Vol. LXVI, No. 9

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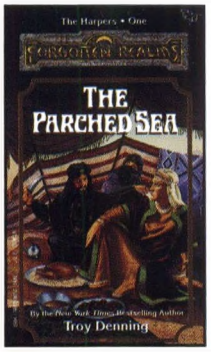

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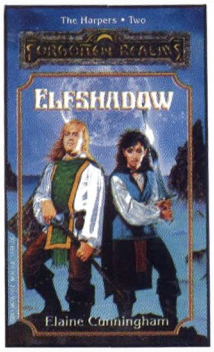

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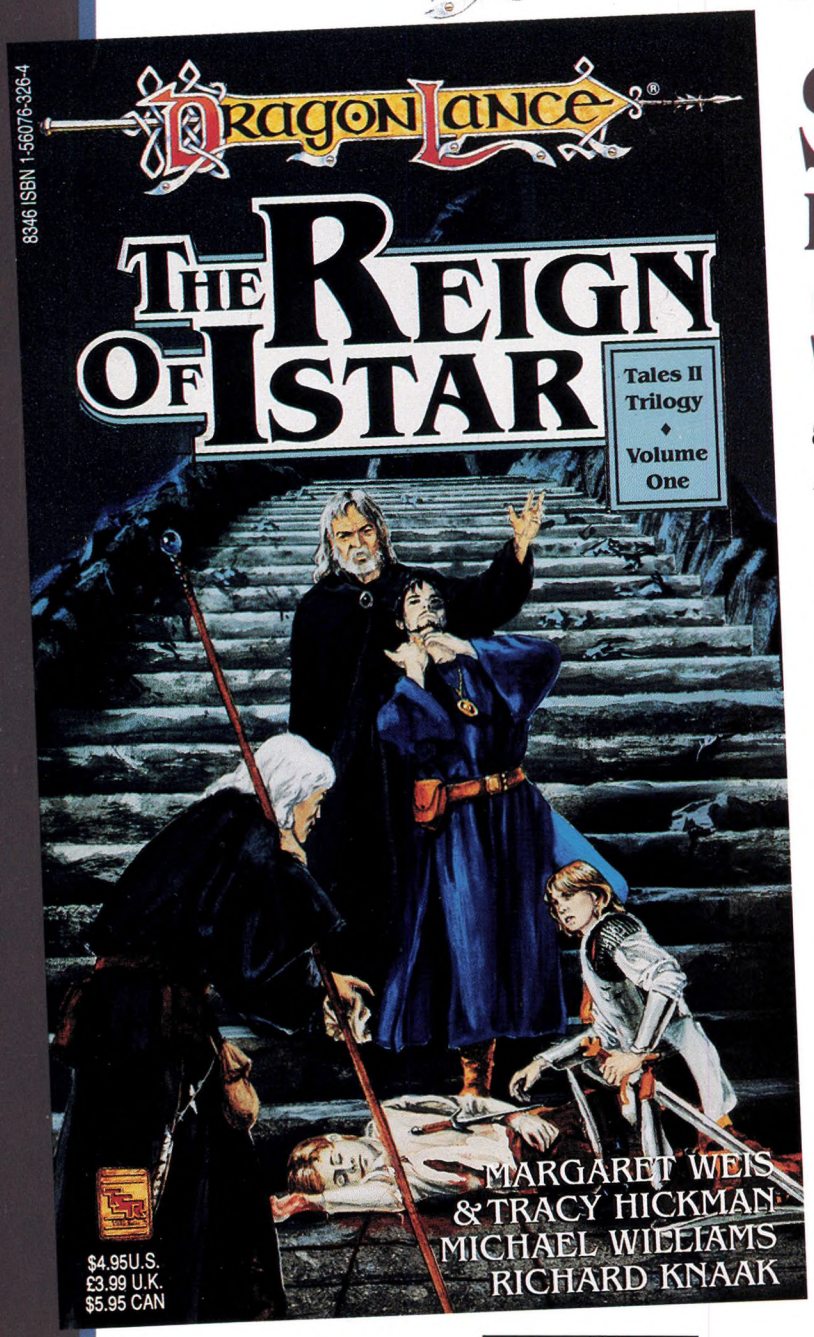

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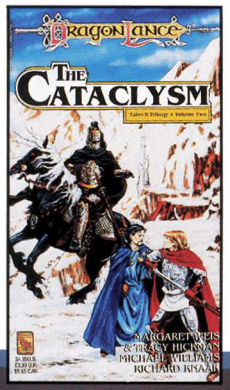

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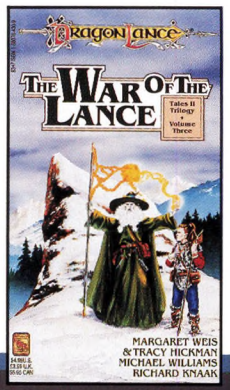

The War of the Lance
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Stranger Than Fiction

Kim Mohan

Barroom brawls are becoming so frequent in England that a British medical association has decided to address the issue. The association suggests an interesting way of dealing with the problem: start manufacturing beer mugs out of thicker glass, for the purpose of reducing the number of disfiguring injuries.

That's a bit of fancy out of which a story could spring. But if I happened to read a manuscript using that idea, I imagine I would find the premise a little hard to accept.

"Oh, come on," I would say to the writer (but probably using nicer language than this). "You call that plausible? You expect me to believe that rational human beings would behave this way? The problem is not the disfiguring injuries—it's the fights that cause the injuries in the first place. What are these presumably rational people planning to do about the *real* problem? If you want to sell a story to this magazine, you have to establish a scenario that *could* happen; you can't just think up any zany old idea and build a plot around it."

I would say that, or something like that—and in doing so, I would make an utter fool of myself. Because every word of that first paragraph is true; I heard that snippet of news on the radio while I was driving to work this morning.

My first reaction was one of incredulity: "Oh, come on," I said to the newscaster. But the more I thought about it, the more sense it made. There's no point in trying to stop the fights—which are, like it or not, an aspect of human nature. If people are inclined to pummel each other in pubs, and apparently they are, then it's sensible to deal with the problem by trying to minimize the amount of harm they can do.

It makes sense to me because I know it's true . . . which says something to me about the way *my* mind works. Maybe—just maybe—I'm going to be a little more generous from now on when I look at manuscripts and I try to decide what's a plausible premise and what's not. ✦

An editorial footnote from Harlan Ellison

In last October's issue of AMAZING Stories appeared an announcement of the imminent publication in these pages of my new story "**ƆƆAB 2 BACK**." Scheduled for the following month, November. But as three of you remarked, said story was nowhere to be found in said issue. While not in the topmost percentile of perplexing mysteries available to us, the delay in publication of this fine work of imaginative fiction should be explained.

I hated the ending.

The great novelist Bernard Malamud once wrote, "Art lives on surprise. A writer has to surprise *himself* to be worth reading."

I almost never know the ending of one of my stories when I begin writing. Sometimes, maybe; but nine times out of ten it's lurking out there in the narrative mist. And as I work my way on, an ending becomes clear. So I stop. Because if *I* can see it coming, so can you. That ain't no fun; too much like television. So I stop.

And that's what happened this time. I got to the end, and it was transparent. Too much good stuff throughout the story to waste it with an ending we'd both find predictable. So I've spent lots of time discovering an equally logical, but less on-the-button denouement. And I missed the damned deadline.

