. Something I said ticked her off."

"Never mind that." I got straight to the real problem. "Is she serious about Gloria Lamour not coming up here?"

Sam nodded glumly.

"Aw, shit," moaned Larry.

I felt like somebody had shot Santa Claus.

"There isn't any Gloria Lamour," Sam said, his voice so low that I thought maybe I hadn't heard him right.

"No Gloria Lamour?"

"Whaddya mean?"

Sam steadied himself with a hand on the edge of our table. "Just what I said. There isn't any such person as Gloria Lamour."

"That's her show-business name."

"She's not real!" Sam snapped. "She's a simulation. Computer graphics, just like your damn football game."

"But . . ."

"All the publicity about her . . ."

"All faked. Gloria Lamour is the creation of a Hollywood talent agency and some bright computer kids. It's supposed to be a secret, but Arlene spilled it to me after she'd had a few drinks."

"A simulation?" Larry looked crushed. "Computer graphics can do that? She looked so . . . so *real*."

"She's just a bunch of algorithms, pal." Sam seemed more sober than I had ever seen him. "Arlene's her 'director.' She programs in all her moves."

"The damn bitch," Larry growled. "She could've let us know. Instead of building up our expectations like this."

"It's supposed to be a secret," Sam repeated.

"Yeah, but she should've let us in on it. It's not fair! It's just not fair!"

Sam gave him a quizzical little half-smile. "Imagine how she's been feeling, watching the six of us—even old Jay-Cubed—waiting here with our tongues hanging out. Not paying any attention to her, just waiting for this dream—this computerized doll. No wonder she got sore."

I shook my head. The whole thing was too weird for me.

Sam was muttering, "I tried to tell her that I liked her, that I was interested in her for her own sake."

"She saw through that," Larry said.

"Yeah . . ." Sam looked toward the hatch. Everything was quiet now. "Funny thing is, I was getting to like her. I really was."

"Her? The Bronx ball-breaker?"

"She's not that bad once she lets herself relax a little."

"She sure didn't look relaxed tonight," I said.

Sam agreed with a small nod. "She never got over the idea that I was after Gloria Lamour, not her."

"Well, weren't you?"

"At first, yeah, sure. But . . ."

Larry made a sour face. "But once she told you there wasn't any Gloria Lamour, you were willing to settle for her, right?"

I chimed in, "You were ready to make lemonade."

For once in his life Sam fell silent. Almost. "I don't know," he mumbled. "I don't think so."

The skipper came back into the wardroom, fixed Sam with a firing-squad stare.

"Lights out, gentlemen. Gunn, you return to your normal duties tomorrow. Ms. Gold will finish her work here by herself and depart in two days."

Sam's only reply was a glum "Yes, sir."

The next morning when we started our shift in the command module, Sam looked terrible. As if he hadn't slept all night. Yet there was a hint of a twinkle in his eye. He kept his face straight, because the skipper was watching him like a hawk. But he gave me a quick wink at precisely ten o'clock.

I know the exact time for two reasons.

First, Commander Johnson punched up the interior camera view of the lab module and muttered, "Ten in the morning and she's not at work yet."

"She must be under the weather, sir," Sam said in a funny kind of stiff, military way of talking. Like he was rehearsing for a role in a war video or trying to get on the skipper's good side. (Assuming he had one.)

"She must be hung over as hell," Al Dupres muttered to me.

"I suppose I should call her on the intercom and wake her up," the commander said. "After all, if she's only got two more days—"

"Emergency! Emergency!" called the computer's synthesized female voice. "Prepare to abandon the station. All personnel to Crew Emergency Re-entry Vehicles. All personnel to Crew Emergency Re-entry Vehicles. Prepare to abandon the station."

Bells and klaxons started going off all over the place. The emergency siren was wailing so loud you could barely hear yourself think. Through it all the computer kept repeating the abandon-ship message. The computer's voice was calm but urgent. The six of us were urgent, but definitely not calm.

"But I postponed the test!" Commander Johnson yelled at his computer screen. It was filled with big block letters in red, spelling out what the synthesizer was saying.

Larry and the others were already diving for the hatch that led to the nearest CERV. They had no idea that this was supposed to be a drill.

I hesitated only a moment. Then I remembered Sam's wink a minute earlier. And the little sonofagun was already flying down the connecting passageway toward the lab module like a red-topped torpedo.

"I postponed the goddamn test!" Johnson still roared at his command console, over the noise of all the warning hoots and wails. Sure he did. But Sam had spent the night rerigging it.

The station had four CERVs, each of them big enough to hold six people. Typical agency over-design, you might think. But the lifeboats were spotted at four different locations, so no matter where on the station you might be, there was a CERV close enough to save your neck and big enough to take the whole crew with you, if necessary.

They were round unglamorous spheres, sort of like the early Russian manned re-entry vehicles. Nothing inside except a lot of padding and safety harnesses. The idea was you belted off the station, propelled by cold gas jets; then the CERV's onboard computer automatically fired a set of retro rockets and started beeping out an emergency signal so the people on the ground could track where you landed.

The sphere was covered with ablative heat-shielding. After re-entry it popped parachutes to plop you gently on the ocean or the ground, wherever. There was also a final descent rocket to slow your fall down to almost zero.

I caught up with Larry and the other guys inside the CERV and told them to take it easy.

"This is just a drill," I said, laughing.

Rog Cranston's face was dead white. "A drill?" He had already buckled himself into his harness.

"You sure?" Larry asked. He was buckled in, too. So was Al.

"Do you see the skipper in here?" I asked, hovering nonchalantly in the middle of the capsule.

Al said, "Yeah. We're all buttoned up, but we haven't been fired off the station."

Just at that moment we felt a jolt like somebody had whanged the capsule with the world's biggest hammer. I went slamming face first into the padded bulkhead, just missing a head-on collision with Larry by about an inch.

"Holy shit!" somebody yelled.

I was plastered flat against the padding, my nose bleeding and my body feeling like it weighed ten tons.

"A drill, my ass!"

It was like going over Niagara Falls in a barrel, only worse. After half a minute that seemed like half a year, the gee force let up and we were weightless again. I fumbled with shaking hands into one of the empty harnesses. My nose was stuffed up with blood that couldn't run out in zero-gee and I thought I was going to strangle to death. Then we started feeling heavy again. The whole damn capsule started to shake like we were inside a food processor, and blood sprayed from my aching nose like a garden sprinkler.

And through it all I had this crazy notion that I could still hear Commander Johnson's voice wailing, "But I postponed the drill!"

We were shaken, rattled, and frazzled all the way down. The worst part of it, of course, was that the flight was totally beyond our control. We just hung in those harnesses like four sides of beef while the capsule automatically went through re-entry and parachuted us into the middle of a soccer field in Brazil. There was a game going on at the time, although we could see nothing because the capsule had neither windows nor exterior TV cameras.

Apparently our final retro-rocket blast singed the referee, much to the delight of the crowd.

Sam's CERV had been shot off the station, too, we found out later. With Arlene Gold aboard. Only the skipper remained aboard the space station, still yelling that he had postponed the test.

Sam's long ride back to Earth must have been even

tougher than ours. He wound up in the hospital with a wrenched back and dislocated shoulder. He landed in the Australian outback, no less, but it took the Aussies only a couple of hours to reach him in their rescue VTOLs, once the agency gave them the exact tracking data. Arlene was shaken up a bit but otherwise unhurt.

The agency had no choice but to abort our mission and bring Commander Johnson back home at once. Popping the two CERVs was grounds for six months' worth of intense investigation. Three Congressional committees, OSHA and even the EPA eventually got into the act. Thank God for Sam's ingenuity, though. Nobody was able to find anything except an unexplained malfunction of the CERV ejection thrusters. The agency wound up spending seventeen million dollars redesigning the damn thing.

As soon as we finished our debriefings, I took a few days' leave and hustled over to the hospital outside San Antonio where they were keeping Sam.

I could hear that he was okay before I ever saw him. At the nurses' station half a block away from his room I could hear him yammering. Nurses were scurrying down the hall, some looking frightened, most sort of grinning to themselves.

Sam was flat on his back, his left arm in a cast that stuck straight up toward the ceiling. ". . . And I want a pizza, with extra pepperoni!" he was yelling at a nurse who was leaving the room just as I tried to come in. We bumped in the doorway. She was young, kind of pretty.

"He can't eat solid foods while he's strapped to the board," she said to me. As if I had anything to do with it. The refreshment I was smuggling in for Sam was liquid, hidden under my flight jacket.

Sam took one look at me and said, "I thought your nose was broken."

"Naw, just bloodied a little."

Then he quickly launched into a catalogue of the hospital's faults: bedpans kept in the freezer, square needles, liquid foods, unsympathetic nurses.

"They keep the young ones buzzing around here all day," he complained, "but when it comes time for my sponge bath they send in Dracula's mother-in-law."

I pulled up the room's only chair. "So how the hell are you?"

"I'll be okay. If this damn hospital doesn't kill me first."

"You rigged the CERVs, didn't you?" I asked, dropping my voice low.

Sam grinned. "How did our noble skipper like being left all alone up there?"

"The agency had to send a shuttle to pick him up, all by himself."

"The cost accountants must love him."

"The word is he's going to be reassigned to the tracking station at Ascension Island."

Sam chuckled. "It's not exactly Pitcairn, but it's kind of poetic anyway."

I worked up the nerve to ask him: "What happened?"

"What happened?"

"In the CERV. How rugged was the flight? How'd you get hurt? What happened with Arlene?"

Sam's face clouded. "She's back in L.A. Didn't even wait around long enough to see if I would live or die."

"Must've been a punishing flight," I said.

"I wouldn't know," Sam muttered.

"What do you mean?"

Sam blew an exasperated sigh toward the ceiling. "We were screwing all the way down to the ground. How do you think I threw my back out?"

"You and Arlene? The Bronx ball-breaker made out with you?"

"Yeah," he said. Then, "No."

I felt kind of stunned, surprised, confused.

"You know the helmets we use in flight simulations?" Sam asked. "The kind that flash computer graphic visuals on your visor so you're seeing the situation the computer is cooking up?"

I must have nodded.

Staring at the ceiling, he continued, "Arlene brought two of them into the lifeboat with us. And her Gloria Lamour tapes."

"You were seeing Gloria Lamour . . . ?"

"It was like being with Gloria Lamour," Sam said, his voice almost shaking, kind of hollow. "Just like being with her."

"No shit?"

"It was like nothing else in the world, man. She was fantastic. And it was all in zero-gee. Most of it, anyway. The landing was rough. That's when I popped my damn shoulder."

"God almighty, Sam. She must have fallen for you after all. For her to do that for you . . ."

His face went sour. "Yeah, she fell for me so hard she took the first flight from Sydney to L.A. I'll never hear from her again."

"But—jeez, if she gave you Gloria Lamour . . ."

"Yeah, sure." I had never seen Sam so bitter. "I just wonder who the hell was programmed in *her* helmet." ✦

Aristodemos

Lois Tilton

Illustration by Doug Chaffee

I never meant to be there for his execution. Didn't want any part of that kind of spectacle. But, you know, it isn't so easy to turn down a man's last request—no matter if he was the enemy.

"He asked for me?" For the third time I read through the note, still disbelieving, then looked up at the messenger from the War Office, whose eyes were having trouble meeting mine.

"Uh, yes, Sir. I mean, Sergeant. That was the message."

Of course it was the message. I could *read* the damned message, couldn't I? For a second I almost took it out on the stupid clerk, standing there trying to swallow his embarrassment. Calls himself a soldier; what does he know about it?

Besides, this whole business was supposed to be over, anyway. Would have been, except for me. If only I'd taken that last shot when I had the chance.

The government had sent us to Sparta as a peacekeeping force. Not that there was any chance for peace, not after Blue Mountain. Luckily, the brass decided to cut our losses and pull us offworld before it got any worse. The politicians

threw a treaty together, called it peace, and never looked back.

I was there when they signed it, all the politicians and brass making a ceremony of the occasion, with us heroes as an honor guard, shined up in our dress uniforms, wearing our medals. We were all survivors of Blue Mountain, four of us with the Valor Badge we earned that night. Our soldiers and theirs, as if nothing had ever happened, as if the conquest wasn't going to start up again all over once we were out of the way. But the treaty was official, and what happened afterward wasn't our concern. Not any more.

We were on the last ship off Sparta with all the diplomats and high command, headed home. A lot of brass on that one ship. A few of us soldiers. And one stowaway Spartan.

First thing we realized something was wrong was around 0700 shiptime the next day, lining up for breakfast outside the troops' galley. It was then, mentally taking roll, that somebody noticed Erskine was missing. Right then and there we did a quick checkdown. Everyone else was accounted for. Erskine had been seen onboard, strapped in for takeoff, but no one remembered seeing him since we went to quarters. All his gear was in one place.

Ship's command, when we reported him missing, wasn't too concerned. If the man was somewhere on the ship, they seemed to think, he'd turn up sooner or later.

We knew better. Erskine wasn't ship's crew; he was a veteran of the Spartan campaign, of Blue Mountain. You don't drop those survival habits the minute you step onto the deck of a transport.

No, I could remember too many nights lying awake, rigid and sweating, straining to listen to every sound out there in those hills. We had all the technology—perimeter scans, IR imaging, tripfields surrounding every outpost. Didn't matter, any of it. They could get through. Did get through. Too many mornings, too many sentries with their throats cut. Worse. Just to prove they could do it, just to remind us we weren't safe, no matter what.

Not even the transport. Something cold crawled down my spine, and I *knew*, standing there, what had gotten onto the ship. All of us did. We just looked at each other and went for our guns.

Of course it's standing regulations—nobody carries weapons on board a transport. But there was no way any of us planned to be caught unarmed, not after Blue Mountain. Within minutes of learning Erskine was missing, we were spread out through the ship's corridors, searching.

Ship's command didn't care for that. They sent their Security to arrest us, confiscate our guns, lock us up. But ship's Security wasn't ready to confront veterans of the Spartan campaign, especially when we had them outgunned. When it came down to it, they weren't ready to fire—and they knew we were.

After that, they called in the military brass—some staff general—to order us to lay down our arms and go back to quarters. "Look," we told him, "we've just got AP's, we're not going to blow a hole in the hull." Some of us, in fact, did have more than just AP's, but we figured they didn't need to know about that. "The thing is, Erskine's missing; there's no way he walked off the ship, and that means someone got him, and now he's probably wearing Erskine's uniform, so Security wouldn't be able to recognize him until it's too late."

The general muttered something about mutiny, but we ignored him. Like I said, there were four of us with the Valor Badge on that ship, and I guess they knew how it would look if they tried to arrest us all, being the heroes we were. Anyway, the brass collectively came around to our way of thinking after we found Erskine's uniform stuffed into a storage locker on top of a dead Security man. His neck was broken and his own uniform was missing. And his weapon too, of course. The intruder was armed now, if he hadn't been before. Whoever he was. And none of us had any doubt on that point.

Suddenly alarms were ringing in all the corridors. Suddenly mutiny wasn't the problem any more. Now there was an enemy on the ship, doubtless bent on sabotage. Security teams were running down the corridor in the direction of the drive core. If it blew, there'd be nothing left of the ship and every man on it but a thin cloud of superheated gas.

Except they were too late. By the time the alarm sounded, both of the Security men guarding the drive chamber were lying dead on the floor outside and the enemy had locked himself in. The alarms clanged, warning transportees and nonessential crew to get to quarters and activate their section seals.

"Lot of good that'll be if the core blows," I grumbled to Captain Becker, who had commanded my company at Blue Mountain.

The ship's comm sounded before he could answer, summoning him up to the bridge. "Shit," he muttered. We looked at each other. It seemed like the ship's brass had realized that combat troops had their proper place in the scheme of things, after all.

I followed Becker out of long-standing habit up to the bridge, where the ship's officers had their heads together with the military brass—all staff types, like the general who'd threatened us with mutiny less than an hour before. No more of that shit now. The briefing was quick and simple. It was basically a problem of time, to get to the enemy before he could work through the failsafes on the drive core and set it off. No doubting that was his plan—Spartans always did like the dramatic suicidal gesture. Blue Mountain had proved that.

I studied the layout of the drive chamber with Becker, frowning. "We can blow that door? That's safe?"

The engineer shook his head. "Don't have to. The bridge has an override on the lock."

Good news. Of course, if the ship's designers had used the same foresight when they installed the core chamber's ventilation system, they wouldn't be needing assault troops.

"Anyway, you could set off an HE charge right in the core and nothing would happen, not with the failsafes intact."

Theoretically reassured, I made note of an exchange tank just inside the chamber door that looked like it would provide good cover. And those big coils, along both walls. Even with the safeties intact, it made me nervous, thinking about a firefight with all that explosive potential around me.

Security interrupted. "What if he's got some of the Engineering crew in there with him?"

Becker shook his head. This wasn't a hostage situation, it was a take-that-guy-out-before-he-can-blow-us-all-to-hell situation.

I assembled a squad of our best men and Becker briefed them quickly. "We figure he's got three 18-gauge AP's off the dead security man, at least. Once we're in and we've got him pinned down, time's on our side. As long as we keep him busy, chances are he won't be able to finagle the safeties on the core."

The troops nodded, measuring that door with their eyes. Our own AP's were heavier, 12-gauge, overkill for a confined space like the drive chamber, but none of us minded the advantage, not if that was a Spartan in there.

"Ready?"

I glanced over at Becker. There was that too-familiar sick feeling in my gut, and my palms were tingling, sweaty. Frontal assault, right into enemy fire, and just hope one of us survives to get through to him. Shit, no, I wasn't ready. You're never ready for something like this. You go in anyway, when you have to.

Just the way the Spartans had gone in at Blue Mountain, right into our guns. And over them. So now it was our turn.

Then Becker gave the signal and there was the dull metal click of the override release on the lock, the hiss of the door seals parting. We started firing as soon as the door had slid back a few centimeters—too risky to throw in a grenade, if he had the safety systems dismantled in there. Of course, if he did, it might be too late for all of us, but there wasn't time to think of that right then.

Return fire came at us from the doorway, the distinctive crackling blue flare of an AP. The brass were all out of sight back on the bridge. This was our show. We crouched against the walls on either side of the door, watching the opening grow wider as the heavy door slid along its tracks. From the direction of his fire, I was getting a good idea of the Spartan's position, behind that damned exchanger tank—you could have hidden half a squad behind that thing.

The question was, what was he doing back there? How far had he gotten bypassing the failsafes? How much time did we have?

Maybe not enough. Becker signaled for covering fire. I opened up, the rest of the squad did, and he went through the door. Van Hagen, opposite me, went next. I took a breath, gripped my gun, and followed them, diving toward the cover of the first coil along the right wall.

A glance told me that Becker was down. Van Hagen too, behind the coil on the other side of the chamber; hit in the legs, it looked like. The Spartan was concentrating fire in the doorway. Another man came through, went down. But Van Hagen was opening up from his position, and he had the Spartan pinned.

Crawling, I moved closer to the exchanger, passing behind the second coil. One meter, another, low, quiet, not drawing fire. The rest of the squad was keeping him busy from the doorway. One more meter, and I could see the blue flash from the barrel of his gun. Getting closer. Almost . . . But just then he spotted me, and blue fire hit the coil just half a meter from my face. I swore, flinging myself awkwardly back. Damn. Almost close enough.

I lay there, cursing silently in frustration that I couldn't see what else he was doing back there. My hand went to the E/F grenade in my belt pouch—strictly unauthorized. The risk. But I remembered what Engineering had said about the failsafes. And if the Spartan had already managed to bypass them, well, none of us would likely still be there.

Another blue flash hit the coil, half-blinding me for an instant. If I was wrong, if he'd already taken out the safeties, I'd never even have the time to realize my mistake.

I pulled the grenade free, blinking my eyes to clear my vision, weighing the risk one more time.

The grenade arced up, three meters over the top of the tank while I ducked down holding my breath, flat on the floor as if the coil could protect me from a core explosion. Then a blast slammed me up against the wall, my eardrums imploded, but in an instant I was up on my feet running around to the other side of the exchanger.

I thought at first he was dead; he was so still, with a thin line of blood trickling from his ears down the side of his neck. I kicked his weapons away, spinning them across the floor, and then leaned back against the tank, still wobbly from the effect of the blast.

And his eyes blinked. I tightened my grip on my gun, half-depressed the firing stud. . . .

And didn't shoot. On the floor at my feet, his eyes drifted in shock, seeking a focus. Finding one. They were black, his eyes, wide open, meeting mine, holding them. He took a shaking breath, to say . . .

Then there were men rushing up at me, and I turned around. A couple minutes more, and ship's security was there; then the brass showed up to take over. I backed off, let them have him.

That was the first time I thought it was over.

There was a funeral with honors for Becker, Van Hagen and the others. The rest of us got more medals and all of that.

I took a long leave afterward, out to the islands where my brother has a boat, spent the weeks floating on the water with the waves rocking the hull, hat shading my face. Ask me what peace is, I can't come much closer than that.

But the newslinks reach out to the islands, and so I couldn't help hearing the reports. Even before our transport had docked, the Spartan government had denied any involvement in the incident. The terrorist, if he was in fact a Spartan (and did we have actual proof that he was?), hadn't been acting under any orders of theirs.

Sure.

Oh, officially, we believed them. Both sides had too much interest in the current peace. But the whole thing had left a bad taste in my mouth. I knew the words: expendable, deniable. Write the incident off and forget the man.

Then came the trial, which was an embarrassment to our government, because the prisoner wouldn't speak, refused even to give his name, let alone admit he was a Spartan operative. And that raised even more questions in my mind, because I knew what kind of resources our interrogators have, the drugs, and what it would take for a man to resist.

I was recalled to testify at the trial, recited my version of the events with that silent figure sitting under heavy guard in the prisoner's dock, never taking his eyes off me. Not an expression on his face, not hate or regret, nothing but that blank stare.

But the show took its preordained course, and the sentence surprised nobody. Then came the messenger from the War Office, and I realized that it wasn't over, hadn't been over at all.

I admit, the thought did cross my mind that it might be some kind of Spartan trick, some kind of revenge. But, like I said, it was his last request, and if he wanted me to witness his execution, I guess I couldn't deny him that.

But why? Why did he want his enemy to watch him die? The night before, every time I shut my eyes I could see his face there on the floor of the drive chamber, staring up at me. That intake of breath before he said—what?

For some reason, formal military executions traditionally take place on the Parade Ground of the War Academy. Maybe they want to give the cadets something to think about while they drill. At any rate, security was tight for the event, but I was admitted with no trouble, escorted past a battery of news cameras up into a small reviewing stand with room for just a dozen seats. Most were already occupied, with generals, War Office officials and the like. They gave me a glance as I went to my own seat, some of them frowning when they saw my rank—and the Valor Badge. I'd made sure to wear it, that day.