It wasn't Kim Mohan's fault, It was mine. But we mustn't hear any *kvetching* about the story being delayed, friends, because you've lost nothing, haven't even been inconvenienced. Just consider this a demonstration of one writer's dedication not to readers, but to the story. Be patient. It is to be hoped that all this *sturm und drang* will result in a better reading experience for you. On the other hand, it might not.

Reflections

Robert Silverberg

What may be a startling discovery indicating that male sexual behavior is at least in part determined by genetic imperatives was announced late last summer. The immediate reaction to the announcement indicates how complex the politicization of American culture has become in the late twentieth century.

The controversial study—done by Dr. Simon LeVay of the Salk Institute of Biological Studies in La Jolla, California—reports preliminary findings showing that the hypothalamic nucleus, a small but important structure in the brain, is much smaller in homosexual men than in heterosexual ones. This structure is normally twice as big in men as it is in women, but there had been no reason to suspect that there were notable differences in its size among men.

It was already known that male rats and monkeys who have suffered damage to their hypothalamus lose interest in the sexual pursuit of females, while continuing to express sexual vigor through such acts as masturbation. So there was reason to think that a relationship might exist between the hypothalamus and sexual orientation, specifically involving attraction to the opposite sex.

Dr. LeVay, using autopsied brain samples from 19 gay men, 16 men believed to have been heterosexual, and six heterosexual women—no tissue samples from homosexual women were available—discovered that the hypothalamic nucleus in the gay men and in all of the women was only a quarter to a half the size of the same structure in the heterosexual men. All the brain samples came from subjects who had died at about the same age—around 40—and so aging itself could not have been a factor in the disparity in hypothalamus size. All of the gay men whose tissue samples had been used had died of AIDS; but six of the presumable heterosexuals had also died of AIDS, contracted as a result of intravenous drug usage, which would tend to rule out AIDS as a significant factor in the difference in the size of the hypothalamus.

It is, of course, a very small statistical sampling. But the consistency of the results even in so limited a group is impressive. Dr. LeVay, who is himself homosexual, has drawn no conclusions thus far from his study except to say that he feels he has detected something worth further investigation, which he intends to carry out. That is an appropriate scientific position to take, at this stage of the research. Those of us who look at the findings from the outside, though, can readily see good reason now to suspect that male homosexuality may in fact be a biological rather than behavioral phenomenon; that one becomes homosexual not primarily because of one's family background or out of cultural preferences but because one's brain itself *is organically designed to make one respond sexually only to members of one's own sex.* As Dr. LeVay himself has pointed out, suddenly the study of homosexuality and its causes moves beyond the province of the psychologist and the psychoanalyst into that of the biologist.

A host of questions instantly arises. Is the hypothalamic size difference genetic, or is it the result of hormonal fluctuations in the womb or other external factors during fetal development? We have no data on that yet. Since relatively few homosexuals have children, though, how could such a trait, if it is genetic, manage to persevere in our species for so long? One would think that the failure of homosexuals to reproduce would have bred it out long ago. Or what if the small size of the hypothalamic nucleus in male homosexuals is a *consequence,* rather than a cause, of homosexual behavior? (The monkey experiments would seem to argue otherwise, but again the information on hand at this time is too skimpy to support any firm position.) Where, also, do bisexuals fit into the scheme of things? If there's biological programming that governs one's sense of who is sexually attractive and who is not, they seem to be able to override it. And what about lesbians: they too feel sexual attraction toward members of their own sex, but does their hypothalamic nucleus differ in size from that of heterosexual women? Perhaps it does. Perhaps it is as large in them as it is in heterosexual men. Dr. LeVay plans to investigate that and many other points in follow-up studies.

Early reactions to the LeVay find-

ings have been varied and sometimes surprising. No one has any doubts about Dr. LeVay's scientific qualifications. "Simon LeVay is a top-notch, world-class neuroanatomist," said Dr. Thomas R. Insel of the National Institute of Mental Health, "and this is a very provocative paper." Dr. Sandra F. Witelson, a behavioral neuroscientist at McMaster University in Canada, commented, "I think this work is very interesting and very important." But she went on to say, "It doesn't mean that other anatomical differences aren't also present. I'm sure additional biological factors, perhaps related to hormones, will also be found." And Dr. Richard Nakamura, chief of the cognitive and behavioral neuroscience branch at the National Institute of Mental Health, offered, "Biology is not destiny, and this shouldn't be taken to mean that you're automatically homosexual if you have a structure of one size versus a structure of another size."

All very reasonable, very properly cautious, very scientific.

From the gay community—and probably I should insert here, by way of defining my own biases and perceptions in this matter, that I am not a member of that community and have never claimed to have much understanding of why people are homosexual—have come some very different responses.

The one that seems most comprehensible to me is that of gay-rights activist Andrew J. Humm, a member of New York City's Human Rights Commission. "The fact that the report talks about homosexual behavior as something innate is good, because that's what most of us experience. Homosexuality used to be seen as a character or a moral defect, so if you want to look at it as hypothalamic in nature, that's probably a step toward looking at it for what it is." That makes sense to me. If homosexuality is seen by the heterosexual majority as some sort of dark and unnatural behavior that is willingly *chosen* by a depraved minority, what real hope is there for any sort of acceptance by that majority of the deviants within their group? But if it is, rather, something that is hard-wired into the genetic mix—the way skin color is, or height, or physical agility—then surely it would be reprehensible to condemn people for behaving the way they were designed by nature to behave.

From the highly political San Francisco gay community (and San Francisco is near the city where I live) have come some vehement negative reactions. John Paul De Cecco, a professor of psychology at San Francisco State University and the editor of the *Journal of Homosexuality,* called the LeVay study "preposterous," saying, "What determines preferences is very complicated. Are we born to like hamburgers or American football or big-breasted women? I think a lot of people are very uncomfortable with the fact that they're homosexual, and one way of handling that discomfort is to claim that you have no choice." Dr. De Cecco warned against attributing homosexuality to a "malformation" of the brain—his term, not Dr. LeVay's—and said that "the idea that you can describe a person by looking at the brain is a dreadful 19th-century invention." Others—betraying that fear of science which is so prevalent in the United States today —were quick to say that if LeVay's findings turn out to be correct, it might lead to attempts by parents to test for hypothalamic size while their children are still in the womb, and to abort those that showed the potential to turn out to be homosexual, or to use some kind of genetic surgery to "correct" the condition while there still was time.And Carole Migden, a member of the San Francisco City Board of Supervisors who is also a lesbian, said, "There are many reasons why people are gay and lesbian. It would be far more useful if scientists turned their microscopes to discovering the cause of homophobia and whether there's some biological deficiency that causes such virulent hatred of lesbians and gays."

I see what Ms. Migden is driving at, but I think she's heading in the wrong direction—unless playing to her local political constituency is her only purpose. We don't need a lot of scientific research to determine why many heterosexuals are uneasy about gays or downright hostile toward them. Heterosexuality is the biological norm—not just for humans but for most animals—and the continuation of the species depends on it, at least so far. An ongoing society consisting only of women has been depicted in science fiction many times, most recently and brilliantly in James Tiptree's classic story, "Houston, Houston, Do You Read?", but we are not yet ready or able to carry on the race by purely parthenogenetic means. The "virulent hatred of lesbians and gays" that Ms. Migden rightly says is felt by many heterosexuals is caused not by any biological deficiency that needs to be discovered in the laboratory, but by a biological *normality* that motivates all too many human beings to despise those who don't happen to share it.