It wasn't long before they brought him out. Everyone's head turned toward the armory door when it opened. There were six guards ahead of him and six behind, and he walked alone between them so you might almost think they were an honor guard. He was facing straight forward, but as he came closer I could see his eyes glancing in the direction of the reviewing stand, and his face was tight, anxious. The his eyes met mine, recognition lit them and, I swear, relief. He straightened, lifted his head.

This was wrong, I thought suddenly. It wasn't right to let him die like this, with only enemies to witness.

The firing squad was already drawn up at the end of the parade ground, and they positioned him about twenty meters away. There were no restraints or blindfolds. He stood alone, back very straight, face forward. God, I thought, would I have been able to stand there like that?

The guards stepped back away. My hands were clenched tight, damp with sweat. My eyes were locked on his, my breath was caught in my throat.

The officer in command of the squad gave an order; the weapons came up, bore on their target. I wanted to do something, say something to stop it, but there was a blue-white flash, almost invisible in the sunlight, and his body convulsed, caught in the energy bursts, unable for a single prolonged second to let itself fall.

Finally I could look away, let out my breath. It was over.

So quick and easy to kill a man. You'd think, after all the killing I'd seen, after Blue Mountain, this one death wouldn't have shaken me like it did, that I might even have wanted to see him die, for Becker's sake, and all the rest of them. But did it bring any of them back?

Some of the officials in the stand next to me looked like they were going to be sick. I hoped so. Men like that, they sit behind their desks and send soldiers out to die. Let them see for once what it looked like. Abruptly, I stood up, pushed past them, wanting only to get as far away from that place as I could.

But I was wrong a second time, thinking it was over. I'd forgotten about the funeral. This time I was the only witness, the only one besides the chaplain and the burial detail. It was his enemies who lay the Spartan flag over the plain, unmarked coffin. The ceremony was short before they laid him in the ground. Alien ground, and not even a name to mark his grave.

Just as I was turning away, the officer in charge of the burial detail came up to me. "Sergeant? He left this for you, if you came."

I took the packet, observed that it was sealed, wondered at that for a moment before I slit it open. There was a folded paper inside, and in it—a braid made of maybe two dozen strands of hair, plaited tightly into a knot. Black hair. His own, I had no doubt.

I stared at it, then looked again at the paper. A single word written on it: Aristodemos.

"His name?" I asked the lieutenant. "Shouldn't it be on the marker?"

He shrugged. "Could be. It sounds Spartan, I guess. They never could get a name out of him, you know."

"There ought to be something," I said, looking down at the unmarked, nameless grave. "Some name, at least."

But why—I opened my hand and stared again at the braided knot of black hair. Why leave it with me?

Back at my quarters, I accessed the database and got part of the answer. It was part of Spartan history, the old Sparta that had been on Earth five thousand years ago, that they're trying to recreate. There'd been a famous battle there, that long ago, three hundred men of Sparta against the entire empire of the Persians, and all three hundred killed, down to the last man.

Except for one. Except for Aristodemos.

The note read: *When Aristodemos came home to Sparta, he was met everywhere with reproaches and insults; no Spartan would give him a spark to light his fire, or speak to him. They called him the Craven, who shook with fear. But at the battle of Plataea he redeemed his honor.*

And in my mind, I was there again, at Blue Mountain, crouched behind the controls of my gun, seeing them coming at us, wave after wave of them. Frontal assault, right into the guns of the enemy. Thirty thousand dead, the Spartans claimed later, all fallen in that one insane night. To the last man.

I knew, then. I knew it all. He had been there, too.

People forget so fast. How many years has it been now—fifteen? Ask about Blue Mountain and all they remember is the thirty thousand Spartan dead. No one remembers the casualties on our side. They forget that the Spartans overran all our outposts—all but one—and came close to wiping out the whole expeditionary force. Ten thousand dead, at least, but the Spartans lost them *all*. Not a single man would retreat or surrender, not even when it was obvious that they'd lost. Afterward, they made that battle, that defeat, into a legend, used it to mobilize their whole population and throw it against us until the brass finally recognized what was happening and pulled us offplanet.

Blue Mountain. The thirty thousand dead. And they couldn't forgive him for surviving.

It would have ruined the new myth the Spartans were so carefully trying to create. Was he a coward? Did he run? I don't suppose I'll ever know. Or whether they'd ordered him onto our ship or if that was just his own way of trying to redeem his honor.

I should have fired, that moment back on the ship. Maybe that's what he was trying to tell me.

I tried to put it all behind me. I was reassigned to a training company, to stand there all shined up with my medals around my neck so the recruits could see what a real hero looked like. But there weren't many recruits, and less need any more for heroes. After the Spartan treaty, the pacifists had taken over the government, the noninterventionists. After a year or so, I put in my resignation, folded my uniform, put my medals away on the back shelf—they had *meant* something once, but no more.

I tried a couple jobs—I still wasn't that much past forty—but none of them seemed to work out, and I had my pension to live on. So I drifted for a few years.

But always there was the reminder, that braided knot of black hair that I never put away. Somehow, I knew it wasn't over yet, that there was still something I had to do.

My chance came unexpectedly. The Spartans had completed a battlefield memorial at Blue Mountain, and they were inviting some of the survivors of the other side to witness the dedication ceremonies. There were people who wondered, with the conquest of their whole world finally behind them, why the Spartans would choose to commemorate such a defeat as Blue Mountain, but I understood. No victory could ever mean so much, not to them.

It was a shock, though, finding myself back in that place. These mountains—that blue-gray color fading into the haze that always seemed to crown the summits, the unforgettable sharp cool scent of the forests. If I shut my eyes, it was almost as if time had shut down and I was back in our outpost, with the quad-barrel firing, lighting up the night like a blue vision of hell as the enemy attacked—so many of them! Falling, dying—how could they keep on coming?

And the next morning, when it was finally quiet, climbing over the bodies, heaped in places three or four deep in front of our guns. But the outpost had held. We had held and we had won.

I opened my eyes, shaken by the memory. Peace was all around me. The Spartans had turned the whole valley into a memorial to the Thirty Thousand. Rows and rows of bronze grave markers set flush into the turf, the ranks filling the valley.

It was a beautiful day, a kind of deep blue, almost purple sky, with the sunlight reflecting off the polished bronze. All my senses were on edge as I walked around the place, trying to visualize just where our position had been, the gun emplacement. On a hill overlooking the valley there was a display of weapons, ours and theirs, and I stared for a long time at a quad-barrel, caringly restored, wondering if it might have been mine.

There were lines of school kids all over the place, like kids on any world, except these were in uniform. But on Sparta the whole population seemed to be in uniform. I thought, how many kids ever visited the war memorial at home?

I walked down through the ranks of bronze markers, reading the names one by one. Spartan names. In my pocket, my fingers closed around a knotted braid of black hair. Not Aristodemos, not a name a Spartan could ever be proud to bear.

In the center of the valley was a monument, a bronze figure of a man, three times life-sized. He wore armor, breastplate and a crested helmet, carried a shield and spear. With difficulty I made out the inscription, the strange, angular letters: LEONIDAS. And below: *Go tell the Spartans that here we lie, in obedience to their command.*

The same words that had been written five thousand years ago on another monument, on another world, where three hundred men had died. And one had survived.

At the battle of Plataea he redeemed his honor. Of all the Spartans, by far the greatest courage was shown by Aristodemos, who suffered the disgrace of surviving at Thermopylae. But the Spartans argued that his courage had been that of a madman, leaving his position and rushing forward in order to die before his comrades' eyes and redeem himself. And so Aristodemos alone was buried without honors.

In a nameless, unmarked grave in alien soil.

The way he had stood, straight, facing the firing squad. With only his enemies to witness his death. And that one small part of himself, the legacy he had left me, because he had no one else.

I came back at night, past the ranks of the silent dead. While the cold bronze eyes of the ancient Spartan general watched, I cut into the turf at the base of the monument and laid the black braided knot in Spartan soil.

Buried without honors. I had brought him home, but I couldn't give him back his own name.

I can only tell the Spartans how he died. ✦

Gunfight at Bertha's Saloon

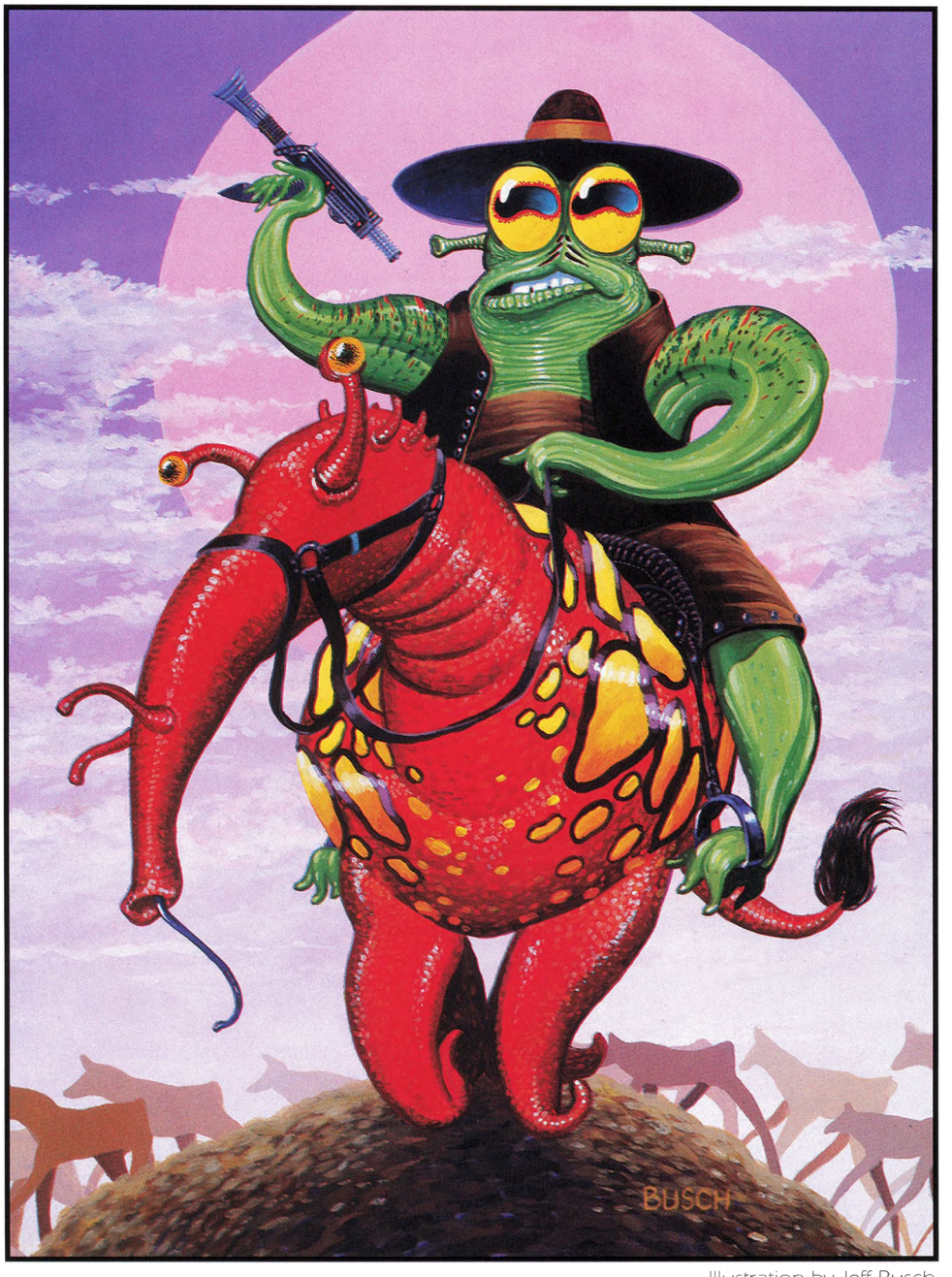


Illustration by Jeff Busch

Thomas R. McDonough

Introduction

The following is a retranslation of an American western called "Gunfight at Bertha's Saloon." It was broadcast as a radio show back in the twentieth century. This broadcast, like many of that century, traveled through the Earth's ionosphere and into interstellar space. Fifty-nine years later, those signals were intercepted by the civilization of Beta Ceti VII. The Beta Cetians then translated it into their native language and rebroadcast it for their own entertainment. Fifty-nine years after that, we intercepted their rebroadcast of this program, retranslated it into English, condensed it, and are here presenting the transcript for the first time in one hundred eighteen years.

It is with special pride that we now present this long-lost part of our cultural heritage.

GUNFIGHT AT BERTHA'S SALOON

Big Jack McGinty rode into town, looking for Dirty Dan LaRue. The tall, sunburnt being sat astride a mighty quadrupedal beast with a great, elongated head, which the natives called a horse. Both creatures breathed gaseous oxygen, with which the planet was covered abundantly. Big Jack's profession was that of a cowboy, an inhabitant who specialized in the organization and administration of four-legged, land-dwelling grazing creatures.

On Big Jack's own head was a great helmet, called a cowboy hat. The helmet had a flat circular base extending far beyond the protrusions of his auditory sensory apparatus. The helmet protected him from the carcinogenic golden rays of the local G2 star which the natives called The Sun, around which this planet moved in an elliptical orbit with an eccentricity of 0.017 and a semimajor axis of eight light-minutes.

Suddenly, Big Jack spotted Dirty Dan, recognizing him by the black cowboy hat and matching carpet of dead tentacles called hairs that sprouted on his face, forming a pattern called a beard. The being was emerging from Bertha's Saloon, a communal fueling station. By the erratic ambulatory behavior of the man, Big Jack could tell that Dirty Dan had recently refueled.

"Whoa!" shouted Big Jack to his horse, using the horsian dialect which he had learned as a young being in the metropolis of Laredo, located nine days of horse travel away, in a south-easterly direction (using the traditional planet-centered coordinate system based on the axis defined by the rotation of that world).

"You still around?" spat Dirty Dan. "I thought I told you to leave these coordinates!"

"I altered my decision matrix. I did not like the style with which you communicated your recommendation. I decided to adhere for an indefinite interval."

Dirty Dan shouted, "You've got twenty-four hours to get out of this colony!"

Big Jack knew that twenty-four hours equaled one planetary rotation—a mere three hundred sixty-fifth of an orbital period—so not much time was left in which to accomplish other business. For a moment, he mulled over the curious time-system the natives used, based on multiples of twelve. Why the normally ten-fingered, ten-toed creatures used a time-system based on twelve was a mystery he was determined to one day solve. And why one hour was equal to sixty minutes was even more tantalizing. Some day, he swore to himself, I will find the answers!

Dirty Dan jumped on his horse and accelerated away.

Big Jack disembarked from his stationary horse, attaching the cable with which he controlled the animal to a post in the ground made from dead cellulose formed by vegetation that grew in certain parts of the planet. By fastening the cable to the cellulose, he knew he would constrain the motion of the horse so that there was a high probability that the animal could be located when next it was needed.

He walked to the entrance of the fueling station, where there was a pair of hatches pivoted on vertical hinges. Instinctively, he pushed the hatches with his torso, knowing that the force would create a torque causing the hatches to swing inward. So clever was the design that the same operation would cause them to move outward when exiting. Big Jack wondered for a moment whether they were microprocessor-controlled, then added that to his list of mysteries.

He stopped for a moment to permit his stereoscopic ocular apparatus to adjust to the decreased intensity of the ambient lighting. Gradually, he perceived a female of the species seated on a small platform in front of what he recognized was a bar—a place where fuels of various permutations of substances dissolved in ethyl alcohol were purveyed for ingestion by the natives for hallucinogenic and disinhibitionary purposes.

He knew immediately that she was a female, because instead of the two-legged coverings of dead skins and vegetation worn by males of the species, she wore over her chassis an intricate, conical sequence of woven vegetation called a dress. He remembered that there were only two sexes on this planet, and he noted that she was especially attractive by native standards, having two exceptionally voluminous mammary glands, partially exposed by the cut of her vegetation. Voluminous mammary glands, he recalled, are thought to be signs of unusual fertility, and are much prized.

"Big Jack McGinty!" she exclaimed.

He nodded. "How did you know my name?" he asked casually.

"Ever since you killed Quick-Draw Slivowitz, your fame has spread far and wide. Everyone's seen your visual representation in the cellulose data-transmission medium."

He approached her. "I see," he said, "that you have exceptionally voluminous mammary glands."

"Yes, I do," she replied proudly. "Many males of my species have praised my mammary glands."

He looked beyond her. Behind the bar was a native called a bartender, wearing the traditional markings of that tribe: hairs sprouting along the sides of the face. "A glass of Red-Eye," he said to the bartender, naming a particularly effective solution of ethyl alcohol. The bartender began to pour liquid from a transparent vessel. Being denser than the atmosphere, the liquid flowed down into a smaller transparent container.

Big Jack picked up the small container in one of his two manipulators and brought it to his face. But before he could complete the fluid transfer, there was a noise outside.

Suddenly Dirty Dan re-entered Bertha's Saloon. He looked at Big Jack and said, "I've changed my mind. Twenty-four hours is too damn much. This habitat is not sufficiently spacious for the two of us!"

Big Jack replaced the fluid on the bar, oriented his visual sensors toward Dirty Dan and replied, "Raise the corners of your fuel-input port in an affectionate manner when you say that, business associate!"

Replied Dirty Dan: "You are not anything but a low-altitude, scaly, legless, sometimes venomous reptile having a long, tapering, cylindrical body, whose digestive zone is of a yellow spectral type!"

"I am exiting this fueling station," said Big Jack, "before I do something I'll regret." He starting moving on his two lower extremities, walking past Dirty Dan toward the swinging hatches.

Dirty Dan pulled a chemically propelled projectile-ejection machine from its compartment on his thorax and aimed it at Big Jack. Big Jack, having no visual receptors on the back of his chassis, was unaware of the danger. Bertha emitted a loud oscillation of approximately 15 kilohertz, just within the hearing range of these beings, designed to communicate negative advisory information for Big Jack, who started to turn around on hearing the signal.

Dirty Dan compressed a mechanism on his machine, initiating a rapid exothermic chemical reaction. It created a loud noise and propelled one of six lead projectiles at high velocity toward Big Jack's back.

Since the beings moved at velocities considerably below the local speed of sound, Big Jack did not turn fast enough, and the projectile struck him in the back. Because this was not the customary way of ingesting lead, he emitted a noise communicating disapproval of the event. He fell to the deck and removed his own projectile-ejection machine from its compartment and initiated the chemical reaction. The lead projectile followed a trajectory intersecting Dirty Dan's internal fluid-pump.

Red fluid spurted from Dirty Dan's pump. He emanated an acoustic signal of censure, clasped the entry hole with his manipulators, and suddenly suffered a total malfunction. His chassis fell to the deck.

Big Jack stood up with difficulty and pressed one of his manipulators over the hole in his back, from which red fluid leaked.

Bertha accelerated toward him and said, "Oh, Jack, you're hurt!"

Big Jack pressed his white solid-fuel input grinders together and said, "It is a negligible malfunction."

She tore off some of her vegetation and covered his hole. Then she moved to his front closely and touched both of her manipulators to one of his. "Big Jack," she said, "I think I would like to engage in a reproductive activity with you."

They moved as close as her mammary glands permitted, lowered their brain-cases toward one another, and brought their fuel-input ports together as if transferring fuel, although none was exchanged.

After prolonged contact, Big Jack said, "Bertha, you are an exceptional female of your species. I too am inclined to engage in a reproductive activity with you, but I have to tell you, I am just not the sort of being who remains in a stationary habitat indefinitely."

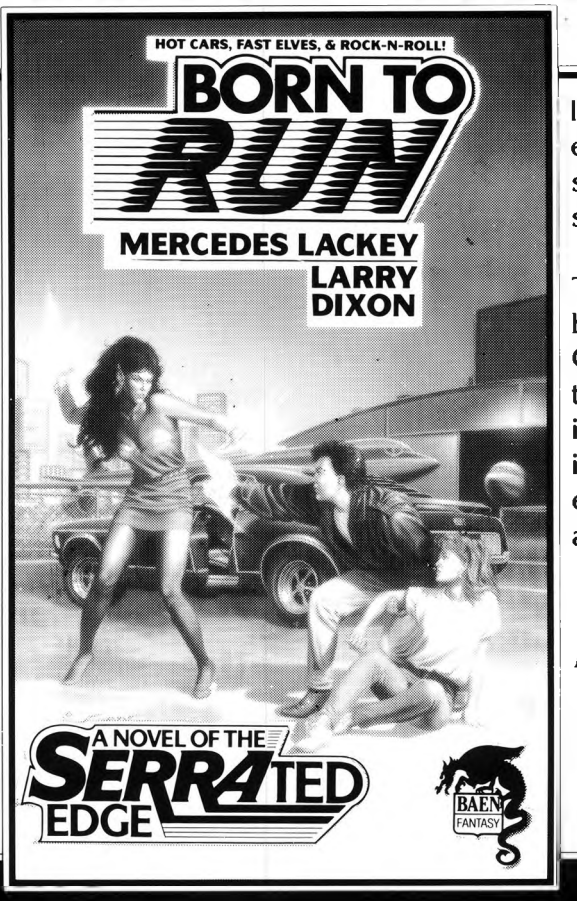
Droplets of aqueous solution of sodium chloride formed in Bertha's visual sensors, a phenomenon not dangerous to oxygen-breathers. "I understand," she said.

After additional contact between their fuel-input ports, Big Jack exited through the swinging hatches and docked with his horse.

He rode off on the horse, traveling in the direction of the setting star. Because there was only one star in this planetary system, its descent behind the horizon almost totally extinguished the ambient illumination, leaving just red light, due to molecular scattering of long-wavelength photons by the atmosphere.

Bertha remained at the entry hatch of the fueling station, watching in the direction of Big Jack long after he had disappeared beyond her visual resolution. Streams of aqueous solution of sodium chloride emanated from her visual sensors for a long time. ✦

MERCEDES LACKEY
LARRY DIXON



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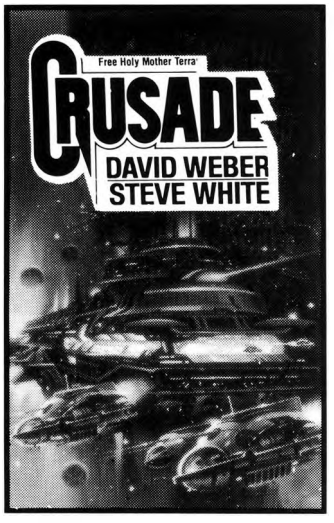

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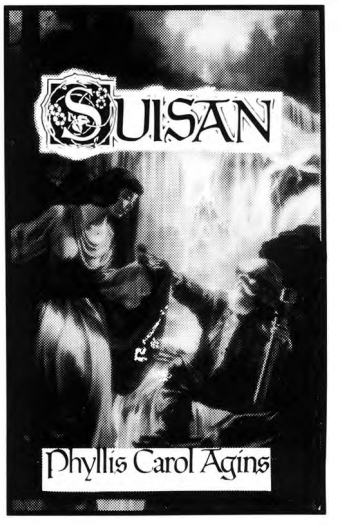

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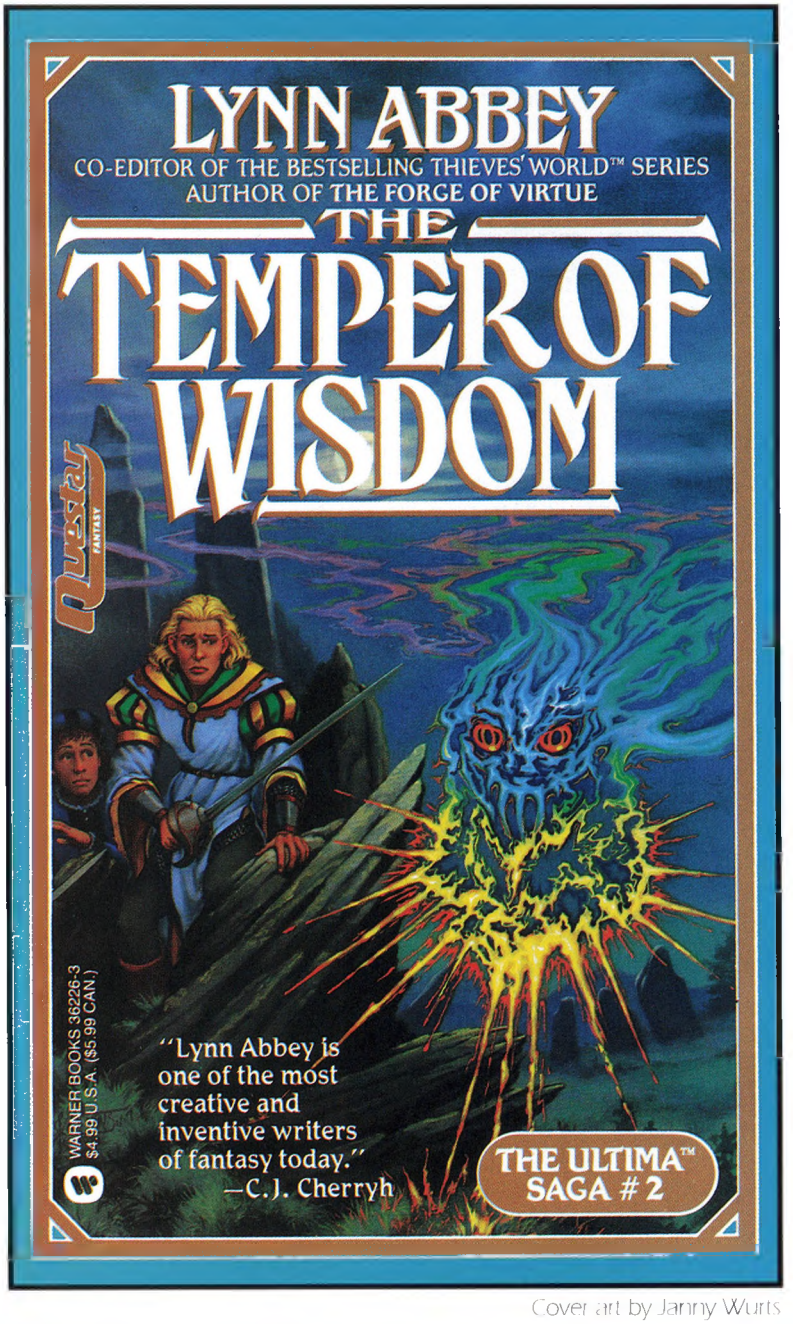
BAEN BOOKS

Looking Forward:

The Temper of Wisdom

by Lynn Abbey

Coming in January 1992 from Warner Books



Cover art by Janny Wurts

Introduction by Bill Fawcett

The Temper of Wisdom is volume two of the Ultima Saga, a sequel to *The Forge of Virtue*. As the story opens, four young adventurers are returning to Hawksnest, their home, after completing a quest that took them far and wide across the land of Britannia.

But their arrival is marred by some terrible news: Their father, Lord Ironhawk, has fallen under the control of the evil Inquisitor Lohgrin. The four young adults, all siblings or foster siblings of one another, quickly discover that dealing with problems in their own homeland is much more complicated and difficult than facing enemies in distant lands.

In the following excerpt, two foster brothers who have been bickering for more than a decade come to the realization that they must work together. Finally united in purpose by the necessity of freeing their father from Lohgrin, they head out to face the Inquisitor in a hidden cave.

—

After several failures—the spell tended to make a sphere around the object on which it was cast—Balthan stuffed reagents into the joint between the metal and wood. The spell stayed put, the dark shovel blade absorbed much of it, and the men, who were no longer *in* the light but behind it, could see farther.

Their immediate reaction was awe. Sheets of pale stone flowed across the uneven floor, frozen cascades rippled down the walls. Huge icicles descended from the darkness, smaller ones hung everywhere; beneath each was a mound. Sometimes icicle and mound met, and became a pillar. Everything glistened. It was like snow. It was like water. It was like nothing they'd seen before.

"When I was blind, this is how it was," Jordan whispered. "Everything was frozen, so I

couldn't tell how fast, or how big. Is that flowing water or solid rock? Are we in a hollow mountain, or peeking into a hollow nut? Did Nosfentor make this last night?"

Balthan picked up a fractured stone. He fitted it to an icicle. The surfaces locked. The senses he used in his healing spells told him the fracture was recent, perhaps as recent as the previous night, but the rock itself was ancient.

"This is bigger than Nosfentor," he answered. "The world's egg." He put the broken piece in his sack. When this was over, he'd study the stone and lose himself in it.

Jordan pointed to the far side of one of the pale flowing rocks. The tracks began again. They left that chamber for another narrow passage, and another chamber, and another, until their senses were numbed by grandeur and majesty. The air was still, now, and saturated. They saw miniature clouds over flawless, miniature lakes. The caverns were not completely quiet, water hung everywhere and eventually fell, creating plops and echoes. When a drop struck his ear Jordan leaped into the air and landed badly. He and the shovel went spinning, sliding down a rock-flow until they struck one of the lakes. Darkness enveloped the chamber.

"Jordan . . . ?"

"Balthan . . . ?"

Balthan made light around his hand. He saw a stone in a nearby pool, reached for it, and was shocked by the depth of the crystal-clear water. He looked for an easier stone, cast a spell over it, and skidded it toward Jordan's voice.

Jordan hung on the edge of a dark pool. The shovel was gone. Jordan was grateful for the glowing stone. He started up the rock flow. Crawling was difficult with the stone clutched in one hand; he tried to stand and skidded immediately. He wound up back in the pool, in the dark.

"Stay there." Balthan unwound his rope and fed it down the slope.

"I'm not hurt," Jordan protested, and started up again, this time without light of his own.

"*Stay there!*" Balthan put magic in his words. "Wait for the rope."

Jordan stayed where he was until the rope touched his hands and Balthan said he was ready, not because of the linear magic, which had no power over him, but because the magician had been concerned enough to use it. Jordan conceded that it was easier to scale the flowing rock with a rope—

"But it wasn't necessary. I would have gotten up eventually."

"That pool was dark."

"So?"

"So—this is the clearest water I've ever seen. That pool there, looks like a puddle but it's deeper than my arm. How deep do you suppose that black pool was?"

Jordan swallowed hard. He could swim when he wasn't wearing a mail shirt, carrying a sword, not to mention his buskins, and rope. Probably he could have shucked the extra weight before he drowned. His pulse raced: *probably* cut too close to the bone.

"Maybe we should run rope between us," he suggested.

The magician averred. "So we could both drown? No, thank you, I'll walk alone."

"I don't understand you," Jordan murmured.

The magician was genuinely perplexed. "If it's so important to you— Give it here. I'll tie it around me."

Jordan shook his head. "No, you've made your point and I can't argue it. If there were more of us, I would, but with just two, one falling would pull the other in after him."

"My thoughts, exactly."

"Aye, once you mention it, I think you're right; but I don't think that way. I wouldn't, even if I could." He handed Balthan the entire rope.

The magician coiled it over his arm. The light danced crazily over the chamber surfaces. "I don't like being joined up. I'm responsible for myself. When someone's tied to me— I don't know what they'll do; if they'll do the right thing. Even you."

"I'm sorry for you. You don't trust anybody."

"Nobody trusts me—or have you forgotten?"

Jordan flashed a rueful half-smile. "I'd forgotten. I thought I was tying you to me, not me to you."

The magician cringed; the light around his hand flickered. "You're scum. You're slime. You have no mercy, no Compassion. You know exactly what to say, then you wait until my flank's exposed and skewer me . . . with *trust*. Damn you." He hung the rope across his chest. The light around his hand continued to flicker; the spell had been hastily cast and then compromised by emotions. He pondered where to cast the next one, now that they'd lost the shovel.

The end of Jordan's long scabbard provided a viable alternative, except in the tight passages, where the shovel had also been useless. They continued to follow the tracks, losing all sense of time and distance as they did. Balthan began tossing ash-coated pebbles into the air whenever they entered a new chamber. He'd kindle the light spell once they left his hand. The men learned not to look at the incandescent spark but at the illuminated features. Sometimes ghostly light clung to scattered icicles or flows after the spark faded. They entered a huge chamber, where the cool, eerie glow was retained by the entire back wall. Balthan decided to wait until the chamber was dark before kindling the scabbard. But the glow didn't fade; it was sustained by another light in the distance.

"We've found them!" Jordan whispered exuberantly.

Balthan agreed, but with less enthusiasm. He couldn't see the distant light without wondering how it was sustained—and he didn't like the conclusions he reached. Casting the light spell on his hand where it would be easier to quench, he took the lead for the first time. The tracks eventually brought them to the base of the monumental rock flow that had retained Balthan's magic. From there they saw a seething radiance in the ceiling of the next chamber. Balthan looked away quickly, but Jordan was transfixed.

The magician held his hand a few inches from Jordan's eyes, breaking the enthrallment.

"Now we know what it did," he explained as Jordan shuddered and returned to his senses. "*Don't* look at it."

"It's hard—the colors move . . . like flames dancing. It's beautiful."

"You'd probably say the same about the dragon that ate you. Don't look at it. Tell yourself it's deadly and forget it."

Jordan repeated Balthan's words, fixing them in his mind; then he was ready to ascend the rock flow.

They had found the end of the trail. Nosfentor's malignancy illuminated a chamber best described as a hollowed mountain with a river running through its heart: the wraith's second vision. Three men could be seen on the river strand. Two were laboring: Ivo and Dench. The third paced.

"This is the place," Jordan whispered. "I recognize it now. They've dug up the cairn." He removed the strap that held his sword in the scabbard. "Let's go."

"Let's not. This may be the place, but they haven't found that box, and they've been digging awhile. They're going to be tired and careless once they find it. If we take them out now, we'll have to do the digging."

As before, Jordan found himself unable to offer a more Virtuous, less risky tactic. He accepted the magician's unpalatable suggestion. They stayed where they were, well above the strand where the churls labored. The river, unlike the water elsewhere in the cave, wasn't clear, but its appetizing color came from the unnatural light that continued to enthrall Jordan. From time to time, Balthan would tap his arm or, if that failed to get his attention, place his hand in front of Jordan's eyes.

"I can't keep from looking," he complained, chagrined by his failure.

"You're doing well, for someone who's head-blind, not a scrap of magic to call his own."

Jordan was not consoled. "I can see myself: sword in hand, head pointed at the ceiling—until a churl slices it off!"

"Good point." Balthan dug into his sack. "Look at me."

Jordan obeyed. It was the magician who hesitated.

"I can't do it."

"Why not?"

"I can't. It's not right to meddle with magic."

"Balthan, I let you meddle when I couldn't even see you—"

"That was a different kind of magic." He put the reagents back in the sack. "This would be Sixth Circle magic, if I'd been initiated into the Sixth Circle, which I haven't been. I shouldn't be able to cast it; I can't cast it. It shouldn't work at all; I don't know why it does, and that's why I don't want to do it. I don't trust me." He was knotting the thongs when Jordan grabbed his hand.

Jordan pressed his thumbnail into the sensitive flesh inside Balthan's wrist. He bore down until the magician's fingers were stiff and the thong slipped through them. "Be a good magician and make your magic. I don't care whether you trust you or what kind of magic your masters let you play with. Right now, I've got a choice between that magic up there, and your magic." He squeezed harder.

Any other man would have been rigid, but Balthan calmly used his free hand to retrieve the sack. Except for his glazed eyes, Jordan might have believed his foster-brother had no nerves.

"I should learn to keep my mouth shut around you." Balthan's voice was soft; his lips scarcely moved.

When Jordan released his hand, the magician cradled it a moment, then fished the reagents out of the sack one-handed. He mixed them in the palm of Jordan's hand; his own was still trembling when he pronounced the words: An Xen Ex. It was the same spell Annon had used to calm Darrel and, as Balthan warned, he could not cast it properly. The reagents were not transformed to weightless powder. But when the magician described the light in the ceiling as maggot-ridden offal and the poisonous ichor of a thousand worms, Jordan found himself nauseous. When Balthan described the light as the vomit of vultures, Jordan staggered away, retching and groaning. He was still green when he returned.

"I guess I deserved that." He coughed and wiped his mouth on the filthy canvas covering his mail shirt. Nothing this side of death could induce him to look up.

Balthan held out a small, bright red lump which Jordan declined. "It's cherry treacle. It's got to taste better than your tongue."

"I don't trust you *that* much, my friend."

With some difficulty, Balthan broke the lump in two. "Truce. Pick your piece; I'll eat the other one."

"I've seen the things you put in your mouth," Jordan muttered, but he took the larger piece, popping it in his mouth a moment after Balthan. It *was* cherry treacle, and it was wonderful.

The churls gave up making holes in the mud. Stripped to breechclouts, they dove along the strand, fighting the current. It seemed unlikely the box would remain nearby if it had fallen into the river, but then Dench surged up with his hands high.

"I've got it! I've got it!"

His joy echoed through the cavern. Lohgrin himself deigned to kneel in the mud to take the nondescript box into his own hands before the churls helped each other out of the river. The Inquisitor gleefully wiped away the silt and held the box up to the light.

"Remoh's sandalwood box!" he shouted, and in the rocks above the strand Balthan and Jordan felt their hearts skip a beat.

"Is he calling?" Jordan demanded. "You said you could tell."

Balthan shook his head many times. "I can't tell. He is, he isn't. I don't think he knows himself."

"We can't take a chance."

The magician had no clever alternatives. "What do I do—other than stay out of your way?"

"Take out Lohgrin before he casts anything. He did something at Hawksnest. It knocked me off my feet and smelled like swamp gas."

Balthan thought a moment and went back to shaking his head. "Magically, I'm no match for him, Jordan."

"He doesn't have a sword, you do; use it. Stay out of sight when I come forward. Maybe you can take him by

surprise. Like you said—they're apt to be careless right now."

The magician flexed the hand Jordan had mauled and made certain his sword would slide out of the scabbard when he needed it. "I've never killed anyone . . . anything before. I don't know if I can."

"Think of maggots breeding in your rotten guts," Jordan said as he started for the strand. "'Cause that's what you'll have if you *don't* kill him."

Balthan muttered until Jordan signalled him to be quiet. Lohgrin and his churls were still celebrating. Jordan picked his target—Ivo, the better fighter of the pair—and flashed Balthan a victory smile before he broke cover. Balthan tried to return the gesture, but his lips were as numb as the rest of him.

"Ironhawk!"

Jordan drew his bastard sword as he leaped over the rocks and, wrapping his left hand below his right at the top of his swing, delivered a mighty cut across Ivo's back while all three—Dench, Ivo, and Lohgrin—were nailed by his warcry. Dench raced for his sword. The Inquisitor shouted something that had no noticeable effect.

"Ironhawk!"

Desperation gave Dench an agility neither he nor Jordan expected. He made an acrobatic dive for his sword, caught the hilt firmly between his hands, and got the blade up in time to parry Jordan's murderous slice. Momentum carried Jordan a stride beyond the impact; by the time he got turned around, Dench was bearing down on him. There was a brief moment when he could see that Ivo was moving and Lohgrin had his hands above his head like the pincers of some gigantic insect. There was no time to look for Balthan before he parried Dench's sword.

The Inquisitor cried out the name of the wraith: "Nosfentor!" and other unrecognizable syllables, invoking a thunderclap that lifted everyone and hurled them through the air before pinning them to the ground. Jordan closed his eyes quickly, but not before he saw the nauseating light dislodge and begin a swift, gut-curdling descent. As soon as the pressure lifted from his chest, he rolled to his feet.

Balthan was the last to stand up. The thunderclap had been aimed at his chest. He was sure it had stopped his heart, and wasn't sure why he wasn't dead. Neither was Lohgrin. The Inquisitor wasted precious moments repeating the invocation without recreating it. Balthan saw his opportunity, leveled his sword like a lance, and charged across the mud. Lohgrin's eyes bulged; Balthan thought he had his quarry. Then the Inquisitor uttered an alien syllable.

The rune was wrong, and so was the manifestation, but Balthan recognized an An Tym spell as it folded around him—it was, after all, one of those he'd used to such ill effect on Jordan. Balthan knew ways to combat magic that the head-blind could scarcely imagine; all of them, however, took too much time, Lohgrin was smiling as he advanced. Balthan saw death coming for him. He recklessly borrowed magic and movement from his future destiny: He raised the tip of his sword, aligning it with the Inquisitor's heart.

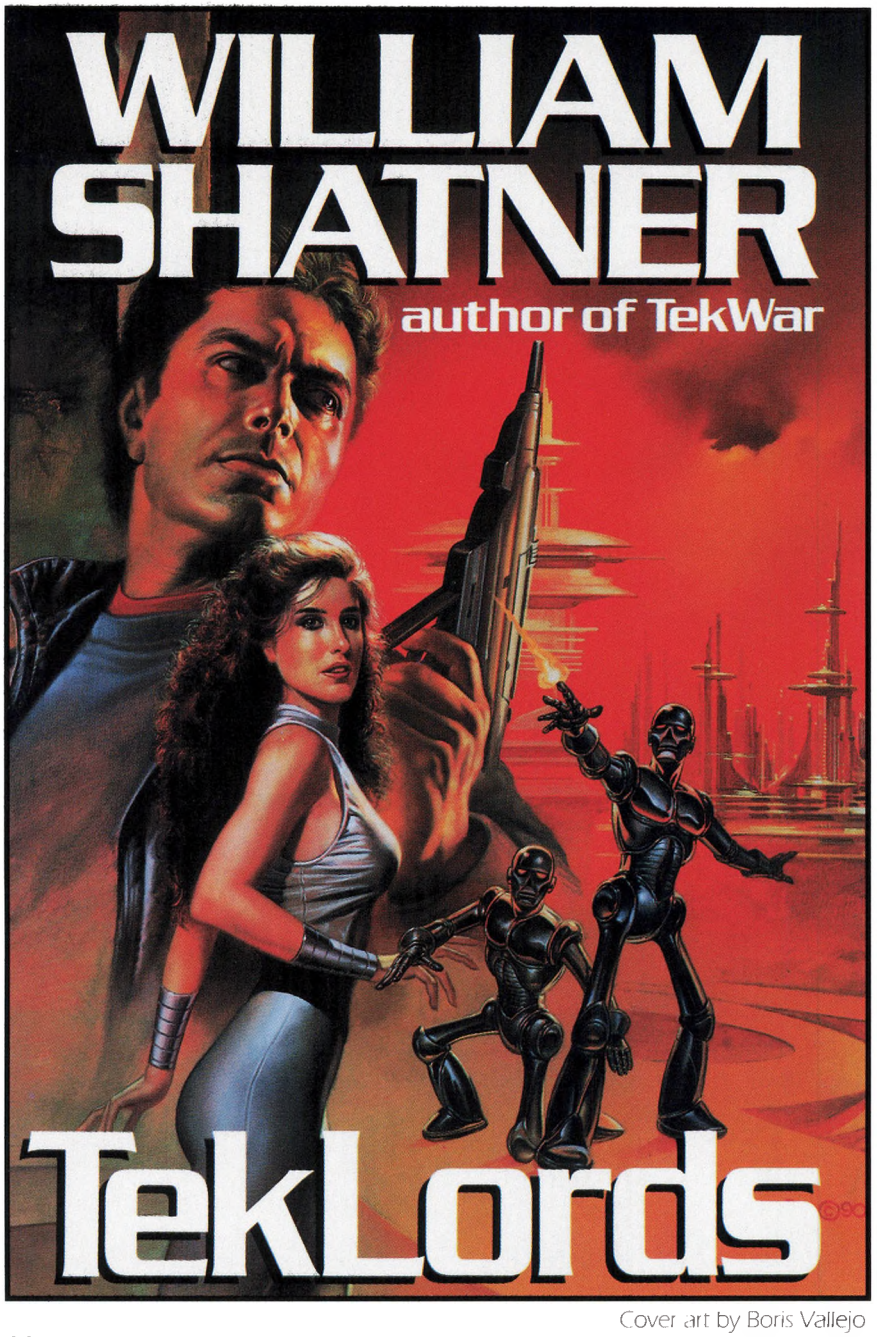
Dead cold sprouted in Balthan's mind. He'd borrowed too much. He might never cast another spell. He wouldn't know until Lohgrin's spell wore off—if he lived that long, which, as the numbness spread, he guessed he wouldn't. He was completely helpless . . . ✦

Looking Forward:

TekLords

by William Shatner

Coming in January 1992 from Ace/Putnam



Cover art by Boris Vallejo

Introduction by Bill Fawcett

Yes, *that* William Shatner.

The man who became famous as *Star Trek*'s Captain Kirk is now making an impact on science fiction as an author. *TekLords,* the sequel to his best-selling novel *TekWar,* follows the continuing personal battle between private detective Jake Cardigan and the drug lords of the 22nd century. A lot of drugs are legal, but one of the deadliest—an electronic-based one known as Tek—is not, and the Teklords, who control immense wealth and power, will stop at nothing to maintain their stranglehold on society.

The Teklords create and launch humans programmed to assassinate anyone who opposes them. Still able to use their own intelligence and cunning, these "zombies" are much more dangerous than the android and robot assassins Jake has also been forced to deal with.

In the following scene, Jake's expedition for information into one of the tougher neighborhoods of Los Angeles takes a very dangerous twist.