And so there have been attacks on LeVay from the hard right, too. The Rev. Louis Sheldon of Southern California's Traditional Values Coalition, which takes anti-gay positions, rejects the hypothetical conclusions of LeVay's work and still insists that "homosexuals choose their lifestyle by virtue of their actions." He would assert, I suppose, that those who refuse to be "cured" through therapy should be suppressed or persecuted in other ways. If I were gay, I think I'd rather listen to such voices as that of the aide to Los Angeles Assemblyman Terry Friedman, the sponsor of a state gay-rights bill, who said, "The new study is one more from a respected scientist that indicates that sexual orientation may not be a conscious decision. I would expect now that some people may think with a little more openness about the possibility that people are being discriminated against for reasons that are beyond their control." The discomfort that many gays in New York and San Francisco have voiced to the new theories leaves me puzzled, therefore. If I were gay, I think I'd be more comfortable having the straight majority believe that my sexual behavior was a matter of innate and immutable biological destiny rather than one of blatant flouting of societal norms. But of course I'm not gay. There's another side to this discussion, evidently, that I'm not able to see—perhaps because of my own innate and immutable biological destiny. ✦

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Letters

Joel Wyatt's letter in the November issue is a prime example of the ghetto attitude that has plagued science fiction for generations. In essence, he—and those like him—are saying, "I don't want good writing. I don't want anything that makes me think or feel or learn or grow. Just give me the same pap I read when I was a kid."

It astounds me that such people claim that *serious* writing does not please them. Look, there are two kinds of writers in this business: those who are trying to write the best stories they can produce, and those who crank out the same old stuff year after year. When Wyatt and his ilk denigrate literature in favor of entertainment, they are revealing the sad limits of their own intelligence and imagination. If science fiction writers did nothing but please these cases of arrested development, we would still be producing second-rate copies of Doc Smith space operas.

The wonderful thing about the science fiction field is that it gives all kinds of writers the scope to do their best work. We are blessed with writers as different as Hal Clement and Orson Scott Card, Ursula Le Guin and Harry Harrison, Roger Zelazny and Harlan Ellison. Unfortunately, we have too many readers like Mr. Wyatt, who apparently prefer comic strips to literature.

I hope he does read the Bible, especially the King James version. There he will find prose that is powerful, moving, and has stood the test of time. In short, he will be reading *literature*.

Ben Bova
Naples FL

—

Not only do I vigorously disagree with the comments of Wayne Davis in the November issue, but I found your response very frustrating. As a science fiction fan, the overwhelming dominance of fantasy in AMAZING Stories has been a major disappointment. The statement that you have "made no attempt to categorize stories by subgenre in order to achieve a certain desired ratio of fantasy to science fiction" demonstrates to me what I've suspected for a while now—that you have a very strong, unspoken bias against science fiction.

Now I see an argument coming. "We pick the best stories, regardless of genre, so it's not our fault there isn't more science fiction." This excuse reminds me of the white business owner who won't hire minorities because he can't find any that are qualified. Personally, I find it hard to believe there aren't any good science fiction writers out there trying to get into your pages.

Do I like anything about the new format? Of course. The artwork is excellent, especially the covers reminiscent of Frank R. Paul, and the commentaries offer interesting insights, but from my own perspective, your emphasis on fantasy ruins an otherwise promising effort.

Gregory Urbach
Reseda CA

—

The purpose of this letter is threefold:

1) Paul Di Filippo's story, "The Mill" (October), was an absolute masterpiece of science fiction/fantasy writing! Many things impressed me—the strength and depth of the characters, the subtlety with which the plot unfolded, the attention to detail. But what really grabbed me was the richness of the language and the sheer quality of writing. Here is someone with an obvious love of the English language and the skill to put that affection to good use. As far as I am concerned, you may print stories of *any* length when they achieve this quality.

2) I began subscribing just as you came out with the new version of the magazine. For the first two issues, I had my doubts. About half of the stories were good, but the other half were marginal at best. Yet, with each issue I have noticed a marked overall improvement in the quality of stories, until now I find myself eagerly anticipating the next issue.

3) Since you keep asking for feedback, I could do without the book reviews. I don't read nearly as much as when I was a youngster, thus that section holds no value for me. But it's not a major complaint, and I imagine most of your readers enjoy that section.

Douglas G.Mattheus
San Diego CA

—

One day I was walking through the magazine aisle of the grocery store and my eye was caught by a large-format, glossy-covered magazine. One heretofore unknown to me . . . or so I thought.

I took a closer look at the title, which seemed vaguely familiar. It was indeed AMAZING Stories! The same magazine I had read and enjoyed since childhood.

Frankly, I am glad to see the move to the new format. I'd always felt that the pulp format was old-fashioned, hard to read, hard to store (for some reason they always end up in the garage, water damaged and moldy and with the covers nearly obliterated by the old-style subscription tape). Also, I always felt that it lent an air of belittlement to the art of sf/fantasy writing. It seemed almost a relic from the stone age of publishing.

I think it is high time that sf/fantasy writers and illustrators were presented to the public as quality artists deserving of a quality vehicle. I see AMAZING Stories now as a beautiful and collectible magazine. I believe that the letters, illos, and stories are better than ever. Perhaps the format itself, in a sense, forces the editors to be more careful in choosing quality art and stories to reflect the quality of the format. Whatever the case, I am now once again, after many years, a certified AMAZING Stories supporter.