—

The Corner Drug Store was in the middle of the block, a six-story complex sitting between the Forbidden City Automat and the Si Fan Bordello. On the walkway in front of the Drug Store's main entrance a robot in bright Oriental robes was snapping a picture of an uneasy tourist couple, and a fifteen-year-old Chinese prostitute was arguing with three skysailors. Glosigns floating over the entry announced—IF IT'S A LEGAL

DRUG, WE HAVE IT! THE BEST POT THAT CAN BE GOT! FREE NEEDLES WITH EVERY PURCHASE!

"Bullshit, I'm not going to do all *that* for a rotten five hundred bucks," the slim hooker was explaining to the spokesman for the skysailors as Jake pushed through the street crowd to enter the lobby of the drug emporium.

The lobby was large and circular and rose up the entire height of the building. The various shops were on tiers of balconies that circled it. On the ground level were a pot shop, a meth store, two different sinspeed outlets, a brainstim parlor, a nosepop shop and a tobacconist.

Jake made a slow circuit of the crowded lobby, glancing into shop windows, dodging tourists and more serious customers. A generic Oriental music was being played on the Drug Store's sound system, a strong teakwood incense was being pumped out of the aircirc system ducts.

"Howdy to ya, Jake." Standing beside him, smiling slyly, was a Japanese cyborg. He was lean, in his late twenties, wearing a long white synfur overcoat and a plastiglass Stetson. Instead of a right hand he had an antique silverpleted sixgun.

"Howdy, Hashknife."

"Right nice to lay eyes on you again, pard."

Jake nodded, saying nothing.

"If you was to mosey into that nosepop shop yondfer, you might now just find somebody who wants to palaver wth you." Touching the brim of his cowboy hat with the fingers of his real hand, he went sauntering away.

"Much obliged."

The nosepop shop had a display of Snortz in its window. Above the neat stack of bright glopak containers of the product hovered a two-foot-high holographic projection of a well-known airsoccer player. "Snortz is my favorite nose candy," the athlete was saying. "I swear to god you'll think it's real coke. Yet it's absolutely one hundred percent legal, kids!"

Jake entered the shop, causing the door to produce a short tinkling tune.

"Ever see that jerkoff play?" inquired the fat lady behind the counter.

"If you mean the jerkoff floating in your window, the answer is no."

"That dork never actually snorted Snortz in his life," she said while picking her teeth enthusiastically with her plump little finger. "Saw him go up against the Moonbase team on the vidwall the other night and he was zozzled to the gills on *real* cocaine if I'm any judge. What can I sell you?"

"I'm Jake Cardigan."

After picking her teeth for roughly another ten seconds, she said, "Damned if you aren't. Go on into the back room."

Jake went through the door and shut it behind him. The storeroom was large and along one wall were stacked plascartons of Snortz, Nosegay, Stuff and similar products. There was one small high oval window and a red side door that probably led to an alley outside. There was also a glass rocking chair.

Sitting in the chair at the center of the room was a plump, smiling Chinese in a white suit. He waved cordially at Jake. "Good to see you again."

Jake took a few more steps into the room, edging to the left and nearer the red door.

The man in the glass rocker stopped smiling. "What's the matter, Jake, don't you recognize me? It's Singapore Sammy, your old pal and one of your favorite informants."

"Doc Nevers set me up, huh?"

"What are you talking about? I got some news for you about Subway."

Jake reached the door and stood with his back against it. "I only happened to find this out by chance," he said. "And I imagine your people don't know yet, since the cops have been keeping it quiet. Singapore Sammy was killed down in the Baja Sector over the weekend."

"That's a lot of crap. I'm obviously alive and well." He left the chair and it kept rocking.

"Nope, I figure you for a kamikaze android loaded with explosives." Jake turned, hit the door hard with his shoulder. It went flapping open and he dived out into the alley behind the Corner Drug Store.

He landed on the ground, rolled and stood up. He started to run for the alley mouth.

Then he noticed his escape was blocked.

They started trotting down the alley in Jake's direction. Three of them, large, wide cyborgs dressed in black and wearing pullover face masks that had narrow eye slits. The one in the lead had a black lazgun in place of his right hand.

Jake judged that the frontrunner was still about 200 yards from him. He glanced around but saw only blank walls on either side of the alley. He didn't want to go back into the storeroom where the explosive android waited.

Almost directly opposite him was a GLA Sanitation Department robot who was casually sweeping up litter and stray garbage. It was a tall, tank-chested mechanism, painted white.

Easing sideways, Jake yanked out his stungun. "Clear off, fellows," he warned the approaching trio.

The one with the black lazgun for a hand fired at him.

Anticipating the assailant's move, Jake dove to the ground, firing his stungun while he was in midair. The buzzing beam hit the first masked assassin square in the chest.

He yelped, flapped both arms, went stumbling sideways.

Meantime Jake scrambled to his feet and ran toward the sanitation robot.

Both the other cyborgs had electroknives for left hands, grey lazpistols for right hands.

The one Jake had shot slammed into an alley wall. Groaning once, he fell to the ground and stayed there.

Paying him no mind, the mechanical sweeper continued to scoop up scraps and deposit them in its open chest.

Jake fired again, but missed the dodging cyborg he'd been aiming at.

The third cyborg fired his lazpistol hand. The beam missed Jake by about two feet, but succeeded in cutting off the cylindrical head of the cleanup bot. The head, spewing circuitry, colored wires and shards of plastiglass, fell down into the robot's open chest.

"We're going to get you," called one of the blackclad assassins. "Soon now."

A smooth purring sound grew audible directly above. Jake was concentrating on the two men who were stalking him and didn't look up.

Then a sizzling beam of crimson came slicing down slantwise. It hit the cyborg who'd taunted Jake, cutting him neatly in half at the waist.

When the remaining assassin saw the two chunks of his associate slap to the ground, splashing blood and innards, he yelled, "Holy shit!" Spinning on his heel, shaking violently, he started to run.

Going by on the street beyond the alley mouth was one of the hourly dragons and fireworks parades that the Little Asia Chamber of Commerce staged for visitors. A long scarlet, black and gold robot dragon was writhing and lurching past, breathing out long sparkling streamers of fire. Firecrackers exploded all around it.

The running cyborg had to halt at the edge of the passing parade. The beam from above came crackling down again and caught him.

It lopped off his head, hood and all. The head went spinning away, bouncing down on the street directly in the path of the zigzagging dragon.

"Jeez, it's a good thing I got here when I did," remarked an amplified voice from above.

Jake, stungun still in hand, looked up at the rainbow-hued aircar that was dropping down for an alley landing.

Piloting the multicolored vehicle was a demure-seeming teenage girl dressed in the green shirt and tan jumper that was the uniform of a very exclusive private school in the Bel Air Sector. The car settled down near him and the passenger-side door popped open. The dark-haired girl leaned and smiled across at him. "I don't think you could've saved your ass without my intervention, Jake."

"Playing hooky today, MariAlice?"

"Zish. Is that the thanks I get for pulling your nuts out of the fire?"

He told her, "I think I was winning the contest on my own and if—"

"Congratulations on surviving, Jake." Singapore Sammy had stepped into the alley and was coming toward him with his right hand held out. "Let me shake your hand."

Jake hopped into the passenger seat. "Take this thing up."

"Somebody you're avoiding?"

"Think he's a kamikaze."

"Zish!" She whapped the control panel with one small fist.

The rainbow aircar shuddered once, then shot straight up into the afternoon.

"Is that any way to treat a pal?" shouted Sammy, jumping, shaking a fist.

When the aircar was 200 feet up, MariAlice put it on hover. "Might as well defuse that schlep." She flipped a toggle.

A beam of intense green light shot down out of the belly of the aircar. At the same time the car started to climb higher.

Five seconds after the beam touched Sammy he exploded with an enormous whumping boom. He was scattered all across the alley, the white suit shredded into thousands of pieces of flickering cloth confetti, his wiring, circuitry and tubes spinning in several directions and then slamming into the alley walls. Smoke, dark and thick, came climbing up from the spot where he'd been standing.

"Your hunch about him was right," said the girl, giggling. "That was sure a kamikaze, Jake."

"He blew a big chunk out of the back wall of the Drug Store."

"Serves them right, doesn't it, for sicking the bastard on you?"

Jake said, "I guess it does at that. What were you doing hereabouts?"

"I didn't come of my own free will. And I don't much like rescuing doddering old cops." She punched out a flight pattern.

"I'm a doddering old private detective these days, child."

"That's right, I forgot. Same thing," she said as the aircar swung southward. "My uncle wants to meet with you."

Jake shook his head. "Not just now, MariAlice. I'm working."

"He knows you're working. That's what he wants to see you for. Catch?"

"Okay, I'll accept the invitation." He grinned and settled back into the passenger seat. ✦

Looking Forward:

Illusion

by Paula Volsky

Coming in January 1992 from Bantam Books

Introduction by Bill Fawcett

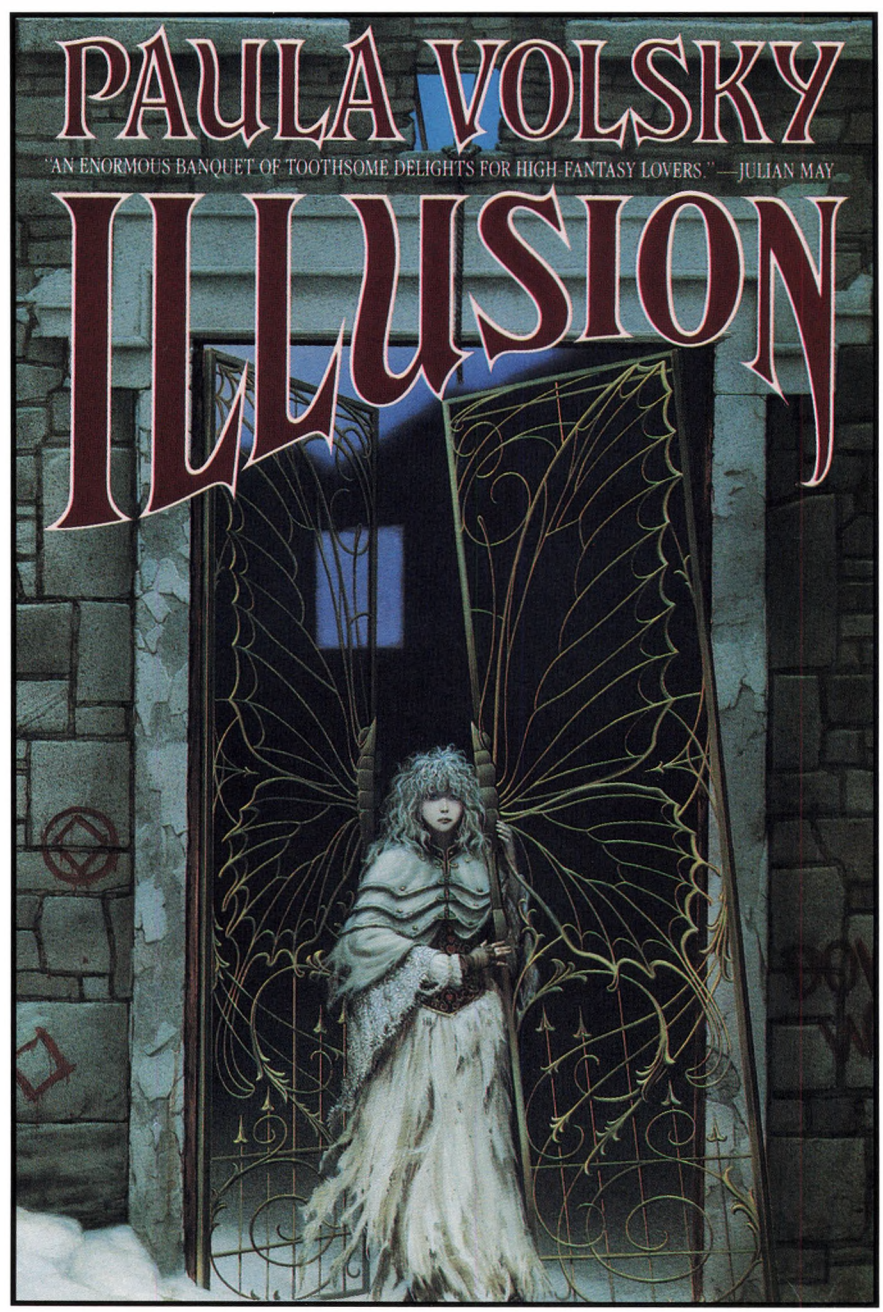
For two hundred years the Exalted classes have ruled Vonahr through the use of their powerful magical abilities. But centuries of luxury have caused many of their powers to grow slack from disuse. The Exalted have become a class apart, living in splendor while the masses starve in squalor.

Then comes the revolution, and the new liberty ends all distinctions of class and rank. Illusion is a chronicle of the adventures of one of the Exalted, Eliste vo Derrivalle, as she learns to first survive amid revolution and then excel among the masses she was raised to disdain.

In this scene, the revolution has begun, and Eliste and her companions have been wandering the now-hostile city in hopes of avoiding the mobs bent on revenge.

—

The figure, which resembled a continuation of the rubbish heap—all dangling scarecrow tatters draped upon a starved skeletal frame—stepped slowly forth from the shadow of the column. The faint light of a lantern some dozens of yards distant fell upon a gaunt and singularly hideous male countenance, low of brow, wide-mouthed and pig-eyed. These features, unattractive in themselves, were further marred by a diseased skin whose raised scales, crusts, and ruffled flaking patches were easily visible even by night. Similar scales and shreds of dry dead skin disfigured the arms and calves, which were bare despite the chill of winter.



Cover art by Michael Whelan

The apparition approached, and a stench of ancient sweat and filth seeped from his rags. Eliste stood her ground with an effort, and fortunately he paused several feet away to address them in hoarse tones, grating and somehow gloating:

"Need a place, do you?"

No reply.

"Worried, maybe? Feeling queerly? Don't know the neighborhood? On the prowl for a gallant knight? You're in luck—Exalted ladies. You've found him, isn't that juicy?"

Silence.

"Out to take the air, then. Walking the streets for pleasure, not profit. Stupid of me. I beg your pardon. Exalted ladies."

"Why call us Exalted, you saucy scoundrel? *I'm* not Exalted!" Kairthe flashed.

"Right. The soubrette, I guess; the devoted slave." The smile that accompanied this remark revealed blackened teeth and puffy gums. "So, then—a sorry supper of aged mackerel with a triple serving of underdone mutton. Better?"

Neither Kairthe nor Aurelie understood him. Eliste stiffened with incredulous outrage, while Zeralenn expressed nothing.

"Leave us." Automatically, Eliste resorted to the tone of icy authority with which she might have cowed an impertinent serf back at Derrivalle, but it was not effective now.

"Your servant, Exalted Lady." The newcomer offered another ruined smile. "I'll leave, and the four of you can freeze your Exalted tails out on the streets until it grows light and a patrol picks you up. Or you can come along with me. Your choice."

"Come along—with you?" Eliste was too astonished for anger. "Who are you?"

"Quite nobody, by your lights—a beggar."

"Come, state your name."

"Introductions, little Marquise? You first."

"Explain yourself, fellow."

"You're in luck. I can find you a place."

"What do you mean?"

"A room. Four walls. A roof. You follow me? You do speak Vonahrish, don't you? Exalted Miss?"

In the old days, she would have struck him for his insolence. Now, she didn't dare. "Where is this place?"

"Don't trouble your little frizzled head about that. The point is, you can lay low. Sometimes it's the only thing."

"Why should you render us such service?"

"Think hard, Exalted Miss. It will come to you."

"You—oh, you want us to give you money?" Eliste was still unaccustomed to the concept of cash payment. It had never truly been part of her world.

"She always this sharp?" the stranger inquired of Zeralenn.

Zeralenn ignored the taunt. "If I understand you correctly, you are suggesting that we pay you, no doubt exorbitantly, then follow you to an unspecified destination?"

"That's it exactly. Exalted lady."

"And in earnest of your good faith—?"

"Nothing."

"It is possible you are neither willing nor competent to fulfill your promise."

"Quite possible. You've got to take your chances. Or don't, as you please." A shrug stirred his tatters.

Their options were few and uniformaly unappealing. The stranger was loathsome and his offer implausible, but they needed badly to get off the street before dawn. Still, to follow such a creature . . . it was too fantastic—

"Another thing you might think about." The gloating note in his voice was now unmistakable. "Turn me down, and I hop to the district station—it's not far—speak my piece to the oinks, and collect a bounty of five R's when they pick you up. Not much, but better than nothing. One way or another, I'll make out."

"Stinking goat-turd," Kairthe muttered under her breath.

"It's up to you. Exalted ladies. But make up your mind, I won't hang around."

The wicked lash of the wind facilitated decision. "What payment do you require?" asked Zeralenn.

"One hundred rekkoes."

"Oh, he must be mad!" Eliste exclaimed, almost involuntarily.

"A bargain. Twenty rekkoes apiece for your Exalted selves, twenty for the little soubrette with the mouth—help comes dear, these days—and then there's the twenty percent added on for The Fungus's commission."

"The what?"

"And don't think of cutting the commission. That won't float. It's The Fungus set us to watching this house in the first place."

"Watching?"

"In shifts, ever since Xouvie caught it. You didn't think this was an accident? You're not the only Exalteds come nosing around here. Xouvie was always doing, so it was odds on something useful would turn up. So it has, and I've grabbed the goods."

The stranger's proprietary attitude was unsettling. Eliste cast a nervous glance at her grandmother, whose face revealed nothing, and then essayed uncertainly, "You would have to perform your commission to our satisfaction before we could even consider paying you."

His abrupt bark of laughter increased her discomfort. The facial contortions set the little rags of peeling skin on nose and cheeks to fluttering. He did not trouble to reply.

"One hundred rekkoes. There is your payment in full." Zeralenn expressionlessly proffered a handful of notes. "Now lead us."

For one moment, Eliste felt as if she could read his mind. Surely as she knew her own name, she knew that he thought of robbing and killing them all. Perhaps their number daunted him—they were women, but there were four of them. Perhaps he feared their outcry would draw the gendarmes. Or perhaps he was simply less formidable than he appeared. The illnesses that left their visible mark upon him may have undermined his strength considerably. Had he guessed the contents of Zeralenn's valise, none of this would have deterred him; but he did

not guess. Following an instant's hesitation, he took the money, stowing the notes out of sight beneath his rags.

And now, having received payment, would he simply disappear? That was another possibility.

"No fear. Quenuble will cough up six R's for you, and I don't plan to miss out. Beats the Reps' going rate," observed the stranger, as if he, too, could read minds.

"Quenuble?" inquired Eliste. The name was familiar, but she could not quite place it. "Cough up?"

He did not see fit to enlighten her. "All right, let's move. Stay behind me and don't chatter. That is, if you please—Exalted ladies."

Reluctantly they obeyed, and found themselves wandering tiny, dank back alleys probably not even marked on Zeralenn's map.

He might, of course, be leading them straight to the nearest district station of the gendarmerie.

No, he isn't, Eliste was able to assure herself with absolute conviction. *Because if he does, then he'll lose every last biquin of that hundred rekkoes.*

Where, then?

The trek, which seemed to go on forever, actually continued not much more than half an hour. To Eliste's relief, they soon left the alleyways behind them, entering into a hearteningly decent neighborhood with aged but respectable shops and dwellings. Light glowed at a few windows. Several of the shopkeepers were already up and about, readying themselves for the morning trade, which would commence in a couple of hours. Such homey signs of life and warmth should have been comforting, but Eliste viewed them with dread. The world was awakening. Dawn approached, and soon the empty streets would fill. The presence of Exalted pedestrians would be noticed, despite all efforts at concealment. And then—the shrill verbal assault, the threats and insults, the flying spittle and rocks, the blows of fist and stick, the torn clothing, and worse. There were certain particularly fervent revolutionaries, she recalled, fond of carving literally blood-red diamonds into Exalted flesh. Or perhaps, since this area of the city appeared relatively civilized—a simple demand for papers of identification and legitimate pass-town, signed by the appropriate section chief; and in the absence of these documents, the summoning of gendarmes or Vanguardsmen. It had happened to many Exalted. It had happened to Gizine vo Chaumelle.

But it did not happen now. Their guide led them around a corner, into a street Eliste actually recognized: Cliquot Street, on the outskirts of the Waterfront Market. And there, straight ahead, an establishment she knew: a pastry shop she'd passed often enough on her way to the New Arcade—Master Quenuble's House of Swans. Quenuble did not really stand in the topmost rank of stylish Sherreenian *pâtissiers,* but found his customers chiefly among the affluent bourgeoisie and the lesser grade of untitled and unfashionable Exalted. By Beviaire standards, he was second-rate, and yet the fragrances floating from the House of Swans, and the puff-pastry creations displayed in the window, had occasionally snagged Eliste's casual attention. Sometimes she had glanced in the window while passing, but certainly never thought to enter. She thought about it now, however, and with considerable misgiving.

The House of Swans occupied the street level of a tall, solid, spacious old structure, exuding ancient respectability. Presumably the upper stories comprised the living quarters of the Quenuble family. Light shone from every ground-floor window. Not surprisingly, the pastry chef had already started in on his daily stock of fruit tarts and *mille-feuilles,* his cream puffs and éclairs, his multitiered *gâteaux,* and his signature swans of choux pastry. The yellow light from the windows fell upon a knot of wretched, starveling figures clustered about the door. The door itself was marked with a big, exuberant scarlet diamond. Similar diamonds defaced the shutters, the shopfront, and the swan-shaped sign that hung above the door. It was this sight that now aroused Eliste's alarm, reinforced by the presence of arrantly republican strangers.

"Wait," Eliste commanded their guide. She was prepared to pluck at his ulcerous arm to gain his ear if necessary, but he glanced back at her without slackening his pace, and she did not have to touch him. "Look at that—Reparationist red!"

"Well?"

"We can't go there!"

"Then don't," he advised pleasantly.

This time, it took real self-control not to hit him. Her hand actually twitched, but again prudence ruled, and she turned wide eyes upon her grandmother.

"Do not alarm yourself," Zeralenn counseled imperturbably. "We have cast our lots; now let us carry through."

"But this animal is leading us straight to—"

"Hush. Courage. Composure at all times, Granddaughter. You are Exalted. Now come, and let us see."

There was no point in arguing with Zeralenn. Eliste might follow, balk in the street, or run in the opposite direction. She chose to follow.

Not through the clot of beggars clogging the front entry, however; for their guide conducted them along a narrow pass-through separating the House of Swans from its nearest neighbor to the red-diamonded back door, upon which he rapped authoritatively. A man—round of face and belly, middle of stature and years—answered the summons at once. The white apron stretched taut over comfortably expansive stomach, the flour-whitened hands and forearms, announced the arrival of the *pâtissier* Quenuble. A white cap appliquéd with a big red diamond sat atop his wiry gray curls.

"Well, Shreds, my lad?" Quenuble inquired of his scrofulous caller.

"Six R's upon delivery," Shreds replied.

"Ah—very good! Exactly so. Fair enough."

As Eliste watched in mounting disquiet, money changed hands.

What's he paying for? And why? ✦

Catastrophes of the Past

Stephen L. Gillett

"Civilization exists by geologic consent."

— *Will Durant*

Modern humans have a peculiar conceit: if something goes awry with a natural system on the surface of the Earth, they automatically assume they're responsible. Ozone depletion, climate change, wetlands destruction—it's easy to jump from the problems humanity *has* caused to assuming *everything* is our fault. I even saw once a letter to the editor proposing that the 1980 Mt. St. Helens eruption was triggered by underground nuclear testing at the Nevada Test Site—over 1000 miles away.

And at this point things have gotten silly. Blaming humans for a volcanic eruption? Really, now. The perspective is all off. Granted, nukes, even underground nukes, are a bit bigger than firecrackers, but on the scale of the Earth itself they're not much more significant. Ol' Mt. St. Helens has roots much deeper in the Earth, and for some time has been doing its thing on a far larger scale, than a mere underground explosion —even a nuclear explosion. (Geologists with the US Geological Survey had also predicted—in 1975!—that Mt. St. Helens was likely to erupt before the turn of the century. Their predictions were laughed off by The Powers that Be . . . but that's another issue.)

By no means are all drastic changes man-caused. Even with our new powers of destruction, "Mother" Nature can be far more destructive than puny humans. In fact, the notion of "Mother" Nature as always kind and beneficent is a peculiarly modern flavor of nonsense, an outgrowth of the Romantic myth of the late 18th and early 19th centuries. Folk that truly live close to nature have no illusions about her capriciousness and her cruelty.

We can't just blame the romantics, though. There once was some scientific rationale for drastic changes being "unnatural." One strain of 19th century scientific thought was that the Universe is stable and steady. Geologists, for example, had devised "uniformitarianism," a view that the natural processes we see now have always operated at the same rate. And the astronomers looked out into an ordered, clockwork Universe in which all was in its place, and in which—as in geology—change occurred over eons, in a stately flow.

This has all gone away, of course. Catastrophic events pervade the Universe—quasars, black holes gobbling hot hydrogen and spewing X-rays, supernovae briefly outshining an entire galaxy in a cataclysmic explosion. And to modern geologists, uniformitarianism is now merely a restatement of Ockham's Razor, the "principle of simplicity": the simplest explanation that fits all the data is the best. It does not mean that rare but catastrophic events don't happen. In fact, you expect them to happen, once in a while.

What, then, are some natural catastrophes? Some *big* natural catastrophes! We have to keep some perspective, after all; even most big catastrophes on a human scale aren't a big deal geologically. The volcanic explosion of the Aegean island Thera about 1000 B.C., for example, qualifies as a catastrophe on the human scale, but it really wasn't a particularly big eruption. (The eruption, bigger than Krakatau, brought an end to the Minoan civilization, and may have spawned the Atlantis myth. Poul Anderson set his time-travel novel *The Dancer from Atlantis* at this time.) Similarly, the San Francisco earthquake of 1906 was pretty trivial, as the Earth measures things.

And, of course, at the other extreme we have to avoid the Velikovsky overkill: invoking an absurdly grandiose, ad-hoc set of catastrophic events to explain mythological trivia. We're going to set planets careening around like billiard balls, regardless of what other effects we should see . . . there's a little perspective missing there, too!

So what are some real Big Catastrophes? Not little belches like Mt. St. Helens or Krakatau; not just a magnitude 7.9 earthquake; not even an Ice Age (which is, after all, gradual in onset). Something Big, something that makes even a nuclear war look modest. And yet, something that's actually happened.

One that's almost a cliché now is impact by a *big* object. Meteorite impact has become trendy for explaining the great extinction at the end of the Cretaceous Period, about 65 mil-

lion years ago, when the dinosaurs and a host of other critters died off. Impact explanations are also now being looked at seriously for other major and not-so-major extinctions in the geologic record.

Of course, a major impact on the Earth is now almost a cliché in SF, too: remember *Lucifer's Hammer* by Jerry Pournelle and Larry Niven, or Arthur C. Clarke's *Rendezvous with Rama*, or *Shiva Descending* by Gregory Benford and William R. Rotsler? So let's forget impact for now, since it's already so popular.

Another possible catastrophe is a nearby supernova, a vast stellar explosion. A nearby supernova may have sparked the condensation of the solar nebula to create the Solar System, by giving the nebula the push it needed to start collapsing. Once the collapse began, it continued under the nebula's own gravity, and finally the core of the nebula condensed into the Sun, while the rest of the Solar System accreted from the leftovers. We suspect a nearby supernova for the trigger push because we see the products of short-lived radioactive elements in meteorites that date from the Solar System's formation. Such elements must have been formed not long before and injected into the nebula—and that points to a nearby supernova. Supernovae, as AMAZING® Stories readers already know, are element factories. (See my article "The Importance of Being Semi-Semi-Stable," March 1991.)

The odds argue that there's been at least one nearby supernova since the Earth's formation, too, although we don't know for sure, and it would have had lots of untoward effects on the biosphere. The sleet of high-energy particles and atom fragments sprayed out by the stellar explosion would have caused high mutation rates at the very least, and may well have caused major extinctions.

Anyway, a close supernova has been treated science-fictionally by Poul Anderson in a novel named, reasonably enough, *Supernova*. (It was actually republished as *Day of Burning*.) So let's also leave this astronomical catastrophe and stick to Earth. What can (and has) "Mother" Earth thrown at us?

I said that ice ages themselves are not really catastrophic, but they can sure have catastrophic events associated with them. At the end of the last Ice Age, central Washington State was swept by gigantic floods—the Spokane Floods. A tongue of the ice sheet up in Idaho dammed meltwater to form a gigantic lake, but as the lake filled, the dam started to float, and whoosh! (The features left by the Spokane Floods have also proven to be nice analogs of Mars surface features that seem to have resulted from giant floods.) I've described the Spokane Floods in detail in "The Winters of the World," August 1991.

For another terrestrial example, the eruptions themselves are not the only thing that make a volcano hazardous. It turns out that volcanic cones, those classic mountains like Mt. Rainier, or Fujiyama, or Mt. St. Helens, are really jerry-built structures, and they're prone to collapse. Abruptly, massively, and catastrophically. (In fact, the people worrying about volcanic hazards now worry about such massive landslides as much as actual eruptions.)

These mountains are what a geologist calls "stratovolcanoes," i.e., they're made up of stacked layers of debris erupted from the volcanic vent. Some layers are good, solid lava flows, but much weaker layers are also intermixed: ash flows, pulverized rock with no more strength and internal cohesion than any pile of loose dirt; and debris flows, or "lahars," which are coarse mixtures of mud and rubble. Such a mixture can flow like a thick liquid; in fact, it's a bit like wet concrete.

All this stuff is stacked, higgledy-piggledy, in a fashion so casual as to make a civil engineer wince. And, every now and then the layers give way, and a major portion of the mountain falls down. Mt. Rainier, in Washington State, lost a thousand feet or so of elevation about 5000 years ago. One fine day, a whole side of the mountain collapsed, forming a massive debris flow that roared its way tens of miles to the north, toward Puget Sound. (The Seattle suburb of Puyallup, 50 miles from Mt. Rainier, sits on the tip of this debris flow.) This collapse was possibly triggered by an *extremely* small eruption on the mountain itself.

Mt. Shasta, in northern California, also collapsed massively not so long ago—within the last few thousand years. North of the volcano lies a curious hummocky terrain made of rubble and gravel. It contains low hills and shallow basins (which become ponds briefly when it rains) and covers dozens of square miles. Interstate 5 between Weed and Yreka runs through this area, for those who've been that way.

This hummocky area is made of pieces of Mt. Shasta. *Lots* of pieces. Most of the north face of the mountain collapsed in a gigantic landslide and flowed north as a mammoth debris flow, a traveling layer of dirt and broken rock that buried the landscape below.

But I've already made fun of some classic volcanic eruptions as being No Big Deal in the geologic scheme of things. It's true, none of the aforementioned are very large eruptions, as such things go. They're catastrophic only if you're unfortunate—or foolhardy—enough to be standing in their immediate vicinity when they occur. And this is also true with these massive landslides.

But volcanic eruptions far, far larger than anything modern humans have dealt with have tormented the biosphere, and in the (relatively) recent geologic past at that.

One kind of eruption is flood basalt. Basalt is an extremely common type of lava that's almost black when it cools. It's very fluid when it's hot, about like heavy engine oil. (Hawaiian eruptions are basalt, for those of you who've seen pictures of Kilauea in action.) In composition, basalt is relatively poor in silica (silicon dioxide, SiO_2), but rich in iron and magnesium. That's why it's fluid: high-silica lavas, like the ones at Mt. St. Helens, are very viscous, or sticky, and thus flow sluggishly. (For the same reason, high silica lavas are more dangerous to be around. Because they're sticky, gases can't escape easily; so they tend to explode instead. Gases just bubble quietly out of a basalt.)

Now, "flood" basalt means just that—an eruption so large that a vast

tract of land is flooded with fluid, molten rock. Southeastern Washington State and adjacent Oregon are covered with dozens of basalt lava flows hundreds of square miles in extent. Literally cubic miles of molten rock gushed out at the surface, from fissures in extreme western Idaho, and spilled hundreds of miles across Oregon and Washington. Many flows even continued out the valley of the Columbia River through the Cascade Range, past the site of modern Portland, and into the Pacific—there to build up huge pods of rock embedded in the offshore sediments.

Catastrophic indeed. Imagine covering hundreds of square miles with molten rock at 1000° C., all within a week or so. There must have been vast effects far beyond the puddled lava itself: forest and prairie fires raging beyond the advancing lava, disruption of river drainages . . . in fact, for a brief time the entire Columbia River must have billowed up into an immense cloud of steam, as its course was blocked by the lava. Weather patterns would also have been skewed. A column of hot air would have boiled up above the lava, and to replace it, high winds would rush in from all sides. That would have caused a firestorm around the flow.

And then: that miles-wide, barren expanse of black rock, soilless and hard; how long did it take to reseed? Surely hundreds of years, as winds gradually blew dirt in so new plants could take root.

And after a few tens to a hundred thousand years, the whole thing happened again, when the next flood basalt erupted.

These eruptions are only about 15 million years old—less than one-fourth as old as the youngest dinosaurs. They're not a phenomenon restricted to a youthful, active Earth. In fact, modern types of trees got fossilized occasionally. Sometimes the period between eruptions was so long—hundreds of thousands of years—that lots of sediments were deposited atop the basalt surface, and forests grew up on them. Then these forests were obliterated by the next eruption, and the sediment they grew in is now a layer of sandstone sandwiched between lava flows. Occasionally, stumps from the burning forest were preserved, if they got pushed down into water and mud by the basalt flowing above. Most of the heat from a lava flow goes upward, and in any case the wood was protected from the air so it couldn't burn. Then later, over geologic time, the charred wood in these stumps was slowly replaced by minerals deposited by groundwater—"petrified"—to make the fossils we see today. (For those of you in the Northwest, see the Gingko Forest State Park, where Interstate 90 crosses the Columbia River.)

These eruptions demonstrate the resilience of the biosphere, too. Despite a calamity on the scale of a local nuclear exchange, the biosphere survived, and even recolonized the cooled basalt surfaces quickly, within a few thousands to tens of thousands of years. Earth is a capricious mother, but life is a more tenacious offspring than it's sometimes given credit for.

Flood basalts may sometimes have had a role in major extinctions, though. A huge set of flood basalts in India, the Deccan basalts, erupted around the time the dinosaurs went extinct, and worldwide fallout from these eruptions has been proposed as an alternative explanation of the extinction. This looks less likely now, though, because new work has shown that the Deccan lavas were erupted sporadically over several million years, rather than all at once.

It's even been suggested that flood basalts could result from a major impact. Rock kilometers deep in the Earth is hot enough to melt at the low pressures on the surface, but at depth the very high pressures from the weight of the surrounding rock keep it solid. Take that pressure off by digging a *big* hole in the ground, though, and the rock would melt. The crater left by a major impact is a good way to dig a big hole in a hurry. Still, even if this happens sometimes, it can't account for all flood basalts: too many of the things erupt in the same general area, over too long a period of time. They must reflect ongoing processes deep in the Earth. If impact were the whole story, you'd expect a large pulse of volcanism right then, and nothing afterwards.

Even flood basalts are not the worst eruptions that have happened. Giant ignimbrite eruptions were far worse. "Ignimbrite" (stress the second syllable) comes from Latin for "fire-cloud." These are igneous rocks formed from molten rock particles dispersed in hot gas. When the particles settle out, they're still hot enough to stick together, to form rocks as solid as lava flows. Because the particles weld when they settle, another name for ignimbrites is "welded tuffs."

Ignimbrites are erupted as bits of molten rock dispersed in superheated gas, rather like the froth on a soda. The gas-plus-suspended-particles mixture acts just like a debris flow, flowing as a separate liquid under the air over the ground surface. Such a hot debris flow is called a *nuee ardente* (French for "glowing cloud"; pronounced, very approximately, "noo-*ay* ar-*dahn*"). We've seen small-scale nuees ardentes from some modern eruptions. For example, the town of St. Pierre on the island of Martinique was obliterated by a nuee ardente in 1902.

Nuees ardentes are *hot*. By comparison, the Mt. St. Helens ashcloud, even near the mountain, was little more than a dust storm. Near the mountain, Mt. St. Helens ash (which was just powdered rock) was suspended in gas at a few hundred degrees C.—plenty hot enough to scald animal life, to be sure, but to weld silicate grains together requires temperatures on the order of a thousand degrees C. So a typical nuee ardente, where it deposits welded tuff, is several times as hot as the Mt. St. Helens cloud. (By the way, the gas from a volcanic eruption consists mostly of H_2O—very hot to *extremely* hot steam. Steam, even at "just" 300° C., will set wood on fire.)

Now, in the Great Basin of the western U.S., in Nevada and extending into California, Arizona, and Utah, are tens to hundreds of vast ignimbite sheets, each the result of a single gigantic eruption. Some of these ignimbrites cover hundreds of square miles—and that, of course, is just where they're preserved, where the rock was still hot enough to weld

when it settled out. Hot ash, but not hot enough to weld, must originally have extended for hundreds of miles farther from the original eruption. Since it didn't weld, though, it was easily eroded away.

Nuees ardentes so big they covered hundreds of square miles with welded tuff are so large—so beyond current and historical experience—as to be almost inconceivable. J. Hoover Mackin, a geologist describing some of these eruptions in the *American Journal of Science*, wrote in 1960:

"Tertiary eruptions of the Great Basin would compare with those of modern times as the explosion of a hydrogen bomb with the bursting of a firecracker."

People don't usually write like that in a technical journal!

And like the flood basalts, these eruptions were not a youthful exuberance of a hot young Earth. These ignimbrites in this area range from perhaps 40 to less than 1 million years old—and for comparison, the dinosaurs went extinct about 65 million years ago.

The major ignimbrite eruptions probably had a large effect on both plant and animal evolution in North America. An eruption out in Nevada would have blanketed much of North America with ash, and in fact debris from these eruptions has been found in sediments out in the Great Plains. Smothering the countryside with ash occasionally would discourage forests; so the grasses, which can tolerate such indignities much better, got an evolutionary boost. Hence, animals that feed on grasses, such as the horse (which arose in North America) also got a boost.

So to sum up, our own "Mother" Earth can throw quite a tantrum occasionally. Life is nothing more than a surface scum on this planet, subject to cruel and capricious destruction from the terrible pressures and temperatures below. Remember that next time someone tells you about how awful humanity is, and how sweet things would be if Nature were just left alone.

And last, such *really* big eruptions have never been treated in SF, to my knowledge. All you budding authors out there, take note! ✦

About the Authors

The more **Phillip C. Jennings** stories we publish, the more material Phil gives us for the obligatory blurb. We're in no immediate danger of running out of Jennings stories, so if you keep reading this space you're bound to find out a lot about this magazine's most prolific author of recent times.

"'Word Salad' may lead to questions about my beliefs," writes Phil, who then proceeds to answer the questions: "I'm a sorry sort of Episcopalian, in favor of the institutional Church as opposed to demagoguery. When agnostics pick on Christians, I defend Christianity. When Christians pick on science, I defend science. Of course, sometimes the bullies outnumber the good guys, and it's wiser to shut up and sneak around them."

Gregory Benford might also qualify as this magazine's most prolific author of recent times, depending on how you define "recent." Greg's name has appeared on forty-six articles and stories in these pages, counting "Touches," which is his first fiction piece for us since "The Rose and the Scalpel" (January 1990). A two-time Nebula Award winner, he first appeared in AMAZING® Stories in November 1969.

Norman Partridge makes his professional magazine debut with "Eighty-Eight Sins," a story that is based on a real place on the island of Kauai. Or, at least, a place that *used* to exist: "The last time I was there," he tells us, "a bulldozer was hard at work and a new house was being built, and I knew I had a story."

We thought that "Shadow Album" (July 1991) might be a tough act for **James Alan Gardner** to follow. Little did we know that he would follow it with "Hardware Scenario G-49," which has nothing in common with his earlier story except that both of them are impossible not to enjoy.

It's nice to welcome **Maya Kaathryn Bohnhoff** to these pages after seeing her earlier work in *Analog* for the last couple of years. Yes, "The Devil His Due" is one of *those* stories, but we thought it handled the old deal-with-the-devil theme in a unique and memorable way.

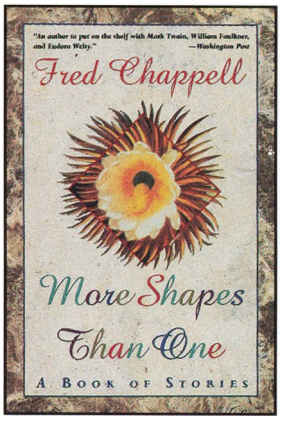
Ben Bova made his debut as an sf writer in the February 1960 issue of this magazine, with a story called "A Long Way Back"—a prophetic title under the present circumstances, because it *is* a long way back to his last story for us. "The Long Fall" is appearing more than twenty-one years after "Blood of Tyrants" (May 1970). The absence is understandable, because he's been kind of busy in the meantime, including but not limited to a couple of long stints as editor of *Analog* and *Omni*. But now he's back, and we hope it's to stay.

Lois Tilton has had twenty pieces of short fiction published over the last five years. "Aristodemos," her first work for us, is one of a group of related stories . . . so if you like this one, maybe there'll be more "Spartan" tales in our future.

Thomas R. McDonough is just the right person to create a story like "Gunfight at Bertha's Saloon," since he serves as the SETI Coordinator of the Planetary Society. If "Bertha's" *is* an example of what the search for extraterrestrial intelligence will produce, we're in for some fun over the next century or two.

Ted Reynolds reports that the collaborative story created by him and **William F. Wu** was "conceived in Moscow in 1963, birthed in Michigan in 1980, and raised to maturity by Bill Wu in California and, being of age, is now on its own." And, considering recent events in the real world, on its own not a moment too soon. We tried to rush the story into print, fearing that it might be outdated by what's happening in the arena of world politics—but we're pleased to discover that, if anything, the plot of the story is even more plausible now than it would have been a few months ago. See if you agree. ✦

Book Reviews



Orbital Resonance
by John Barnes
Tor Books, December 1991
320 pages, $19.95 (hardcover)

Robert Heinlein and Andre Norton have for years set the standards against which young-adult SF is measured, but that may be about to change. *Orbital Resonance* is quite possibly the best new SF novel for younger readers to come along since Heinlein and Norton, but it's no clone of either author's style. Which would be impressive all by itself—except that John Barnes has also written a book with enough high-tech appeal and speculative punch that it could well wind up on the major award ballots come next year.

Barnes sets his story on the orbital habitat *Flying Dutchman,* in a 21st century where Earth-based civilization has been worse than decimated by assorted political conflicts and biological or environmental disasters. Children aboard the habitat are almost universally gifted in some way, receive an intensive and innovative education, and can acquire adult status in their early teens through an examination process.

Teenager Melpomene Murray is both the book's narrator and its subject. On one level, the novel is just what it appears to be: Melpomene's personal journal, which she's writing on assignment as a sort of guidebook for Earthbound readers. But as Mel and her classmates, particularly one Randy Schultz, begin to work out just what's expected of the young people generally, and what's been planned for their personal futures, the reader slowly realizes that Barnes is posing some frighteningly honest questions about the rights of individuals versus humanity's overall struggle for survival.

Melpomene is an utterly convincing storyteller. She has a teenager's vibrant enthusiasm for life and a corresponding impatience with all things unpredictable. She also has a typical teenage vocabulary, liberally laced with slang (though a couple of the futuristic coinages grate on the ear), and a cheerfully adversarial relationship with her computer, which regularly flags passages in her text that it thinks will confuse Earthbound readers. Not once does Barnes break character or lose control of Mel's narrative voice.

But *Orbital Resonance* isn't just a nearly flawless teenage space-cadet novel. It's also science-fictional speculation of the first order, in which Barnes projects terrestrial catastrophe and then explores the responses to it, on Earth and in orbit, from the far side of the disaster. His characters have asked hard questions about humanity's future, individually and as a species, and the answers they've evolved are at the heart of the puzzles Melpomene and Randy discover and unravel.

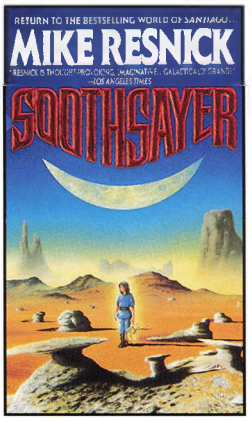
It's not that hard to find decent SF adventure novels on the stands these days. But it's vanishingly rare to find one that's also a topnotch ethical exploration of an all too plausible tomorrow. John Barnes has written a real winner here, one that just may turn out to be a classic. — *JCB*

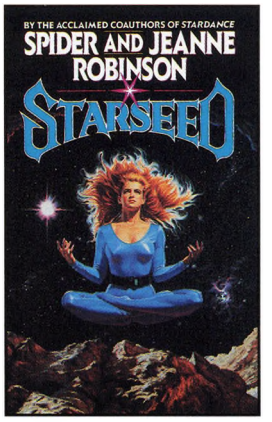
The Last Camel Died at Noon
by Elizabeth Peters
Warner Books, September 1991
352 pages, $18.95 (hardcover)

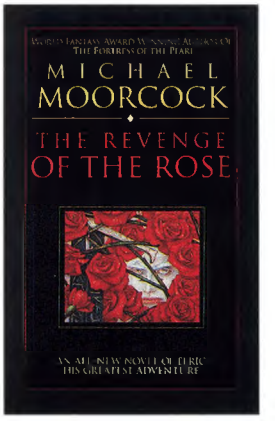
You can call this one science fiction —if you count Egyptology as the science in question. Or you can call it fantasy after the fashion of Edgar Rice Burroughs and Arthur Conan Doyle, complete with a lost city, mysterious priests, and a battle for an ancient throne. (Author Elizabeth Peters herself cites H. Rider Haggard as a major inspiration.) Mostly, however, *The Last Camel Died at Noon* is an old-style adventure novel with more plot twists and narrow escapes than all three Indiana Jones movies put together.