David T. St. Albans
Albuquerque NM

The Round-Eyed Barbarians

L. Sprague de Camp

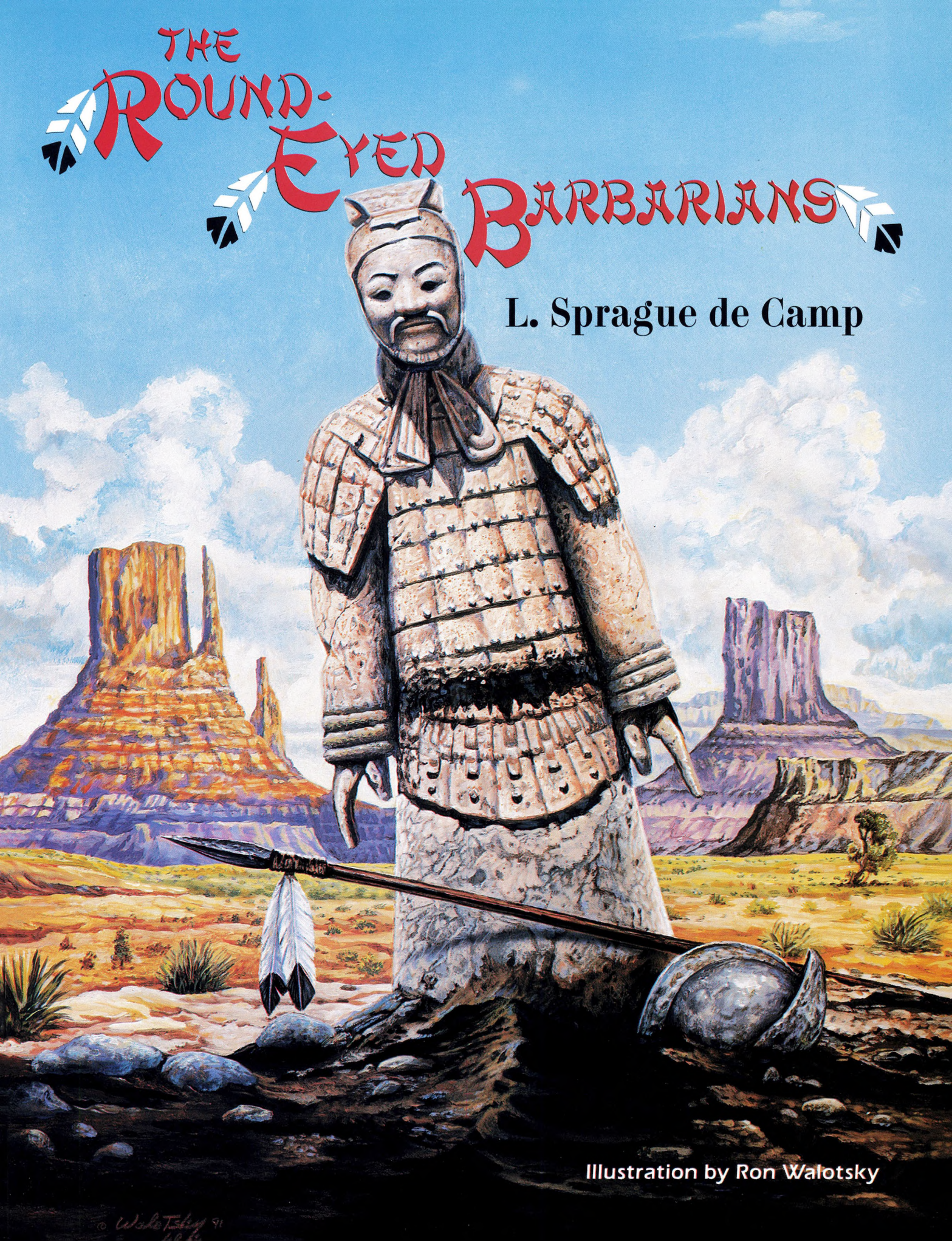


Illustration by Ron Walotsky

Ho Youwen, General of the Advanced Imperial Eastern Force, to the esteemed Li Ganjing, Director of the Eastern Continent Section of the Barbarian Relations Bureau of the External Affairs Department of the Overseas Branch of His Imperial Majesty's government. Health, prosperity, and many sons!

Dear old friend: This person thinks that, besides his formal report on the affair of the round-eyed barbarians, which will follow in the next dispatch, you would also like a personal letter to furnish background for this turn of events. It is all very well for officials of the Upper Mandarinate to sneer at barbarian thoughts and deeds as of no interest to representatives of mighty Zhongguo. True, barbarians' customs are often strange and disgusting, their beliefs outlandish, their manners appalling, and their emotions childish. But to be realistic, barbarous tribes and nations also include many dangerously vigorous and ingenious people. It was just such a toplofty attitude that in the days of the Sung led to the Mongol plague and the subjection of civilization to the rule of barbarian hordes for a century.

The same shortsightedness threatened a century ago, when Zheng-tung was the Son of Heaven. A cabal of scholars and soldiers sought to end the voyages of exploration and tribute gathering begun by the great Zheng Ho. These misguided persons sought to stop all foreign contacts. They held that, since the Middle Kingdom had everything needed by civilization, such contacts would only have adverse effects.

Luckily the cabal was defeated; the work of exploration and of scientific development initiated under the accursed Mongols was continued. Hence the exploration and conquest of this Eastern Continent has proceeded in an orderly manner. The red-skinned barbarians, realizing the futility of opposing the advance of civilization with weapons of wood and stone, have been offered the benefits of our superior culture. Many take advantage of this opportunity and, in another few centuries, may have raised themselves almost to the level of civilized human beings.

But to return to the round-eyed barbarians. One day this summer, this person was reconnoitering the eastern side of the Lower Mountains, in an area not yet brought under the benevolent sway of the Son of Heaven. I led a company of Hitchiti infantry, armed with our new breech-loading rifles. A scout reported the approach of a force of redskin warriors of the Ochuse tribe, who dwell on the shores of the great water to the south. Signal drums and gongs alerted my detachment.

A *shi* later, this force debouched from the trail. First came a scattering of redskins, from their paint evidently the Ochuse. After them rode a horseman in a steel helmet, cuirass, and other pieces of plate armor. After him came hundreds of round-eyed men afoot, less impressively armored, in the garb of Yuropian barbarians, wherewith the voyages of Admiral Xing have familiarized us. Their loins were covered with short, bulging breeches, below which they either went barelegged or wore a kind of skin-tight trouser on each leg. They bore pikes, crossbows, and firearms of primitive types, obsolete in the Celestial Empire for a century. My redskin spies had warned me of the incursions of such people along the coast of this continent, but these were the first such intruders whom I had personally seen.

Behind them, threading their way through the forest, I glimpsed many other redskins, men and women bowed beneath the weight of the burdens they bore. Further back yet, barely visible amid the towering trees, came a troop of armored horsemen and other men leading unsaddled horses.

At the sight of my group, taking cover behind rocks, bushes, and hummocks, the newcomers halted. The armored man in the lead swung off his horse with a clank of armor and handed the reins to another round-eye, who led the animal to the rear. The armored round-eye was handed a pole, and another man afoot joined him in front of the array. This was a lean man in a long black robe; through my telescope I saw that he was clean-shaven.

The armored man drove the butt of his pole into the soil. From the upper end of this pole hung a flag; but since the day was still, there was no wind to flutter this banner. All I could see was that it bore a pattern of red and yellow.

The armored man then shouted in his native gibberish. Through my telescope I saw that he was of medium size, with a sun-browned skin, sharp, beak-nosed features, and a full black beard. This, I perceived, must be one of those round-eyed barbarians inhabiting the Far Western Peninsula, called Yuropa by its natives, of which Admiral Xing informed us on his return from those lands in the reign of Hung Wu. The other round-eyes crowded up behind him.

When the armored man finished his proclamation, the other round-eye, the black-robed one, raised his hands and uttered another unintelligible speech. I called to the scout Falaya nearby:

"O scout, you know the Ochuse tongue. Find out what this be all about!"

Falaya stood up and shouted in the tongue of the coastal redskins. Presently one of the Ochuse conferred with the armored man and shouted back. This translating back and forth, as you can imagine, proved a lengthy, tedious business. Mankind were better off if all men spake the tongue of Zhongguo, which is after all the speech of civilization. At length Falaya turned to me, saying in broken Zhongguo:

"O General, he say man in armor say he claim all this land in the name of his king, Felipe of Espanya."

Somewhat astonished, I told Falaya: "Ask this bold fellow, who claims lands belonging to the Son of Heaven, who he be."

After the usual pause for translation from Zhongguo to Ochuse and from Ochuse to the armored man's Yuropian dialect, the reply came back:

"He say he Captain Tristan de Luna y Arellano, and who be we?"

This person gave Falaya the needed information, adding: "And by whose leave, barbarian, do you trespass on the lands of the Son of Heaven and, moreover, claim

parts of it in the name of some tribal chieftain in the Far Western Peninsula?"

I know not how literally my words were translated, but they seemed to arouse the armored round-eye to a frenzy. He began to shout a reply; but the black-robed one laid a hand on his arm. I could not hear what they said at that distance—not that I could have understood their blather anyway. But black-robe seemed to be urging negotiation.

At last the armored round-eye fell silent and signaled black-robe to speak. The result, translated sentence by sentence, was a lengthy homily. It reminded me of the endless sermons of that loquacious bonze, Brother Xiaojin, whom we sent home last year. He could put a hungry tiger to sleep with his endless disquisitions on the wisdom of the compassionate Buddha.

This fellow, the black-robed one, advanced an astonishing claim: that his master, a Yuropian high priest called a *Papa,* had divided the world between two Yuropian rulers, the kings of Espanya and Portugar; and this part had gone to the King of Espanya. There was more, about how the Yuropian god had commanded all men to love one another; and if we would but accept his theological doctrines, we were all assured of endless bliss in his Yuropian Heaven. If we refused to swallow these myths, we should all be slain by the Yuropians' weapons and then suffer eternal torment in the Yuropian Hell, a fearsome afterworld reminding me of the more eccentric afterlife concepts of the Tibetan Buddhists.