This is Peters's sixth tale to feature narrator Amelia Peabody, her archaeologist husband, Radcliffe Emerson, and their enterprising son Ramses. The time is 1897, and the setting is the Sudan, where three challenges await: dodging the tides of war, as British forces attempt to extend their dominion over the region; conducting an excavation of an ancient pyramid complex; and determining the fate of a long-lost explorer whose last message has only recently reached civilization.

The last of these goals quickly takes priority as unknown agents at-







tempt to lure ten-year-old Ramses away into the desert via hypnosis. An expedition into the sands nearly ends in disaster, but rescue materializes at the last moment, and the Emersons find themselves installed as guests in a fantastic hidden city where ancient Egyptian and Nubian ways survive largely unchanged by time. But the missing explorer's fate remains mysterious, and a power struggle is in progress between rival candidates for the city's rulership. The explorer's reckless nephew, also lured into the city, further complicates matters, and before long the adventurers are prisoners and potential sacrifices to the gods.

Readers of Amelia Peabody's previous adventures will find the style familiar, while newcomers should be impressed by its peppery self-confidence and the light but authoritative sense of time and place. Peters's Egyptological credentials are strong as well, and her invented City of the Holy Mountain has an air of authenticity about it that isn't often found in this sort of yarn.

But the novel is in no danger of being overrun by dry history. Far from it—Peters expertly manages a large, lively cast and deals out revelations and complications with the expert dexterity of a specialist in sleight-of-hand. Not even readers who cheat by turning to the last page ahead of time will anticipate all the surprises Peters keeps hidden up her literary sleeve. As a mystery writer, Peters is an award-winner, and she's at the top of her form here.

But whether you call it a mystery thriller, a peculiar sort of alternate history, or a swashbuckling period piece, *The Last Camel Died at Noon* is high-quality entertainment with a vengeance, and well worth the pilgrimage out of the SF section at the bookstore. — *JCB*

Sherwood
by Parke Godwin
Morrow Books, August 1991
527 pages, $20.00 (hardcover)

This has been a banner year for Robin Hood; we've had two new movies (one with novelization) and an anthology about the green-clad archer of Sherwood Forest, and now comes the first of two books about Robin from Parke Godwin, an author well known both for historical fantasy and more modern tales. Yet while *Sherwood* should get high marks as a solid work of historical fiction, I can't say I'm any happier with it than I was with any of the year's other Robin Hood material.

The problem isn't the setting, though Godwin moves his story from Robin's usual twelfth-century milieu to the years just following the Norman conquest. As Godwin indicates, this shift allows him to frame the conflict as a struggle between the newly arrived Norman rulers and the native Saxon power structure, giving the legend somewhat stronger context than the traditional background provides.

Nor is it characterization; while Robin is drawn as an idealist, Godwin also gives him a good sense of the possible and an appropriate degree of cautiousness when warranted. Other characters are also neatly sketched, and Ralf Fitz-Gerald, Sheriff of Nottingham, gets a share of the viewpoint and much more sympathy than the standard ballads and swashbucklers provide.

And it's not that Godwin ignores the traditions, either. In fact, a major sequence reprises the familiar tale of Robin's disguised visit to a Nottingham archery tourney, where he wins the gold arrow under the Sheriff's nose, and the relationship between Robin, Marian, and the Sheriff becomes even more than usually triangular in the course of the narrative.

It may simply be that *Sherwood* is just too big for its own good. At better than 500 pages, it's a fat book with a somewhat leisurely pace, beginning early in Robin's life and finishing well before its end (a sequel is promised). And its often contemplative tone runs against the perception of Robin as a swashbuckler and man of action.

In principle, there's nothing wrong with that, but an audience that expects Robin Hood fiction to highlight adventure over political insight will find the novel a slow read. Those seeking thoughtful historical insight will be better satisfied, but even they may find the book rather ponderous. — *JCB*

A Gathering Evil
by Michael A. Stackpole
GDW Books, August 1991
327 pages, $4.95 (paperback)

There's a growing intersection these days between the realms of "men's adventure," horror, and high-tech near-future settings masquerading as cyberpunk. One of the latest voyages into this complex blend of category fiction is Michael Stackpole's *A Gathering Evil,* but where many such efforts disintegrate into confusion, Stackpole's gradually comes together into as good a tale as this crossbreeding is likely to produce.

Tycho Caine looks at first like a standard men's adventure hero: he's instinctively expert with guns and describes them with crisp precision, he can blend with equal ease into a high society party or a gang of street fighters, and he tends to find himself at the center of events rather than among the bystanders. But there's a catch: Caine's past is a blank, hidden behind an amnesiac block, and the price of recovering his identity may run much higher than fulfilling an assassination contract.

Stackpole's extrapolated Phoenix adopts the increasingly common theme of a city dominated by corporate empires; in this case, the unique touch is a citywide grid of solar cells that literally block light from reaching ground level, turning the area below into an often dangerous realm of street folk dwelling in permanent darkness. But the technology is not otherwise far removed from today's, and outside the city, the desert remains much as it was.

That's not insignificant, because it eventually becomes clear that the twin mysteries of Caine's identity and the mission he now can't remember are tied to ancient supernatural powers of extraordinary malevolence. Stackpole combines bits of Indian lore with wholly invented horrors, and connects the setting to classic pulp-adventure traditions through a variety of allusions to the original Shadow (who may or may not make a personal appearance as the mysterious El Espectro).

For the most part, the tale unfolds quickly and smoothly, though there's some surprisingly clunky prose in the first couple of chapters. It's no literary classic, but *A Gathering Evil* is a credible entry on the gritty side of the high-tech horror spectrum. — *JCB*

The Aeneid of Virgil
translated by Edward McCrorie
Donald M. Grant, Publisher
308 pages, hardcover

Some books should be in every library, whether the owner is a reader of the fantastic or not. *The Aeneid* is one. Although not in the same class as *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey,* it's certainly up there among the classics of world literature, and its images have haunted and inspired artists through the ages.

The Aeneid was written by Rome's greatest epic poet, Virgil, between 30 and 20 B.C., under the patronage of the emperor Augustus. It wasn't quite finished when Virgil died, but it's nearly complete.

The story: after Troy is sacked by the Greeks, the survivors are forced to leave. Under Aeneas's leadership, they make their way through various lands, are constantly forced onward, and ultimately make their way to Italy, where they found Rome. There is enough magic and mystery for a dozen fantasy novels; particularly effective is a visit to the underworld.

But is the translation good? Therein hangs the chief problem of most such editions. Does this version maintain the rhythm of the original, the power and magnificence of language that make it great—or is it a rote translation, changing words to their closest English counterparts?

One good sign: the translation is rendered into verse, with the original line numbers included for comparison. (Many sloppy translations render the poem into narrative form, as though it's a novel.) The first few lines are always a giveaway:

My song is of war and the first man from a Trojan
coast to arrive in Italy, forced by Fates to Lavinian
shore: the power of Gods repeatedly tossed him
on land and sea, Juno's fierce and remembering anger
caused him to suffer greatly in war while founding a city,
bringing his Gods to Latium, leading to Latin
and Alban fathers, to high walls of the Romans.

That's not quite the way I would have translated it (in my fourth year of Latin studies, I read much of *The Aeneid* in the original Latin), but it carries the poem's feel while remaining faithful to the text, which is the most important criterion. Leafing through this new translation, browsing through the most exciting parts, you still get caught up in the story. It's a good translation, all things considered: solid, faithful, and at times quite poetic in its own right. Paired with some stunning illustrations (11 in color, 14 in black and white) by Luis Ferreira, it makes quite an attractive package. This is, indeed, the sort of book you don't see much of anymore.

This edition is signed by the translator and the artist, and limited to 500 copies. All in all, a delightful book. If you're in need of a copy of *The Aeneid,* you could do far worse than to pick this one up. — *JGB*

More Shapes Than One
by Fred Chappell
St. Martin's Press
208 pages, $17.95 (hardcover)

This collection of 11 stories is quite an odd duck. Fred Chappell, the author, is a Literary person . . . as in Literature-with-a-capital-L. You can tell by looking at the copyright page, where you learn that these stories appeared in *American Review 26, The Fred Chappell Reader, The Akros Review, Georgia Review, The Chattahoochee Review, The Texas Review, Appalachian Heritage, Cold Mountain Review, Madison Review,* and *Denver Quarterly.* However, a few also appeared in *Deathrealm, Weird Tales,* and *The Year's Best Horror.* Yes, there's something definitely odd here!

Clearly, Chappell is a horror writer who's gone the literary route. The

stories here more than verge on the fantastic; they reek of it. In "Weird Tales," we learn where Lovecraft's cosmic visions really came from. In "The Somewhere Doors," we meet a writer reminiscent of Clark Ashton Smith, who is given a way to escape our world . . . if he wants it. In "The Adder"—one of my favorites—*The Necronomicon* begins rewriting all the classics of world literature.

The rest of the stories touch on the bizarre and the fantastic as well. You can find whole worlds in a flower in "Linnaeus Forgets," or experience dreams made—literally—tangible in "Mankind Journeys Through Forests of Symbols," which is another favorite for its sheer surrealism:

> There was a dream, and a big gaudy thing it was, too. . . .
>
> The dream would measure about two stories tall and five hundred yards wide and it lay lengthwise on the highway for a distance of at least two miles. It was thick and foggy, in consistency something like cotton candy. Its predominant color was chartreuse, but this color was interlaced with coiling threads of bright scarlet and yellow and suffused in some areas with cloudy masses of mauve and ocher. It had first been reported about seven o'clock in the morning, but it had probably appeared earlier. Traffic was light on that stretch.

Fred Chappell is a writer who deserves more of an audience within the fantasy and horror fields. Give him a try. — *JGB*

Time Frames: A Speculative Poetry Anthology
edited by Terry A. Garey
Rune Press
97 pages, $12.00 (hardcover)

Time Frames is the first hardcover speculative poetry anthology since 1984's *Burning With A Vision*. Rather than try to assemble a large number of poems by different people, editor Garey picked eleven poets and selected the best from their *oeuvres*. The poets are Ruth Berman, John Grey, Mark Rich, Steve Sneyd, Robert Frazier, Geoffrey A. Landis, Ann K. Schwader, Roger Dutcher, Carmilla Decarnin, Alan Stewart, and John Calvin Rezmerski.

I don't claim to understand poetry; basically, I either like it or don't. I enjoyed more than half of the material here, which is generally a good sign. My only criticism—and it's more of an observation than a complaint—is that several of the best, and best-known, poets in the field aren't included. What poetry anthology can be complete without Tom Disch and Ursula K. LeGuin?

Still, at twelve bucks, it's quite a bargain. You can order from: Rune Press, c/o The Minnesota Science Fiction Society, P.O. Box 8297, Lake Street Station, Minneapolis MN 55408. Add $2.00 for postage. — *JGB*

Soothsayer
by Mike Resnick
Ace Books, November 1991
288 pages, $4.50 (paperback)

Soothsayer is Mike Resnick's first book in a series set in the same universe as *Santiago*. This book is the story of Penelope, a child with the gift of precognition. Being able to see the future has its advantages, and many people would like to control her. As a result, most of bounty hunters in the universe are trying to capture her so they can sell her off to the highest bidder.

Which is how we meet Cemetery Smith, the Forever Kid, Three-Fisted Ollie, the space pirate Yankee Clipper, King Tout, Merlin the Magician, and Mouse the Thief.

Precognition is a useful defense, which is how Penelope protects herself from this troupe of nasties. Even when she is captured, she doesn't stay that way for long, and people who try to hurt her have a terrible tendency to end up dead. If you can see the future, you can manipulate the present to make sure that the future that you want to happen does.

The Mouse becomes her protector, and the two of them, chased by what seems to be most of the known universe, travel from world to world, narrowly escaping from each trap by Mouse's wiles and Penelope's warnings, as Penelope begins to understand her talent. The story builds to the final climax on the planet Killhaven, when it comes time to stop running. Thanks to Penelope's talent, the ending is never in question, although her victory is not easy and not without sacrifices from her allies, and not always voluntarily.

Resnick's style in *Soothsayer* is similar to the one he used in *Ivory*; he is not so much an author writing a novel as a bard sitting before the fire creating myth. The characters, with the exception of Penelope, are essentially archetypes, and the story itself is in the style of the classic myths: the normal person with a special gift who is prophesied to use the gift for the good of Mankind.

Resnick is one of the top storytellers in the field, and *Soothsayer* is the first in a series of books about Penelope, who will become Oracle, and finally Prophet. It is a wonderfully written, lyrical tale, and I honestly can't think of anything negative to say about it. — *CVR*

Starseed
by Spider and Jeanne Robinson
Ace Books, October 1991
256 pages, $17.95 (hardcover)

Starseed is a long-awaited sequel to *Stardance,* the novella that won the Nebula and Hugo awards (for 1977 and 1978 respectively). What struck me as special about the earlier work was the way the authors were able to take an art form that is visual—dance—and use it in a story in a way that makes dance special to people who have not studied it.

Spider Robinson was at one point one of my favorite writers. His early stories, like "The Time Traveller," "The Law of Conservation of Pain," and "God is an Iron" looked at very real, well-developed characters with flaws and feelings, and the stories generated strong emotional responses. Over time his stories have gotten shallower and less effective, the emotions forced and his characters shallow and tending toward stereotypical strawmen. Instead of Thomas Hauptman coming to grips with so-

ciety in "The Time Traveller," we get Lady Sally telling us that whorehouses don't have to be exploitative of women, and that if we all just work together we can make this world a happy place.

That's my main gripe with Robinson's work. His early stories included a sensitivity to many important issues: feminism, motherhood, physical disability and others. He did a good job of raising his readers' awareness, teaching them about the issues, and making people care about them.

Over time, I felt that he'd stopped discussing these issues with his readers and started simply lecturing. The turning point for me was *Night of Power,* which was about racial bigotry. Robinson let his anger about racism take control of the story, and the result was a work that I found angry, dogmatic and insulting. I've been wary of his work ever since.

Because of this, I almost skipped *Starseed*; I was afraid it might sour my memories of *Stardance.* But I tried it, and I'm glad I did. While it has some of the problems that have bothered me in his other books, it rises above them. If you can get past the first fifty pages, which are poorly paced, not very interesting, and not really relevant to the plot, you'll end up enjoying a good story. The Robinsons put you inside the skin of an aging dancer who chooses freefall and Symbiosis to getting old and losing her dance. The conflict between the Stardancers and the rest of humanity is carefully put together and realistic, and the training regimen of a Stardancer is a fascinating process that was full of interesting, human people.

Because it starts very slowly, I almost gave up on Starseed a couple of times, but once the book got involved in the dance training and the main conflict, it turned out to be worth pushing my way through the early problems. — *CVR*

Prince of Chaos
by Roger Zelazny
William Morrow, November 1991
256 pages, $19.00 (hardcover)

The good news is that the latest book in the Amber series is out. The bad news is that *Prince of Chaos* is the latest book, but not the last one. Much as I enjoy Fantasy's version of a soap opera, I think the plot is getting a bit thin; as I read the book I found myself gritting my teeth a bit and thinking "get on with it."

If you aren't already an Amber fan, you don't want to start in the middle, unless you like being hopelessly confused. These books make no pretense of standing alone. Newcomers to Zelazny's tale of intrigue and royal plotting should buy a copy of *Nine Princes in Amber* and start with that.

This isn't heavy reading. Amber books should be considered a guilty pleasure. I use them as a fun way to spend an evening when I don't want to think too hard, but don't feel like indulging in the mindless silliness of someone like Craig Shaw Gardner. What Zelazny writes is action/adventure intrigue, a soap opera with dozens of characters running around so that you almost need a scorecard to keep track of them.

Zelazny's strength is plotting. At any one time, he might have eight or more subplots all running through a book at full speed, but he never loses control of them and everything comes together at the appropriate time to show that they all were interrelated all along. Zelazny's also quite good at grabbing what seems to be inconsequential details from previous volumes and turning them into issues that were important all along.

If plotting is his strength, it's also his weakness, since it seems that any time Zelazny comes up with a subplot that looks interesting, he feels compelled to toss it in. It should not have taken six books to finish this series, but the author couldn't tie up all the loose ends created in the first four books in this one. Much of the complication is unnecessary, and the careful excising of a couple of the subplots could have kept things from growing out of control.

It's obvious that the next book will end things, because most of *Prince of Chaos* is spent tying up loose ends. There is still a lot to be resolved, though. The second Amber series is flabby and not as good as it could have been, carrying on just long enough for the interest to wear thin and for loyal fans like myself to see things through to the end out of loyalty. That's a disappointment for a series that started out as strong as it did. — *CVR*

The Revenge of the Rose
by Michael Moorcock
Ace Books, November 1991
256 pages, $17.95 (hardcover)

The Revenge of the Rose is the latest volume about Michael Moorcock's character Elric, the albino Prince of Melniboné. Although Elric is one of the classic characters of the fantasy genre, I hadn't read the series until Ace released the paperback of *The Fortress of the Pearl.* That book impressed me enough that I took the entire series (*The Revenge of the Rose* is the eighth Elric book) on vacation with me and spent a wonderful few days immersed in the universe in which Elric resides.

Unfortunately, this book isn't up to the quality of the rest of the series. There isn't anything specifically wrong with it, but Moorcock has set himself a high standard in the previous volumes and this time he falls short.

In *The Revenge of the Rose,* Elric is called upon by his dead father to locate and return his soul to him. His father had been in a fight between his patron demon, Arioch and another demon, the Count Mashabak. In an attempt to keep himself by being acquired by one or the other on his death, he hid his soul in a box, which was later stolen and transported to parts unknown many years ago.

The plot has potential, but Moorcock never does anything special with it. The story plods along, and Elric finds the missing box with surprising ease. Yet there are some twists, and the depiction of the final battle that leaves Elric in command of his father's soul is the kind of writing that I was expecting from the entire book. The first three-quarters of the work, though, seems to simply be jogging in place waiting for something to happen. — *CVR* ✦

Pay Any Price, Bear Any Burden

Ted Reynolds and William F. Wu

Illustration by Carol Heyer

1442 / Day 0

The final briefing took place in a small conference room in the Kremlin that was luxuriously furnished in old, heavily embroidered nineteenth-century Russian furniture.

"... and welcome you," said Karamzin, the Minister of Defense of the Union of Confederated Republics. He was a gruff, bearlike man who paused at intervals for his interpreter. His suit coat threatened to pop its buttons any minute. "I know Major Bylinsky of the former Red Army will work with you effectively. . . ."

General Nicholas Brandes, U.S. Army, looked across the table at him but tuned out the

Russian's diplomatic fluff. Brandes sat between Colonel Kelsey, the President's watchdog (who masqueraded as Brandes's personal aide) and Ambassador Gertrude Harris, who had been part of the team that had negotiated the Vienna Treaty. The American interpreter sat on her other side. Brandes scowled across the table at Karamzin.

Aside from his interpreter, Karamzin's only companion on the far side of the table was Major Bylinsky, a ramrod-straight young officer who glared back at Brandes.

"Last year," said Karamzin through his interpreter, "we uncovered a small misunderstanding with your General Richard Chun, who insisted on an interpretation of protocol new to us. To avoid problems once you are in the field searching for nuclear material, we must review the understanding between our countries."

"It's a little late for that—" Brandes responded, then stopped when he felt Ambassador Harris's gloved hand on his arm.

"I don't see any harm," said Colonel Kelsey. "If the Minister would prefer."

So it was starting already. Brandes was certain that Kelsey was bolstered by private Presidential instruction, making him far more important than his rank would indicate. The President knew Brandes was one of the most outspoken opponents of the treaty. Still, Brandes would not find his job any easier for that fact, since he knew that the President would receive a detailed report on how carefully he carried out his duty within the treaty provisions.

"Go on," Brandes growled. The American interpreter's tone was more polite when he translated the sentence.

"Just as your team, General, is today choosing a sector of our nation to search for nuclear contraband, so our team is doing in your country. The search is limited to fourteen days from the minute of your leaving Moscow. The sectors searched last year have been sealed off by United Nations teams. This was done to prevent suspicion of any later transfer of contraband by either government into the cleared areas, as agreed upon."

"Of course," Brandes said impatiently. The Union of Confederated Republics, reorganized under a new constitution from the old Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, had supposedly destroyed its nuclear material or converted it to uses permissible according to the treaty, as the United States had. In the portfolio under Brandes's hand was, again supposedly, a list of all fissionable or fusionable material in the country. Naturally, it was all described as being legally employed.

Brandes didn't believe it for a minute. He was here to prove that President Blagonov and this Minister Karamzin were lying through their Russian teeth.

"Last year, General Chun asserted that the fourteen days in question began from the moment of his arrival in the selected sector. We accepted this at the time, for the sake of the treaty, but under protest and only with great reluctance."

Good for Rich, Brandes thought. Richard Chun had been picked for the sector investigation the year before precisely because he was as hard-nosed as Brandes . . . and because he had one more star.

"This year we have insisted that the fourteen days begin from the moment your team leaves Moscow."

"If a precedent has been set—"

"We've already agreed, Nick," said Ambassador Harris coolly.

Brandes stared at her, his jaw clenched. She turned away, leaving him to look at her wavy, steel-gray hair. The only reason not to tell him earlier had been to forestall argument.

"General Brandes, I have two more points to review," said Karamzin. "Within your chosen sector, you represent the United States with total authority, including jurisdiction over citizens and government officials; your country is responsible for any damage or injury. Second, no member of your team will leave the sector boundaries until the investigation has been completed."

"Of course." Brandes took this review as an insult.

"The time of investigation will be from 0600 Moscow time tomorrow, September 3rd, to 0600 Moscow time on September 17th. No member of your team will remain in any part of the U.C.R. save Moscow after the latter hour."

Karamzin left unsaid the obvious: that if someone of Brandes's open hostility to the Confederation were to violate these provisions, the treaty could be suspended. Brandes reflected soberly that sabotaging the treaty was one way to stop all this, but even he couldn't go that far. He had his orders.

"We are ready to select a sector," said Ambassador Harris.

Karamzin nodded agreement.

"Question," said Colonel Kelsey.

Brandes turned in surprise.

"Sir," said Kelsey. "If our business is concluded, may I ask an informal question?"

Karamzin stared at Kelsey while this was translated, leaning his bulk forward on his elbows. When he understood that this was a casual question, he grinned expansively and nodded.