Although this person knows better than to laugh under such circumstances, I could not suppress a burst of mirth. I sent back the message that his *Papa* seemed very free in giving away other peoples' countries; and that in any case all men came naturally under the dominion of the Son of Heaven.

As for his theology, I was satisfied that I must have done something right in a previous incarnation to have earned my present rank as a reward. I would try by correct action and keeping my *karma* clean at least to maintain this status, compared to which round-eyed barbarians were less than worms beneath my feet. They must have committed grave offenses in previous lives to have been born into such a lowly estate.

At this, the armored man altogether lost control of himself and screamed orders. His redskins spread out to the flanks, nocking their arrows, whist a couple of hundred other round-eyes formed a double line facing us and readying their primitive firearms. These operated by means of lengths of cord, treated to burn slowly; I have seen specimens of similar weapons in the Imperial War Museum.

One round-eye passed down the line with a bucket of glowing coals, wherein each of the invaders dipped the end of his cord until it was alight. Then he clamped it to the mechanism of his gun. Meanwhile those armed with crossbows cocked them. The leader shouted some more, and my scout reported:

"He say we surrender or die, sir!"

I replied with a vulgarism expressing my disdain for such primitive insolence. The armored man shouted again, whereupon the other round-eyes discharged their weapons. After the first rank had fired and begun the lengthy business of reloading, the second rank stepped forth between them and fired in their turn. On their flanks, the redskins shot arrows.

The guns made loud reports and tremendous puffs of smoke, whilst their musket balls and crossbow bolts whistled past us. Since my people were well under cover, and those of the second rank had fired blindly because of the curtain of smoke before them, we sustained no casualties save a few flesh wounds among my Hitchiti from the arrows.

When the pall of smoke had somewhat dissipated, I said: "Fire!"

Our rifles opened up, and a number of trespassers, both round-eyed and red-skinned, fell.

"Reload!" I said, and then: "Fire!"

The round-eyes were still struggling to reload, which with firearms of that archaic type is a protracted process. As I later learned, such a gunner does well to get off twenty shots in one *ko,* whereas a well-trained soldier can fire one of our breech-loaders a hundred times in that interval, if he run not out of cartridges.

At our third volley, the intruders' redskins fled. Half the round-eyes were down; but the leader was still erect, shouting commands and defiance. I told the captain of my force:

"Choose a sharpshooter and order him to wound that armored man in the leg. I wish him alive, and also a redskin who can speak his language."

So it was done. At the fall of the leader, the other round-eyes joined the redskins in flight: first a few here and there, then all of them. Some dropped their guns to run faster. Behind them, the redskin porters also dropped their loads and fled, while the horsemen cantered off with their armor jingling. I did not command a pursuit, knowing that in these forests of immense trees the pursued can easily slip away and the pursuer as easily get lost. My Hitchiti broke from cover and raced away to collect the scalps of the fallen foes.

Later, when I had donned my official robe instead of my filthy uniform, and my peacock-feather hat in place of the steel cap, I commanded that the wounded Yuropian leader be brought to my tent, along with his redskin interpreter and our own Ochuse-speaking scout. I also sent men to retrieve the baggage dropped by the fleeing porters.

This Tristan de Luna appeared at the entrance to my tent with a pair of my redskins gripping his arms. His armor had been shed, and his garb was ordinary Yuropian, with the puffed trunks and below them the skin-tight trousers of their kind. He sweated heavily in the heat, limped on his bandaged leg, and supported himself by a tree branch he had somehow obtained, whittled down to a walking stick.

Now that I had a closer look at the man, I saw that he was older than I had thought. His curly black hair and beard were, like mine, beginning to show gray. But his stance was still erect and his movements youthfully springy, save for his wounded leg.

As he neared, I became aware that the man had not bathed lately if ever. Not to put too fine a point on it, he stank. I then attributed this to the exigencies of travel, but my redskin spies inform me that this is usual with Yuropians. Not only have they a naturally stronger bodily odor than normal folk; but also the Yuropian religion discourages cleanliness. Most adhere to Christianity, whereas the other major western creeds, Islam and Judaism, value bathing and cleanliness. Christians suspected of going over to either of these other faiths are burned alive, as the more warlike redskin tribes do to captive foes. Therefore, among Christians, cleanliness arouses suspicion of conversion to one of those other cults, which are completely outlawed in Espanya.

At the entrance Captain Tristan wrenched loose an arm, placed his hand over his heart, and made a low bow. This gesture, evidently meant as a polite greeting, overbalanced him in his crippled state. He staggered and would have fallen had not the two redskins caught him. He did not go to his knees and touch his forehead to the carpet, but one must make allowances for barbarians who have never been taught civilized manners; the full *ko-tou* would have been difficult for him in any case.

At least, this barbarian had evidently decided on a more urbane approach. His translated words were:

"Sir, now that I perceive you more closely, it appears that you come from the Great Khan of Cathay. Be this true?"

Yuropians had evidently not kept up with events in the Middle Kingdom. I told Tristan: "Two centuries past, your impression might have been apt. But we sons of Han expelled the Khans long ago and restored the Celestial Empire to the proper Sons of Heaven, now reigning as the glorious Ming. The Khans were but barbarian usurpers from the Gobi. Whence came you?"

He said: "From the land that the deceased Captain Ponce discovered and named 'la Florida.' He thought it an island, but unbroken land appears to extend far to the north thereof, and also to the west to Mexico." After a pause, he continued:

"Then be we in truth in the Indes? When that Italian Colón returned from his voyages, half a century ago, he insisted that he had reached them, or at least come to a chain of islands to the east of them, whence another day's sail would have brought him to the Spice Islands.

"But a ship of that fellow Magallanes returned to Espanya thirty-odd years ago. The captain thereof, Delcano, asserted that far to the west of these lands lies an ocean so vast as to require three or four months to sail across, and that the lands of the Great Khan lie beyond it. But this Delcano was a Basque and therefore not to be implicitly trusted. If this be the true Indes, that were greatly to the advantage of my sovran."

I told him: "Your Captain Delcano is quite correct. In any case, the Eastern Continent whereon we now stand is wide enough to take a well-mounted man, with remounts, as long to ride across as your Magallanes found the Eastern Ocean. It has nought to do with the land of India, which is even farther than the Celestial Empire. And now, what is all this nonsense about claiming this land for some Yuropian chieftain?"

The man muttered: "So huge a world!" Then followed another harangue, essentially repeating what the black-robed man had said before the shooting began.

"I could better explain it," said Tristan, "if your men had not slain our holy father. I myself have small knowledge of letters and history. But what have you done with my woman?"

"Woman? We have no captive women. There were a couple of female bodies in the woods behind your battle line. I suppose they were struck by our fire before all your redskins fled. What woman claim you to have had?"

"The daughter of a chief of the Nanipacana," said he. "We fell in love and eloped."

To straighten this out took further questions, since there be nought in Zhongguo exactly corresponding to these concepts, save perhaps in Li Po's poetry. But, like Captain Tristan, I am no literary man, familiar with such things. Besides, the mating habits of barbarians afford endless amusement.

Tristan said that he and the woman had not only fled secretly, defying the wrath of the woman's father, but had also caused the black-robed one to conduct a rite over their union, according to his customs rendering it permanent and unbreakable. I later learned that Tristan already had a wife somewhere, notwithstanding that Yuropians are supposed to be monogamous. But that is no affair of ours.

"Sir," said Tristan, "could you let me have something to eat? We are all half-starved, for the Indians" (as the Espanyans ridiculously call the redskins, although these live halfway round the world from the true Indians) "along the route had fled, taking all their food supplies with them before we arrived. Those *cabrones*—"

Falaya could not translate that word, but questioning revealed that it meant a eunuch. Notwithstanding the high rank of the eunuchs of the Imperial Court, the term is a deadly insult among round-eyes.

Whilst this person was getting Captain Tristan's meaning straightened out, a Hitchiti of my personal guard thrust his head into the tent. "O General!" he cried. "Our scouts report a large force of Nanipacana approaching, in full war paint."

"Kwanyin save us!" I exclaimed, rising. "Sound the alarms!"

This time things went more smoothly despite the war paint. The new force was led by Chief Imathla, with whom I had had dealings and so knew personally. I had been trying to persuade him voluntarily to place himself under the protection of the Son of Heaven, to save us the necessity of conquering him. So, when Imathla thrust his spear into the ground and laid his skull-cracker beside it, I signaled him to advance.

When he and I returned to my headquarters tent, the round-eye Tristan still stood there, leaning on his walking stick and with his free hand hungrily gnawing an ear of maize. At the sight of him, Chief Imathla burst into a tirade. Had he had his weapons to hand, I would not

have wagered a brass cash on Tristan's life. The round-eye shouted back. When the polemics ran down, I said to Falaya:

"Ask whether this speech refers to the chief's daughter."

At length Falaya reported: "He say aye, it does. This round-eye carry off his daughter, delight of his age, and chief set out in pursuit. When his war party near this place, they come upon daughter Mihilayo wandering, lost, in forest, with some Piachi whom Espanyans enslave and now flee back home. From her chief learn that round-eye and his men fight great General and lose. He say happy to see scoundrel captive, and he know some excellent tortures to dispose of him."

Tristan, to whom his own interpreter had been feeding a translation, visibly paled beneath his swarthy skin at the mention of torture. Then he squared his shoulders, raised his chin, and assumed an attitude of defiance, as captive redskin warriors are wont to do at the prospect of being burned alive by their foes. I could not help a twinge of admiration for his courage, barbarian though he was. He asked:

"Where be she now?"

Imathla replied: "Know that she is safe under her father's protection. Where that be is no affair of yours."

"She is my lawful wedded wife! That is whose affair it be! Fetch her here!"

I suggested: "That might be a sensible thought, O Chief, to unravel this knot."

"Never!" said Imathla. "You know not, O General, the depths of evil of these palefaces. Before they passed through our tribal lands, they had descended upon the Piachi tribe, whom they enslaved to furnish porters for their supplies. When some Piachi defied the palefaces' commands, the invaders seized them, chopped off their hands and feet, and cast them out to die. Others they strung up by the hands and affixed weights to their feet until they expired, or forced water down their throats until they burst inside."

"Why should they go to so much trouble? If one wishes to kill a man, it is quicker and easier to shoot him or chop off his head."

"Because they have a passion for that pretty yellow metal that we get in ornaments by trade from other tribes. They would not believe that there were no hidden stores of this metal, and they thought that by such treatment they could force the Piachi to reveal its whereabouts. Of course the Piachi are not Nanipacana and so not real human beings, or we should have felt obliged to avenge them.

"Twenty years ago the accursed Ernando de Soto came through, treating those who gainsaid him in this same ferocious manner. He also brought strange diseases amongst the tribes, whereof over half of us perished. Had our towns been still fully populated, O General, you would not have found it so easy to pass amongst us unscathed."

The round-eye was hopping up and down on his unwounded leg, indicating an eagerness to say his say. I told Falaya to give Tristan my permission. The barbarian shouted:

"These savages are too stupid and ignorant to appreciate the benefits we offer! They refuse to understand that, by accepting our religion, they may live to serve us, as is only right for such lowly folk, in return for the boons we bestow. Then, after death, they shall enjoy an eternity of pleasure in Heaven, praising the true God."

"Is that all you do in this Heaven?" I asked.

"What more is needed? We sit on clouds, play the *arpa,* and sing the praises of God."

"Forever?"

"Aye, forever."

This person commented: "Your Yuropian God must get bored with incessant flattery. Our gods are more rational; they are busy keeping records and otherwise carrying out their duties in the Heavenly bureaucracy."

When this had been translated, Tristan gave a contemptuous snort. But he forbore to argue theology, for which I doubt whether either of us had enough book knowledge. I regretted that the bonze Xiao-jin was no longer with us, having set out to return to his monastery in civilization. He would have argued spiritual matters with the barbarian all day and all the following night. Tristan said:

"I still demand my wife! I rescued her when two of my colonists would have raped her and then slain her for her golden earrings."

"All the demands in the world will not get the poor thing," said Chief Imathla. "She is well quit of you."

"Then fetch her here and let her choose her own fate!" cried Tristan.

"Ridiculous!" cried Imathla. Those twain began shouting again, until I roared them to silence. I said: "Come, honorable Chief, tell me: Is the woman where we can reach her?"

"She is under the protection of my personal guard," growled Imathla.

"Well, am I to understand that you wish her to be happy?"

"Aye, O General. That is my dearest wish, since her mother died of one of those diseases these accursed palefaces brought into our land."

"Then why not fetch her here, set the alternatives before her, and let her decide? If after that she be not happy, the fault will not be yours."

Imathla growled a bit, but after further argument I talked him round. The fact that he was alone in my tent, with rifle-bearing Hitchiti standing by, may have influenced his decision.

So Imathla put his head out the tent and called to one of his warriors. After some converse in Nanipacana, the warrior set off at a run. Whilst we waited, I caused tea to be brewed and offered to our guests. Imathla drank his, while Tristan took a mouthful, made a face, and returned the cup to the Hitchiti who had brought it.

At length the warrior returned, leading a young Nanipacana female. When she entered the tent, Tristan limped forward and seized her in an embrace. He performed that gesture of affection used by Yuropians and Arabs, of pressing the lips against the esteemed one.

Then Tristan placed his hands on the woman's shoul-

ders and held her at arm's length. He said something sharply to her; she replied, and they argued. It sounded as if he were making some demand and she refusing. I asked Falaya for a translation.

"O General," he said, "he say she must cover self; she say no cover, too hot."

Mihilayo was clad in the normal garb of these southern redskins in hot weather, namely: naked save for a pair of golden earrings and reticular designs painted on her body and limbs. Yuropians, coming I suspect from a cooler climate, regard such exposure as improper.

A heated argument followed amongst the three: the woman Mihilayo, the round-eye Captain Tristan, and the Chieftain Imathla. Mihilayo and Imathla spake in Nanipacana, whilst Mihilayo and Tristan conversed in the tongue of Espanya, which she spake albeit somewhat brokenly. Tristan and Imathla, having no tongue in common, had to communicate through the interpreters.

At last Imathla said to me: "My daughter wishes to know if you, O General, need a wife."

The question so surprised me that for a few heartbeats I was unable to reply. At last I said:

"I have my Number One wife back at Fort Tai-ze. But she has long nagged me to take a second wife, to relieve her of some of the burdens of domesticity. Besides, she says that she is too old to enjoy the act of love any more, whereas I am still fully able. Suppose I did take Mihilayo as proposed; how would that sit with you?"

Imathla grinned. "I should deem it as a splendid idea, giving me access to the General's ear and high standing amongst the tribes."

"Does your daughter truly wish this?"