"If your country destroyed all its nuclear warheads over a year ago—though I am not doubting this—why did your government insist on sector inspections instead of accepting one nationwide inspection? Why keep the world in suspense for six years?"

While this was translated, Brandes quivered with fury. Kelsey didn't need to ask that of the Russian; he was baiting Brandes, hoping to soften him up toward the Russians.

"Let us postulate," said Karamzin. "Suppose we immediately open our entire country to your inspectors. They find, of course, no nuclear weapons . . . but our investigators find that your nation is still fully armed and has an unchallenged military superiority over the entire world. You then dictate your terms."

We beard this before, Brandes thought angrily to himself. *And the Senate and the President bought it. All you're doing is parroting the standard line. No need to bother on my account.*

"No, my friend," Karamzin continued. "The sector investigations insure that our nations will be searched simultaneously insofar as possible. The system has also

worked, as you know, in Brazil, Canada, and China. The other nuclear powers of the world were considered not large enough to require sector search, with our two countries overseeing the investigations."

Kelsey was smiling idiotically, nodding agreement.

"Each year that no contraband is found," the Minister concluded, "confidence can grow that there is none in the others. Eventually, the final sectors will be small and able to hold, at worst, only the smallest amount of armed material hidden from satellite surveillance. But until we know that your country is unarmed, we must hold that same doubt over your heads."

"*Sir.*" Brandes snarled through his teeth, and found himself on his feet, burning with fury. "No one who knows the records of our two nations could believe that postulate. A democracy such as ours could not violate that trust, while yours is famous for treachery from Finland to Afghanistan, Czechoslovakia to Sinjiang. I know you have warheads hidden here and I will find them—"

"You're disgracing your uniform and your country," Ambassador Harris said frostily. "Sit down, Nick."

Brandes's face was hot with embarrassment as he suddenly realized what he was doing. He must look like a fool. Chastised but unchanged, he sat down.

He had his orders.

0612 / Day 1

The sight would have staggered the imagination of Americans and Russians from the '40s through the '90s, Brandes thought from his seat in the jet. A fleet of more than seventy USAF planes was flying eastward over the Confederation—over dams and cities, roads and factories—without a bomb in the bunch. Instead, they carried helicopters and state-of-the-art neutrino detectors. American satellite reconnaissance, capable of recording the teeth on a house key and the weave of a tweed jacket, had done all it could; now it was time for the crucial on-site verification.

The entire project would not have been possible without the truck- and chopper-mounted neutrino detectors that had been developed a decade ago. Brandes didn't understand all the science, but he got the basic picture. Neutrinos, given off at greater rates by the nuclear material he was seeking than by other sources, passed through virtually everything. That made them impossible to hide. These detectors, essentially screens made of a heavy, dense material, registered on the attached computer whenever a neutrino struck an atom, making it fluoresce. Brandes had been told that neutrinos were so small that they often missed atoms, but also that the scientists and technicians could tell when the number of signatures, as they called them, indicated the presence of an unusually active source.

Neutrino detectors, a small number of troops, and hard-headed skepticism were really his only tools.

As the sun rose higher ahead of the plane, it gleamed from solid blankets of cottony cloud beneath it. Brandes sat by the navigator's table, watching the small computerized map screen where a jagged green line marked their progress across Eurasia. They were nearing a town named Akumorinsk.

"How's our Red Major?" Brandes asked.

Kelsey grinned. "Made himself quite at home with our bourbon."

"I'll sober him up. Get me all-team coverage and the Kremlin."

Kelsey flipped a switch and spoke in crisp terms. The dour face of Minister Karamzin appeared on the com screen.

"I am officially notifying you in the name of the U.S. government," said Brandes. "We shall inspect Sector Four, in the Aral-Caspian region. This is official." He slapped off the connection without waiting for Karamzin's acknowledgement. Ambassador Harris seemed to like him; he was her problem.

A few hours later, Brandes quietly watched the green line move inexorably across the screen. The pilot turned to him.

"Sir? A message from the Kremlin for Major Bylinsky."

Brandes nodded. Bylinsky took the navigator's headset and knelt by the table, listening. The navigator switched on the com screen, where the face of Karamzin appeared, lips moving silently.

Bylinsky looked up. "General, one of our fighters has crashed in the southeast corner of Sector Four. We are being notified of its location and of a rescue and recovery team being sent from the nearest base, which is just outside the sector line. The pilot ejected; he is alive but injured. Is recovery permitted?"

Brandes hesitated. "What type of plane crashed, Major?"

Bylinsky relayed the question. "MiG 990, General."

"With nuclear propulsion. It is not all right." Brandes leaned toward the mouthpiece, then realized that the Minister might not have an interpreter at hand. "Major, tell him no rescue team crosses the sector line until after we have inspected the site." He refrained from offering his suspicion that the Russians might ignore his order and make excuses afterward. To the navigator, he said, "Take this plane right to that site. Get it from Bylinsky and plot a new course. Kelsey, notify the team—"

"This could mean the pilot's life, General." Bylinsky was seething. "We are hours yet from that point. What can—"

"I gave you a direct order, soldier!" Brandes barked.

Bylinsky began a fast stream of Russian into the mouthpiece.

Watchdog Kelsey stood at Brandes's shoulder. "Sir, why—"

"How do I know there's been a crash?" Brandes demanded. "What if that's the hiding place itself? Their so-called 'rescue team' may clear out the warheads before we get there, and claim residual radiation was caused by the nuclear pack in the fighter. We go in first, Colonel—then their rescue and recovery team."

Kelsey paused, then said, "The timing does seem a bit suspicious."

"An accident, General," Bylinsky said coldly, pulling off the headset. "A simple accident, compounded now

by possible murder." He took a deep breath. "Colonel Kutuzov will be awaiting your permission with a rescue and recovery team at the edge of the sector." He scribbled the coordinates of the site for the navigator and strode to the back of the plane.

Brandes leaned back in his seat, staring at the plodding green line again. The life of one Russian pilot—maybe—against the life of the United States. The decision had not been hard.

The crash site was in a remote mountainous area near the Afghanistan border. Brandes ordered a skeleton security team to parachute onto the site, radiation-safe, to secure it. He joined a larger contingent that landed at a rudimentary airstrip and drove in on commandeered vehicles.

A crash had indeed occurred. Brandes ordered an investigation with a neutrino detector, in case the crash had been planned to camouflage radiation in the area from hidden, shielded warheads. He also sent out a squad to triangulate on the radio signal coming from the downed pilot's personal transmitter.

The terrain was a maze of forested mountains and barren valleys. Brandes set up a command station on an empty bluff overlooking the site, far enough that he did not have to bother with a radiation suit. He stood with one foot resting on the bumper of a truck as the team approached the remains of the MiG.

The fighter had come in at a low angle, carving a long groove in the soft earth. It had finally plowed itself to a halt in a depression between two wind-rounded bare ridges, the wings ripped from the fuselage but still connected by twisted tendons of steel. He watched as the white-suited figures moved in carefully, checking the radiation levels. Some of the suits were already turning a delicate, warning pink, but they would have the power pack shielded rapidly.

Brandes was pacing the windy bluff impatiently when Kelsey approached with a walkie-talkie, his face an unreadable mask. "Sir? They found the pilot."

Brandes took the unit. "Brandes here. Go ahead, over."

The squad leader reported without ceremony. "Found 'im, sir. Deader'n hell. Bring 'im back? Over."

Brandes frowned but had to ask. "How long? Over."

"Not more'n a half hour, sir, the medic says. We're a long ways from ya and . . ."

Brandes handed the unit back to Kelsey while the squad leader was still talking. "Get the body. We'll leave it for the Red colonel."

"Colonel Kutuzov," Bylinsky said from behind Brandes.

Brandes turned. "I had forgotten the name. I apologize."

"And for the pilot whose life you unnecessarily sacrificed?"

Brandes walked away.

By midday, the team had established that the downed fighter was the only source of radiation in the vicinity. Brandes called off the search and notified Colonel Kutuzov's team that they could enter the area. The pilot's body would be transferred by truck to the nearest village to await pickup.

* * *

One-eighth of the Confederation that used to be the U.S.S.R. A slab of continent stretching from Astrakhan almost to Karaganda and Lake Balkash, from the Sinjiang Free State to Tiflis. High mountains, wide seas, arid deserts. Ancient cities and modern irrigation, including but not limited to some Confederated Republics called Uzbek, Tadzhik, Kirghiz, and Turkmen. Lots of haystacks in which to hide little nuclear needles. Sector Four.

In whatever way one searched out one's needles, it came down to chance or, at least, to statistics. The team, in two weeks, could not personally kick apart every metaphoric haystack in every field. The statisticians, however, could and did inform General Brandes cheerfully every morning that because they had taken apart a certain number of haystacks the day before in a certain number of fields with their neutrino detectors, none of the unsearched haystacks contained the deadly contraband, either. That still came down to chance, though admittedly reduced chance.

Officially, Brandes had a huge amount of manpower subject to him. He had the authorization to call up local Republic officialdom, the ex-Red Army divisions now employed on civilian work everywhere, and even school children if he desired, to aid in the hunt. Yet how far could he trust the reports of a Republic official or soldier, or even a gang of Young Pioneers, if an American investigator didn't check it out as well? That brought the argument back full circle. They couldn't kick apart every haystack in two weeks.

Even worse, Brandes wondered how much he could trust his own team. He had first felt uneasy when Gertrude Harris, for all her lifelong reputation for toughness with the Russians, appeared to have relaxed her caution completely. That unease had now multiplied enormously. People believed what they wanted to believe, and with the first real sniff of worldwide nuclear disarmament in the air, even the military had been affected.

He had two bugbears accompanying him everywhere. One was named Bylinsky and the other Kelsey; often Brandes felt that the easygoing good nature of the American was more deadly than the understandable foot-dragging of the Russian. And his team was studded with Colonel and Lieutenant and Sergeant Kelseys, accompanied by Lieutenant and Colonel and Major Bylinskys.

Brandes smiled grimly when he reached his conclusion: the trouble with the team was that it didn't have enough Brandeses in it. Did Kelsey never wake up at night in sweat, starkly seeing the fireballs rising over Wichita, or wherever he called home? Or couldn't he think about it, even to prevent it?

Brandes knew that the only way to destroy the horror of his dreams was to destroy the reality of the threat. With that driving him, he kicked and swore and drove his team to the limit, and a bit further. Yet day after day, his hunches failed to develop, and the mocking cache of death failed to reveal itself. Nightly he tossed without sleep, knowing the depth of the monomania that had seized him, but at the same time encouraging, emphasizing that same monomania.

0617 / Day 8

On the eighth morning, halfway to deadline, Brandes awoke to the conviction that he was going to end the two weeks actually insane, the victim of a permanent, self-induced bomb-seeking psychosis. He finally muttered, as he struggled into his pants, "Okay, Nicky boy, *go* crazy, but find those warheads and it's worth it." That gave him enough direction to reach breakfast, where Kelsey and Bylinsky sobered him completely.

"You should read Trotsky yourself," Kelsey was saying.

Bylinsky shook his head firmly. "I won't waste my time on a traitor whose words could only turn my stomach."

"Without reading his work, how do you know he was a traitor?"

"Life's too short," said Bylinsky. "I trust the judgement of friends who have looked into Trotsky. They all agree."

"But if . . ." Kelsey trailed off as Brandes arrived at the table. A cool formality descended like a blanket.

Brandes's personal squad was in a small town called Raskov this morning, some hundred kilometers from the Afghan border. He briefly laid out instructions for the day. Kelsey and Bylinsky were to head the squad, first inspecting the abandoned Sarkhon mines, where the quarter-mile deep shafts could both hide and shield radioactive material. Then they were to examine the records of a bridge, a dam, and two ex-Red Army work brigades, in search of unusual deployments of material, manpower, and traffic. That evening they would rendezvous with Brandes in Tashkent for a carefully planned psychological stunt.

Brandes was taking a chopper to review the other squads.

"Take care of yourself, General," Bylinsky said. "The team would be lost without you."

Brandes barely refrained from planting a fist in the Russian's gently mocking face.

At noon, Brandes called Kelsey's plane. A young private answered. Kelsey's group was behind schedule, he reported. They were still at the Drubnotskoii Dam, and Kelsey had been in the control tower for over an hour. Brandes headed west for it.

When he walked into the dam control tower, overlooking the gleaming waters of the reservoir, he saw Colonel Kelsey sitting with his feet on a table and a glass in his hand, chatting with the short, solid, moustached controller. Brandes finally lost his temper. He did not, however, explode; his anger toward Kelsey was ice cold. He walked forward slowly.

Kelsey's back was toward Brandes, and the colonel was saying in painful Russian, "I agree, Comrade, it's much better to have the soldiers building dams than bombing villages. In America, we've stopped bombing but not yet started building."

"Colonel Kelsey." Brandes's voice was low and soft.

Kelsey swung about, looking a shade tipsy. "Ah, Nicholas. I didn't expect to see you until evening; may I introduce—"

"If you please, no. You won't be in Tashkent by this evening, at this rate. Where's your squad, Colonel? And Bylinsky?"

"The squad broke up, sir. They're at the encampments of the 3rd Red Army Agricultural Development Battalion and of the 17th Red Army Engineers. Major Bylinsky is checking the records of the Drubnotskoii Dam, over there in the corner."

Brandes glanced to one side. The major nodded to him from a cluttered table of papers; apparently the dam office was not computerized. Brandes looked back at Kelsey. "And why, may I ask, are you not personally checking those records?"

Kelsey actually laughed. "At my rate of reading Cyrillic, General, that would take longer than we have in this country for that one job alone. Graves and Forester went over to the—"

"Colonel Kelsey," said Brandes, in a voice quaking with fury, "take those records from the major. To have him check them is worth less than nothing to us." He looked at Bylinsky. "If you think Americans fools, Major, I can't blame you. Some of us don't don't know our enemies from our friends."

The Russian shrugged. "I'm aware of that, General."

An apologetic hand plucked at Brandes's sleeve. The dam controller stood at his elbow. In slow Russian, he was saying, "Welcome, sir, to Drubnotskoii. It is an honor to meet an American general, and to know it is in peace and friendship. The treaty has set our hearts at rest." He dug out a wallet while Brandes stared at him in mute bafflement. "Look, this photo, my son, Vassily, a fine lad, killed in the Khyber fighting, but no more of that in our time, we hope forever. . . ." Quietly, the stocky little Russian babbled on hypnotically, but when he stuck out his hand to shake Brandes's, the American turned his back.

"Be on time in Tashkent," Brandes barked out to Kelsey, and then strode out in a rage.

As Brandes hurried toward the waiting chopper, however, he suddenly felt strangely unpleasant to himself. He thought of the moustached little man's hand. He paused, took a step back, swore, and hurried on to the chopper.

Colonel Kelsey arrived that evening in Tashkent on time and reported briefly that the day's activities had uncovered neither finds nor leads. Then he retired to crack jokes with Bylinsky. Brandes was too absorbed in the approaching media ploy to rake over the day with them again now. The show planned throughout Sector Four this evening was another of his brainchildren, and he had a hunch that this might bring the game out into the open.

All salient points were covered by the team, but Brandes wanted to observe for himself, as well. At precisely 2117, local time, he was strolling anonymously in civvies through the crowded theater area of the city. On schedule, the constant news video screen overlooking Tashkent's equivalent of Times Square let out a sudden bleat of music, and cut to a recognizable shot of the President of the Uzbek Confederated Republic.

Brandes didn't have to use his lousy Russian to follow the statement. He had drafted it himself. Through Kelsey, he had ordered the President to read it three times clearly, without changes, additions, or editorial comment.

"Attention, all citizens," he said, with barely controlled anger. "The American investigators have discovered nuclear material, and are planning to explode it within the hour. Any citizen within ten versts of such material is instructed to leave the danger area immediately." He repeated the message twice.

The street was electrified; the message had done its work. Groups gesticulated in shock or disbelief; scared faces glanced about nervously; people streamed out of the theaters. However, as far as Brandes could see—and far more expert eyes than his were systematically watching reactions throughout the sector—no one made a move to escape. Obviously, nobody in this particular crowd knew of any nuclear cache in the vicinity.

The same was true, his private radio link began to inform him, of Confederation citizens throughout Sector Four. City officials and Republic ministers stayed put; Red Army officers did not move; if people went anywhere, they went home. No one was observed behaving in the manner of one who believed that an imminent nuclear explosion was about to occur nearby.

Brandes left the frenzied crowds. In a few minutes, the President of the Republic would cut back in, to retract the statement and explain that a mistake had been made.

And now, thought Brandes, I am surely this nation's most thoroughly hated individual. I've intentionally frightened millions of people into panic with a hoax and stirred up raw fear that may never wholly settle. But I was so sure this would pinpoint a disturbed group of people, and thereby locate the areas of infection. Scratch one hunch. Never batted so low in my life.

Brandes slouched back to his hotel.

Hanging up his civilian jacket in the entry to the team's suite, he noticed a paperback book poking out of Kelsey's fatigues also hanging there. He drew it out. It was an edition of *Pay Any Price, Bear Any Burden,* the sanguine little bestseller compiled by career diplomats from thirty nations, painting the rosy future ahead for the world.

Brandes's face set wearily. Had everyone forgotten the origin of that phrase—John F. Kennedy's fighting words against Communism as he had been inaugurated President in the depth of the Cold War?

What future did the world have, when a bunch of professional diplomats could use the phrase to mean taking the risk of disarmament—the opposite of Kennedy's original intention?

It had become his generation's version of the phrase "Peace in our time," coined by Neville Chamberlain after the Munich meeting, where he thought Hitler could be appeased by making concessions. Peace in our time, indeed. The words had become a tragic joke.

He crossed to the bathroom, lifted the top of the tank, and dropped the book into the water.

In the commons room Bylinsky sat alone, facing a darkened television. He didn't turn as Brandes entered, but he called over his shoulder, "Is that you, General?"

Brandes grunted assent.

"Come here a moment. I want to tell you something."

Brandes walked across the room, sore with fatigue.

Bylinsky was slumped in his chair, a bottle of local vodka half-empty beside him. When Major Bylinsky looked up at him, his eyes seemed strangely soft. "General," he said very slowly, very sweetly. "General, you are the most contemptible man alive."

"If you think so, I'll be sure my door's locked tonight."

"Of course," said the Russian. "You always do."

1904 / Day 14

The second week passed, with no new hunches and no glimmer of a payoff. The deadline raced toward them, a final barrier Brandes could not penetrate. They were in a *qishlaq,* a village of several hundred single-family homes surrounded by wheat fields.

Brandes paced again across the small kitchen of a commandeered house, then turned to Kelsey. "How long to Moscow?"

"Six hours to be safe, with varying weather and all. If we're going to have the whole team back under the wire, I'll have to order loading at once."

Brandes resumed his pacing.

"Sir," Kelsey said reasonably. "You've covered the sector thoroughly and nothing is here. I didn't dream such an exhaustive search could be done in such a short time. But if nothing's here, you can't blame yourself for not finding it."

"If nothing's here," Brandes repeated. The chart lay spread on the table. He looked down at it, then gazed almost wistfully out the door toward the wheat fields, golden now in the setting sun.

"Sir?" Kelsey said quietly.

"Major Bylinsky," Brandes called.

The major, lying outside propped against a fence, raised his head. He rose and came striding to the door, rolling a stalk of wheat between his palms.

"Major," said Brandes, "I'm sure you will be pleased to know that the investigation team is to start for Moscow immediately."

A sigh of relief came from Kelsey. The Russian major merely looked at his watch and nodded.

"Colonel," Brandes said to Kelsey. "Order the loading operations at once and embark at will; you are in command. I shall remain here for the time being with the chopper."

Kelsey jerked like a puppet on strings. "General—"

"Colonel Kelsey, you will obey my orders at once without hesitation or backtalk. I've had my fill of insubordination from you. I don't care if you are the President's hound-dog!"

"Yessir." Kelsey's eyebrows shot up but he said nothing more. Turning, he extended a hand to Bylinsky. They shook and then Kelsey walked with superfluous stiffness to the door.

"To make it clear, Colonel," said Brandes. "Don't come back to get me. If I see you or any of the team approaching, I shall shoot." Then Brandes turned back to the Russian, who was standing at the table, pouring a shot . . . two shots.

Bylinsky pushed one glass toward Brandes. He ignored it.

The major swiveled his chair to face the general and sat down. He looked straight at Brandes's eyes for a long moment. Then he tossed down his drink and turned away. "I cannot bring myself to believe, General Brandes, that you are a stupid man."

Brandes clenched his teeth and waited.

Bylinsky poured another drink and sipped it. "The terms of the treaty are so clear. You had two weeks to find what you were after, and you have found nothing —because, of course, there is nothing to find. You have not been granted two weeks and even one minute more. If you overstay your time, if you are not yourself in Moscow by 0600 Moscow time tomorrow, you will personally have broken the treaty . . . all by yourself." He sipped his drink again. "Powerful man, the general." Bylinsky fell silent.

Brandes was quieter.

"General, please return to Moscow with your team." His voice had just a faint hint of pleading. "I know you do not like this treaty. I know you do not like me, for that matter. And you do not trust our government. I have not let this matter affect me in giving you all possible aid in fulfilling your duty." He raised the full glass that Brandes had ignored. "But not only my own government, but yours also, signed the Vienna Treaty. It must be preserved, no matter what one's private feelings may be. If it goes . . . we are back where we were before. Isn't it better now? General, an honorable man knows when he has failed honorably."

Brandes slammed his fist down on the table, blazing with anger. "Major Bylinsky, you say you have given me every possible help. This is the first I'm aware of it. You have dragged your heels and hindered me every step of the way. And now, when you can get me out of here, you dare to remind me of my duty!"

Brandes turned away with a growl, then swung back to the table. Leaning over it, he traced out savage lines on the map with his finger. "Don't worry about your precious treaty. Here's where we are now, at Koronoskoye. Under the treaty provisions, I must not be anywhere in your Confederation other than Moscow by the deadline. In fact, your whole Confederation team last year didn't fly back to Washington, remember? They just headed right out of the country. Now, the Afghan border is down here, two hundred kilometers to the south of us. Just beyond, here, is Kaygul. We have the helicopter, and under the terms of the treaty, you are subordinate to my command until tomorrow morning. When you drop me off at Kaygul at 0600, you're free of your responsibility. To me, at least. And the treaty's intact. Any more complaints, Major?"

Bylinsky stared at the chart for a long moment. Then, satisfied, he turned to his bottle and poured two drinks. He drank one, glanced shortly at Brandes, and drank the other.

"You are a fanatic, General. Or a very determined man. Both. You are within your rights." Bylinsky smiled slightly. "Do I gather that neither of us sleeps tonight?"