"She assures me that indeed she does."

"How about that previous indissoluble marriage to Captain Tristan?"

"Oh, she says that is easy. His Yuropian mumbo-jumbo means nought to her. If there be any doubt on that score, the answer is simple. Slay him and make her a widow, free to wed whom she likes under any nation's customs."

According to what I hear, she was not quite correct, since it is said that in India they burn widows alive. A wasteful custom, I should say. But I saw no point in correcting the woman.

When Tristan's interpreter had given him the gist of this dialogue, the round-eye uttered a scream of rage. Wrenching loose from his guards—for he was a powerful man—he limped forward, gripping his walking stick in both hands and raising it over his head. I know not whom he meant to bludgeon first: Mihilayo, Imathla, or me. Before he got within hitting distance, however, one of my guards fired his rifle at close range. With a howl of frustrated fury, Tristan fell back on my Tang-dynasty rug, writhed a little, and fell still. He was dead from a bullet that entered his ribs below the heart, came out his back, and punched a hole in the canvas behind him.

I questioned Imathla about Nanipacana marriage customs. He told me that when a man and a woman moved into the same hut, that was deemed a marriage. There were none of the processions, music, gifts, fireworks, and so forth that solemnize a wedding in civilization. Imathla said in Nanipacana that he gave Mihilayo to me, and that was that.

Later, I asked my new bride why she had chosen me in lieu of her round-eye lover. That, she said, was simple. When she saw the power that Captain Tristan commanded by his thunder sticks and his armor and weapons of this Yuropian metal, she decided that he would make a suitable spouse and protector of her and their children. When she observed that I commanded even greater power, by my superior thunder sticks and my well-trained army, she decided that I should be an even more effective protector. Besides, the union would confer honor on her family, clan, and tribe. She added that Tristan stank; although redskins, as a result of smearing their bodies with animal fats to protect themselves against insect bites, are also fairly rank.

Such a foresightedly practical outlook makes me hopeful of eventually raising the redskins to our level of civilization. About the Yuropians I am more doubtful.

Now I am back in Fort Tai-ze with two wives. My Number One carped about my taking a Number Two whom she had never seen, let alone chosen for me; but that died down. A more vexing problem is acting as judge when the two women daily disagree over some detail of household management. Although Mihilayo is fast becoming fluent in the language of civilization, I fear she does not fully accept her position as subordinate to the Number One. She also tries to elicit from me more frequent love-making than is easy for a man of middle age.

On the other hand, ere we parted, Chief Imathla declared his allegiance to the Son of Heaven and placed the Nanipacana beneath our benevolent protection.

With this letter I shall send samples of the guns and armor of the round-eyes, to see whether they have features that might usefully be copied and improved upon by our makers of armaments. I doubt that this be the case; for in these techniques the men of Espanya seem to be about where we of Zhongguo were a century and a half ago.

I regret the death of Captain Tristan de Luna, fool though he was. Had he lived, I should have brought him back to Tai-ze. I should have questioned him about conditions in Yuropa and amongst the men of Espanya who have landed along the coasts of the Eastern Continent and begun to subdue and enslave the redskins. If he proved reticent, I have ample means to loosen his tongue.

But how typically barbarian to make such an unseemly fracas over so trivial a matter as affection for a woman! As I said at the start, their customs are strange, their beliefs outlandish, and their emotions childish. Let us thank the divine bureaucrats that we, at least, are truly civilized! ✦

Death of a God

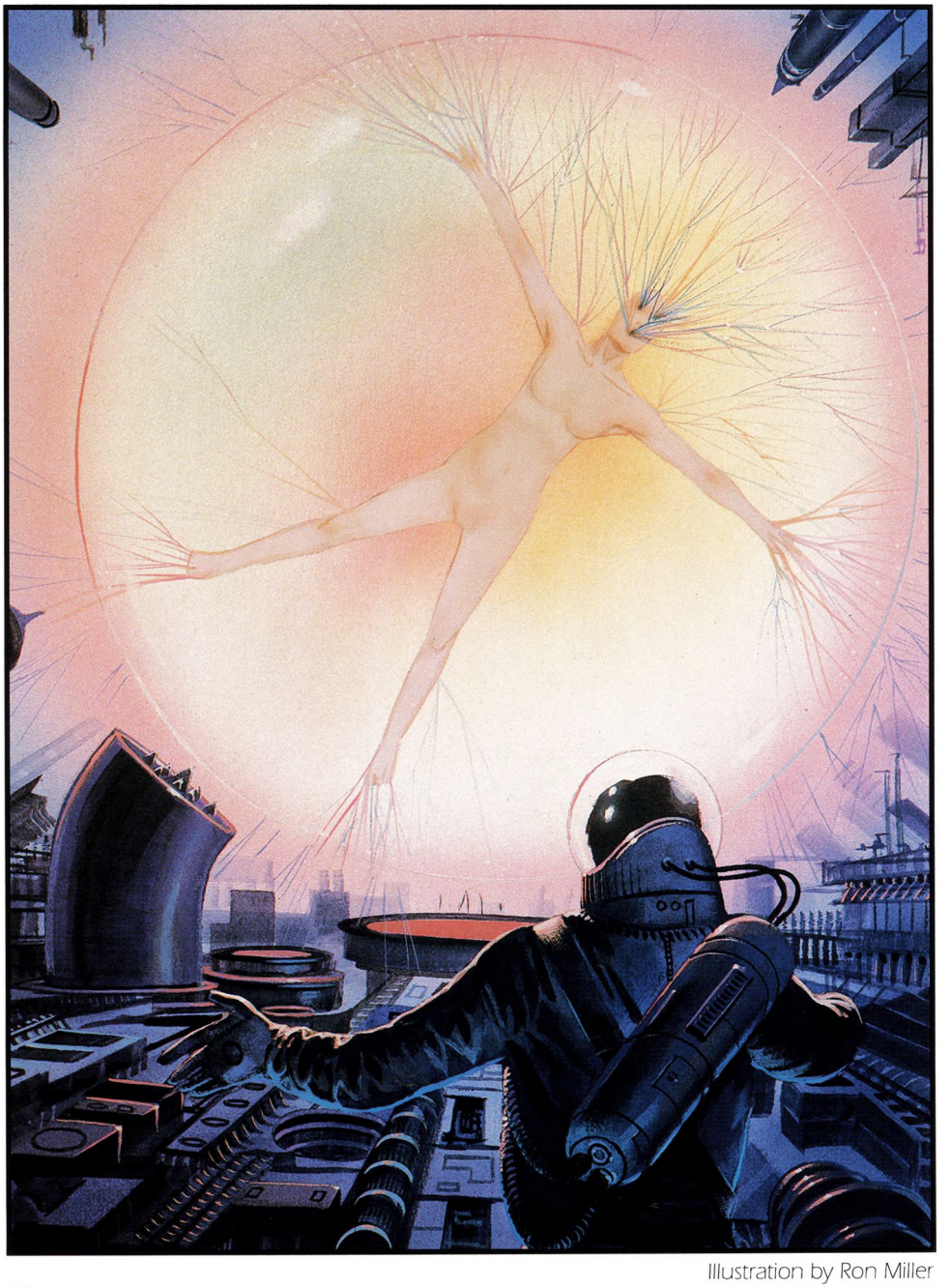


Illustration by Ron Miller

J. Robert King

1

I stood in the gray-walled conference room, a stranger amid clumps of white-coated techno-surgeons and drowsy hacks. They chatted and yawned and poured lukewarm coffee down their throats. To a man, they were so sleepy or jaded that not a head but mine turned as the destroyer began her regal procession into the room.