Brandes grinned mirthlessly in answer. He pulled out a sheaf of notes, placed them beside the chart, and seated himself. "You'd better sleep in the next hour, if you can."

Bylinsky started for the door.

"Major," said Brandes. "Major, you were wrong on one point. You said I did not like you. Rather, I cannot afford to like you under the present circumstances. If we meet as civilians someday, I would be glad to drink your vodka and I might even find I could like you. But not now."

Bylinsky paused in surprise, then laughed musically and strolled out into the dusk.

Brandes turned to his notes, thinking only of nuclear material. All he needed was one more hunch . . . if it was the right one.

After a long while, he heard the sound of departing aircraft in the distance. He looked at his watch; that was all right. Leave it to Kelsey to get out fast enough. He returned to his notes.

Half an hour later, Brandes jerked himself from the chair and resumed his pacing. His eye fell on the half-empty bottle of vodka. Then he peered cautiously out into black night.

Bylinsky lay cozily huddled under the fence in the warm darkness. Returning to the table, Brandes poured a short slug and tossed it off. He rotated the glass in his hand in rhythm with his thoughts. Abruptly he called out, "Major Bylinsky."

"Da!" came briskly from the dark. The general hastily set down the glass before the major wandered in from the night, brushing grass wisps from his clothes.

Brandes stared at him. "Bylinsky, where are those warheads?"

The Russian just grinned. "I have no idea, General."

"Because you're just small potatoes, right? The boys upstairs haven't let you in on the secret."

"Because there are no warheads, General."

"How can you be so damned sure? Are you the Defense Minister of the Confederated Republics, by any chance?"

Bylinsky frowned. "I do not have that honor, General."

Brandes slumped back down into his chair and kneaded his forehead. "Major, I am an exhausted and discouraged man. I have been given a task to fulfill. I have tried to fulfill it to the best of my ability. Yes, I have failed to observe some of the human amenities. I came determined to find contraband material. Well, Kelsey came believing there was none. He has done to the letter everything he was supposed to do, but that basic slant in his attitude was enough to make him sloppy. However, I haven't suffered from the same fault."

Bylinsky sat down across from Brandes and struck a match. He lit the lamp.

"Major, right now you have Confederation troops

looking for hidden nuclear weapons in some U.S. sector. Would you want them to search with the attitude of a Kelsey—or a Brandes?"

Bylinsky raised his eyebrows at the vodka bottle. "A Brandes." He lifted the bottle. "There is nothing to forgive." Then he smiled wryly. "Do you like our Russian vodka after all?"

"Very much, thank you. May I?"

"With pleasure. Let us drink." The glasses touched.

Brandes swallowed. "I admit my failure, however. The weapons are not here, or else, if you will pardon my saying so, I haven't looked hard enough. In any case, my time is up. We're off to Moscow."

"No. Your trip to Afghanistan is all that is left to us. We cannot be in Moscow in time without the supersonics."

"Oh, just send ahead that we're returning together," Brandes said wearily. "We'll be out of this sector, anyway."

"Not good enough. In Moscow, or out of the country by 0600. As you pointed out yourself, that's the treaty provision."

"If your government is as set on keeping this treaty as you say, Major, they'll hardly break it for an hour or two AWOL. You claim they view the preservation of the Vienna Treaty as an absolute necessity for world peace."

Bylinsky gazed into this glass. "General, when we're sober enough to fly straight, we'd better fly straight to Kaygul."

"Why?"

"I will be frank, though I hate to give you grounds for your mistrust of my country. The fact is, we have people like you in the Confederation, even near the top." He grinned suddenly. "People like you . . . who detest the Vienna Treaty, who fought it from the start, who would like to see it broken . . . because they do not trust your country to observe it. They might well make an issue of any infringement, even the slightest, to push for an end to it. Your recent 'explosion' hoax has given them a groundswell of anger toward you. If you are even a minute late, they would have the letter of international law on their side. And they would note your late arrival back in Moscow."

Brandes stared at the Russian in amazement.

"Please do not twist what I say," Bylinsky begged. "I do not speak of President Blagonov. Why, the treaty is largely his creation. And I do not speak of the Parliament, mostly. Certainly not of the people. This treaty has been their first hope of true world peace at last. They do not want it to fail."

Brandes spoke in slow wonder. "Of whom, then, do you speak?"

"We have just a few. Believe me, very few indeed. Some members of the government, maybe even one or two of the inner circle; a few scientists feel this way, and some writers, a few officers of the Red—former Red Army. . . ." Suddenly he blushed. "We have more than a few. That is how I know about them. But they do not speak for our government or our people."

"Then why do you let them remain in positions of influence?"

"Why are you in your position, General?" Bylinsky flared.

Brandes thought a minute, then swung toward the major. "Listen, Bylinsky, this is important—"

"I always listen," he said coldly.

"Fine. Then let me accept, as a working hypothesis, that your government has sincerely backed this treaty and has taken the responsibility of destroying all its illicit nuclear stocks."

Bylinsky smiled faintly. "Accepted."

"Then the government is exonerated, not at fault. But, Major, is it possible . . . just *possible,* that these cold warriors—these people like me—could they have swung enough power to have held out contraband without the knowledge of the government?"

Bylinsky did not answer at once. His lean face remained poised, unmoving beside the flickering lamp. Finally he spoke. "This is possible, General Brandes. And if they thought it possible, then they certainly would have tried it."

"And if there were nuclear warheads, hidden and controlled by a minority of distrustful, treasonous cold warriors—threatening my country and breaking the treaty—would Major Bylinsky want me to find them or . . . not to find them?"

The Russian sipped his vodka, then downed it all at once. "Major Bylinsky would be determined to help you find them . . . *fanatical* to help you find them."

"Third question. From the Major's knowledge of these cold warriors in the Red Army, the way they think . . . where would he expect to find those nuclear weapons in less than five hours?"

Bylinsky was silent a long time. Then he spoke wearily. "The Major hasn't the slightest idea, sir. Perhaps I should not have drunk so much, but . . . I just don't know."

Brandes sighed and fingered his drink. Minutes passed silently. In a sudden movement, he drained his glass. "We'd better switch to coffee. We'll have to get off in an hour or so."

"If you wish me to check any particular place for you, and it is not too far away, I shall be glad to do it."

Brandes glanced at the door, opened to blackness. One star glanced back. "No. It doesn't alter the fact that I've done my best, and found nothing. If your cold warriors don't drop a nuclear bomb on Washington before next year, my successor will get another shot at it. I've had mine."

"Get some sleep, sir," said Bylinsky. "I napped earlier. I'll load the chopper and call you." He got to work.

Brandes walked slowly into the next room. He collapsed on the cot and shut his eyes, feeling as if he would weep in the dark.

As the chopper climbed toward the morning sky above Koronoskoye, the east was beginning to glow with dawn. Far to the south, soaring white fangs caught the rays of the yet-invisible sun. The chopper circled and bore southward over fields of wheat, lost in the darkness below.

"Well timed," said Bylinsky, at the controls. "A short

hop to Kaygul; we'll be in good time." He grinned wryly. "I trust you'll put in a good word for me with the Afghans when we land. They're not too fond of us Russians, for some reason."

Brandes said nothing. His eyes roved the horizon and the darkness below. The chopper sped on. A few scattered lights appeared ahead.

"Raskov?"

"Yes. The border is under an hour away. Then we can report fulfillment of the treaty terms even before we reach Kaygul."

The American's eyes continued their restless sweep as the first rays of light broke to their left. The shafts led up to a blueing dome of air. To the southeast, a blinding crescent of white burst out; the dam at Drubnotskoii was bathing in the morning light.

"Were those Drubnotskoii Dam records really in order?"

"Actually, at first I thought we had some anomalies. I couldn't figure out where all the requisitioned steel had ended up. But it turned out to be all right. We traced it to sloppy record-keeping, not illegal procurement."

"Thanks for taking the trouble to check it out."

"Well, I certainly wasn't going to tell you about it, with the way you were going on. But I had the Drubnotskoii Young Pioneers tracing it down for three days."

Brandes slid back into his thoughts. Had he actually been wrong about the very existence of nuclear warheads? Had he chosen the wrong sector, and left the deadly devices waiting safely in the Archangelsk sector, or out in the Pacific Maritime Provinces of the Russian Republic? Or were they still here, sneering at his futile attempt to unveil them?

Best forget what was past mending. Even if Bylinsky were to turn to him and tell him, with a triumphant Bolshevik grin, exactly where the contraband was, it was too late to do anything about it now. By next year, the stuff would be moved.

The vast Drubnotskoii reservoir fell behind them, a blazing sheet of light in the newly risen sun, and they were roaring over the forested mountains and barren troughs among which they had first arrived. Brandes frowned, remembering the one decision that had seemed so simple at the time—for which he knew he would never quite forgive himself.

"I wish I hadn't wasted the life of your fighter pilot," he said quietly. "It was so damned unnecessary."

Bylinsky said nothing, turning his head to watch the land creeping by underneath them.

"It was just bad timing. It seemed so suspicious. . . ."

"General." Bylinsky's voice was tense. "I've just got one of your hunches."

"Huh?"

"Kutuzov! That vermin Kutuzov!"

"Of the rescue and recovery team? What about—"

"He's one of them—one of the dissidents in our military."

"But we checked the crash site thoroughly—nothing was there for him to take out."

Bylinsky began keying the communicator. "Kutuzov entered from outside the sector after you had checked the site. Suppose he brought something in, right through your own security with your own permission?"

Brandes gripped the arm of his chair. "Of course—jumping at the chance to exploit that accident. Radiation from the plane would have camouflaged the shielded radiation from warheads. We wrote off that site as already accounted for."

"Maybe there was no accident, General. That fighter came out of Kutuzov's base and had a computer lock. I'll wager Kutuzov crashed that plane deliberately. We have to look."

"No," Brandes shouted firmly over the roar of the chopper. "We have to get across the border before that damned deadline."

Bylinsky had a response now on the communicator and switched to Russian. Brandes got the gist of it.

"I am personally flying General Brandes across the border into Kaygul, Afghanistan," said Bylinsky. "We are going over the border now. The treaty provisions remain intact." He listened to the reply and then signed off.

Brandes watched him, saying nothing.

"They were worried about you. Now, I am going to use an American expression Colonel Kelsey taught me. Keep your damned trap shut, sir; it's my turn now."

Bylinsky leaned on the stick, and the chopper curved away in a smooth arc toward the crash site of the Russian fighter plane.

In the early morning light, the low hills were empty and silent. Bylinsky kept them in a hovering position well to the east of the site and as high as he could. Brandes searched through his binoculars for several minutes. Then he handed them to Bylinsky and took the controls.

"I dared not approach the radiation more closely," said Bylinsky. "Could you see anything?"

"Yes. You see the depression where the plane came in?"

"I think . . . yes."

"Look to the rise on the left. The contour is completely changed—a very large burial, I'd say."

"Well, of course. The debris of the plane would have been crushed and buried along with all contaminated material."

"Look to the right, Major."

"Eh? I see. Another burial, obviously. Much smaller, but—"

"Why bury debris in two such close places? Unless one is to be retrieved and the other is not? And you are keeping your radioactive material distinct, so later on you can make clear to a subordinate which material you want to retrieve?"

Bylinsky handed back the binoculars. "Enough to justify further investigation. This will be difficult to explain to Moscow, General. And you do understand that you are no longer in the Confederation? By now you are well across the border."

"Understood." He extended his hand.

Bylinsky hesitated, then gripped it hard, once, before taking the chopper into a sharp descent.

On the dusty ridge of a hill, Brandes leaned against the landed chopper. It threw an uncouth shadow west-

ward in the early light. Far below, kilometers off, Uighur farmers were entering the wheat fields in a declivity of foothills. Bylinsky's voice, and the responses from Moscow, muttered from the communicator but he was too numb to concentrate on their Russian. He might have found what he had come looking for, but the rest of his world seemed to have spun out from under him.

The voices continued to glance off his fatigue until suddenly they were speaking English.

"Ambassador Harris?" Bylinsky asked nervously. "Perhaps you heard what I have been telling Minister Karamzin. We believe—er, I think I have located a cache of illegal weapons. Not hidden by the government, but by renegade officers—"

"I see," she interrupted. "Is Brandes there?"

"No. He is in Kaygul, Afghanistan. And, your excellency, this discovery was made by me, a major in the Red Army, and voluntarily disclosed. I hope your government takes a lenient—"

"Never mind that. Can you estimate the number of warheads?"

"No. Our neutrino detectors had to go back with the team."

Brandes heard the familiar rumble of President Blagonov's voice, followed by the translator. "A special unit will be there within the hour, one of the U.N. teams now engaged in sealing off the border. They will bring a detector with them. Now, do you say this is your doing, Major Bylinsky?"

"I . . ." Bylinsky hesitated. "I only followed orders, sir. I don't think I should take the full . . ." He trailed off, obviously unsure if he was discussing blame or credit.

"Major? To whom does the recognition go?"

Bylinsky's jaw dropped. At the same time, Brandes's eyes widened.

"Shall I explain the situation now, Major, or would you prefer to wait for a more formal briefing?"

The English translation was continuing—because, Bylinsky supposed, the American ambassador was being allowed to overhear this exchange. "Why, er, if you please, sir . . ."

"Quite natural. Well, last year, our government was in the delicate position of having to admit, in private, that fifty-five of our nuclear warheads were unaccountably missing from their proper locations. The American government, for its own reasons, was inclined to be lenient. The American inspection team under General Chun last year discovered seventeen of the missing warheads in a cluster of Ukrainian silos. These were quietly confiscated. You may remember Marshal Mykov's abrupt retirement last October. Your find, if confirmed, will help clear the records further. Do not worry; our government is not to blame and will not be accused. Colonel Kutuzov, however, is being detained at this moment, and his base secured."

The President chuckled, followed by a similar chuckle from his impeccable interpreter. "Please return to Moscow at your earliest opportunity; both sides are grateful to you. Now that the treaty terms have been satisfied, we are issuing an official invitation to General Brandes to return to Moscow with you. His government has cleared and accepted; I fear you will have to fly back to Afghanistan to get him. Do you suppose you can find him?"

Bylinsky waved a hand before his face as if swiping at flies. "I'll look around, sir."

"Good. Because we have much to thank him for, as well. Neither of you can know how carefully you were picked for this task. Of all the top brass in the U.S. military, none was more eager than General Brandes to catch us breaking the treaty. If our weapons were hidden in the most insignificant outhouse in this country, he was the man to find them."

Brandes slumped against the side of the chopper. He felt no new increment of feeling. He was already overcharged.

"Excuse me, sir," said Bylinsky. "Am I permitted to know why I was chosen?"

"I understand you came the closest to the model the psychologists picked for Brandes's opposite—absolutely devoted and trusting of our government, and with no reason to be ashamed of that. But also you are a fine and dedicated soldier. You were the most effective irritant, with your character and official instructions, to keep him at his best."

Ambassador Harris broke in. "You should have seen Kelsey's face when I told him why he was chosen. See you shortly in Moscow, Major Bylinsky." She clicked off.

Bylinsky left the unit on, sitting slumped in thought. Brandes looked up at him. Both of them had had their worlds collapsed, to find themselves on bright new pedestals. Brandes climbed up and collapsed beside Bylinsky.

"You didn't bring any more rotgut, did you, George?"

"I don't know that word, Nicolai."

"Vodka."

Bylinsky's eyes lit up. "Vodka." He twisted around to extract a full, sealed bottle from his overcoat pocket. With a sharp nod, he extended it to Brandes. The com screen winked on again and President Blagonov's face beamed at them.

"Ah, Comrade Brandes; a fast flight to Afghanistan, Major. You are to be congratulated. A friend wishes to say a few words to you, General, and then we shall leave you in peace. A supersonic from Colonel Kutuzov's base —former base—will meet you both in Raskov and bring you to Moscow."

A new face filled the screen, one that was lined, with deep-set eyes and gray-streaked black hair. "C'mon, Nick, we know you never reached Kaygul. I had people there waiting—ordered them to meet you as soon as Kelsey reported your so-called intentions."

Brandes tried to juggle the bottle out of sight, then gave up. "Hi, Rich," he said sheepishly.

"Hurry back, Nick," said General Chun. "Listen, I know what you're going through. I went through the same shock last year, only I had no one to talk to. Get back to Moscow, and we'll talk it out. By the way, you're part of the conspiracy now—you have to help choose the leader of next year's team."

Brandes smiled weakly. "You mean we could put old hard-nose Hanson through this next?"

"Well, not Hanson. Trudy—Gertrude Harris, I mean—just got a private cable from the White House two hours ago. The Confederation investigators in the States have located nine of the warheads the Pentagon had lost track of, hidden in the unused target ranges on Kahoolawe in the Hawaiian Islands. And Hanson has been detained, with some of our other ol' buddies. You didn't know our side had misplaced any, did you? I'll fill you in when you get back." Chun's face disappeared.

Brandes and Bylinsky sat in silence for a long time. The sun rose higher and the day shone bright and clear. After a while Brandes noticed the vodka bottle in his hand and tipped it twice. He passed it to Bylinsky and looked out toward the distant valley, where golden wheat rippled quietly in the forenoon breeze.

Peace in our time? he thought to himself, not believing it yet, but thinking he might come to believe it someday. Peace in *our* time? And he had been a crucial part of it.

Pay any price, bear any burden.

For a man whose lifelong beliefs had been shattered, he felt pretty good. ✦

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First new-format issue. *A Tip on a Turtle* by Robert Silverberg; *Change of Face* by Kristine Kathryn Rusch and Kevin J. Anderson; *The Ghost Taker* by Lawrence Watt-Evans; *Klepsit* by John Brunner

June 1991
Victoria by Paul Di Filippo; *Hitmen—See Murderers* by Timothy Zahn; *The Sixty-Five Million Year Sleep* by Sharon N. Farber; *The Galleon Gal* by Phillip C. Jennings

July 1991
Except My Life, Except My Life, Except My Life by John Morressy; *Arms and the Woman* by James Morrow; *The Perfect Hero* by Elizabeth Moon; *Holos at an Exhibition* by Bruce Boston and Robert Frazier

August 1991
Fantasies by Michael Swanwick and Tim Sullivan; *Plague Ship* by R. Garcia y Robertson; *The Number of the Sand* by George Zebrowski; *The Face of the Waters* by Robert Silverberg

September 1991
Death Link by Gene DeWeese and L. A. Taylor; *The Storming Bone* by Ian McDowell; *Thomas and the Wise Men* by Kristine Kathryn Rusch; *The Last Reich* by Don Tarbet

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Skin Deep by Brian Stableford; *The Drifter* by Lawrence Watt-Evans; *Wacky Jack 5.1* by W. R. Thompson; *Line Item on a Dead Grant* by Jack C. Haldeman II

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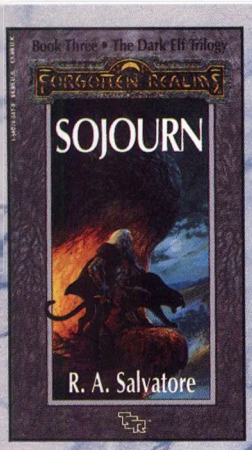
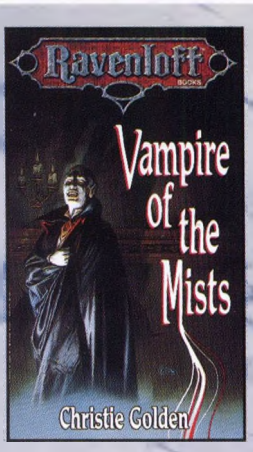


Sojourn
R. A. Salvatore

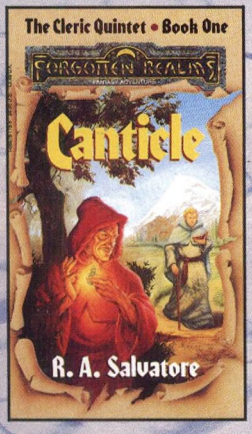
Far above his merciless Underdark homeland, Drizzt Do'Urden fights to survive the elements of Toril's harsh surface.



Vampire of the Mists
Christie Golden

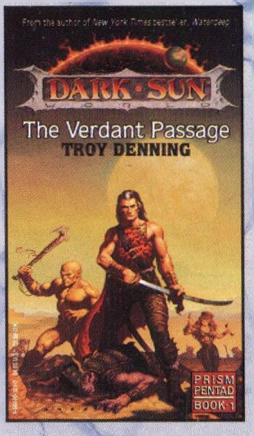
A five-hundred-year-old vampire meets Ravenloft's master, the vampire Count Strahd Von Sarovich, in a quest for revenge.

Canticle
R. A. Salvatore

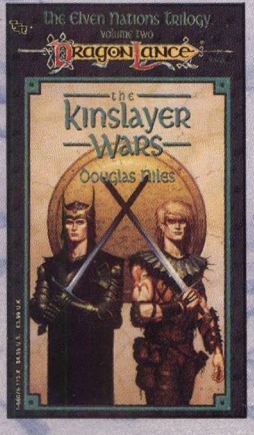


Cloistered among his colleagues, a scholar-priest named Cadderly must contain a malevolent, consuming essence that's been uncorked, before his own brethren can turn against him.

The Verdant Passage
Troy Denning

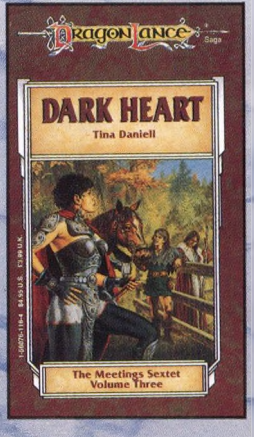


Banding together to spark a revolution, a maverick statesman, a winsome half-elf slave girl, and a man-dwarf gladiator must choose between love and life.



The Kinslayer Wars
Douglas Niles

The firstborn ruler of all silvanesti elves declares war on the humans of Ergoth, and his twin brother, married to a human, must choose sides.



Dark Heart
Tina Daniell

Haunted by the memory of her Solamnic father, Kitiara Uth Matar's constant search for him and increasing fascination with evil throw her into the company of a roguish stranger.

We think you'll enjoy your stay in Ravenloft

The Powers from Beyond Call Your Name

Welcome, my friend, to the land of darkness, where strange mists engulf the night. While traveling lonely roads or dark alleyways, footsteps will echo around you. Your pace and heartbeat may quicken. But flight is of no avail. The alluring phantoms surround you. With a flash of the fang and a bloodcurdling howl, you are seduced to the macabre land beyond the grave. Of course, you now realize, all roads lead to Ravenloft. . . .

Vampire of the Mists

Torn by rage and grief, Jander Sunstar is pulled into the dark realm of Ravenloft. There, the vampire forges an alliance with the evil Count Strahd Von Zarovich . . . only to discover that his own quest for love-lost revenge is linked to the count's ruthless past.

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Knight of the Black Rose

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