The legendary warbird's holoimage was mercilessly vivid against the charcoal walls. Digital diagnostics had stripped her of any charitable shroud of distance or darkness. I could make out her ruptured plasma-lines and the blackened craters in her hull—even the minuscule scoring of thirty years of space dust showed clear on the projection. Though I had known Spaceport Phoenix was equipped with the latest optical diagnostics, I had not realized they would make the starship look so dissected, so naked. So like a corpse scanned on a forensic mediframe.

Yet, despite all the damage, a month in drydock would leave her hull rebuilt and spotless. But unfortunately, the neural center of the ship—its CNU—would have to be replaced, not repaired.

Between sips of tepid coffee, a technosurgeon standing beside me muttered bitterly, "Hope you got your sleep. This'll be a bitch of a day."

Bitch. I considered today the grand culmination of my postgraduate studies; the tech beside me considered it a *bitch*—eighteen hours spent retrofitting a destroyer. But CHRNS-775 would have disagreed with both of us. For her, today was more a funeral than anything else. My eyes compulsively scanned her silhouette again: the entire forecastle had passed the docking-bay doors now. As I watched her reverent procession, it struck me as absurd that any tech would question her sapience. But obviously the tech beside me did. It was just as well. If he had known she was intelligent, he probably would have used the word *bitch* for her, not for the day.

"You the cybershrink?" the surgeon asked.

"One of them."

He downed another swallow of coffee and winced at its bitterness. "Bet you're pissed about the Gieson legislation. Didn't used to be that a shrink'd have to sit through this."

Have to sit through this? I'd been pushing for the Gieson bill for two years. It was the first time the Imperial Council ever entertained the notion of cybernetic sapience. I only wondered what went on before cyberpsychiatrists were required at these retoolings.

The holoimage continued its majestic entry into the board room. Over the past three months I had studied her plans and log-files in such depth that her frame had become an unconscious archetype of my mind, ranking equal in importance to fire and water and blood. I stepped quietly back to allow more space for the advancing projection. But I was the only one. The labbies stood oblivious as the ship's frame washed in distorted images over them.

Well, almost oblivious. An older surgeon, whom I had guessed to be the project leader, tolerated the flashing lights for only a moment. He broke off his conversation, strode curtly across the room, and switched off the holoprojector. Without a sound, the destroyer's gigantic frame disappeared. Conversation rattled into silence and the man at the switch began to speak.

"The ship's cleared the hangar doors. It'll be docked and moored by the time we get to the ports, so we might as well get to it." He turned his leathery face toward me. "Dr. Gheist?"

"Yes."

"Stick close. First thing's the anesthetic, and we'll need you to sign off on it." He said it as though I were simply a rubber stamp.

"I will gladly do so if it is properly administered," I replied flatly.

His eyes narrowed, but remained on me only a moment more. "I want everybody scrubbed, from the surgeons down to the hacks. I don't care if you'll be clipping the leads from her bald backside or wheeling about the diagnostics, we gotta have a totally sterile field in there. Let's move."

2

Because of a misguided fear of sabotage, the Imperial Council had ordered that CHRNS-775 and the rest of the alpha destroyers be designed impervious to chemical anesthetics. The alternative "anesthetic" proposed by the designers proved a textbook case of somatocentric thinking. Despite thirty years of protests from the Cyberpsychology Association, the brutal practice of electroanesthesia was still legal. Until the Council settled the issue of cybernetic sapience, we operated under the Gieson compromise: electroanesthesia remained legal but required a psychiatrist's sign-off. It was like requiring a laser-surgeon to witness chain-saw amputations.

From the enclosed observation deck I gazed at the ship: she floated huge and silent in the vast, starless darkness inside the spaceport. Her moorings were in place, and the harbor's cylindrical causeway had already telescoped out and melded with her forward coupler. Techs and hacks milled about the airlock, their envirosuits and polyglass helmets already donned. I wondered if it was just to keep them from guzzling more coffee. I unlatched my helmet and tilted it back to check the psychdeck strapped to my back. The screen was shielded, the drives parked, and the headgear secured. I glanced back up at the ship and wondered what was delaying the procedure. Perhaps she was still transmitting the log-files of her last mission. Or perhaps she was delaying the log-files because she knew what was about to happen.

With a sudden, thunderous *boom,* the harbor's docking claws locked in place over her moorings. The mooring lines were integral to her frame: even if she tore herself to pieces, she couldn't break free. As the thunder of the docking claws reverberated through my skull, I remembered an old 2D photo I'd seen in some psychhistory software: a "schizophrenic" strapped limb for limb to a padded table. I gazed grimly at the captured starship: our methods remained the same. They had only become more powerful.

From countless follicles along the spacedock's surface emerged probes, mounted on slender umbilici. The umbilici lengthened as the probes at their tips strained toward the great ship. Unguided and blind though they seemed, each probe sought out and engaged a socket upon the battle-scored hull. The thin umbilici, strung tight from the dock to the destroyer, looked like the web of a giant spider. And CHRNS was the cicada entrapped at its center. When all the probes had engaged their sockets, a low-level moan arose: high-voltage current coursed in random surges through the umbilici and into the ship. The peaking waves of power inundated her internal comlines, overriding the weaker electrical impulses from the CNU to all points of her metal body. She was paralyzed, like a woman electrocuted: she could neither activate nor deactivate any of her systems. But this was no anesthesia: the surges produced more pain than they overrode. In fact, the surges would have electrocuted the CNU herself were it not for the thin ring of transformers that surrounded her. But I had to won-

der which fate was worse—immediate death, or the constant, jangling pain of electricity coursing through her paralyzed body? For despite the paralysis, CHRNS remained fully aware.

Above the sonorous hum of the current, I could suddenly hear my heart's insistent pounding. I gazed out at the ship, feeling as paralyzed as she. Today was the culmination of my postgraduate work, true. But that fact did not discount the day's tragedy. I had heard historians say that among the greatest casualties of the 20th-Century Renaissance were the gods. But only now was I beginning to glimpse how traumatic it was to put a god to death.

A young hack approached me and, without a word, handed me the anesthesia sign-off sheet. My gaze fell reflexively to the symbol-clogged page. I turned it over stiffly in my hands and drew a deep breath. My eyes followed the letters on the page, but I honestly couldn't make sense of them.

"You realize she is still fully aware?" I muttered stupidly.

The hack studied my face. "Sir?"

I raised my eyes and stared blankly at the labbies swarmed about the causeway. "Once we're in the inner sanctum and she starts losing sensation, she'll figure it out."

"Sir," the hack said, his voice irritatingly calm, "we need your signature to continue."

I turned away from him; had to pull myself together. The pen was in my hand, though I couldn't remember having picked it up. I flattened the sheet against the huge window before me and signed next to the red X.

The completion of the mazy ink lines that counted as my signature seemed to work a kind of magic. The main airlock to the causeway hissed and rumbled open, and the techs and hacks who'd been swarming around the portal suddenly poured into the open shaft.

In a hypnotic daze, I tilted my polyglass helmet back over my face and locked it to the suit. Then I wandered through the open blast-doors and into the causeway. The dimly lit tunnel ahead of me was filled with a flurry of white envirosuits and flashing metal gear. Behind me, hacks flooded into the passage, towing a pair of mammoth prosthetic capsules and diagnostic mainframes. The darkness within the causeway grew even deeper as the last of the task force entered it and the blast-doors slammed closed behind them.

"Suits secure?" crackled a voice over the intercom in my helmet. Silence settled for a moment. Then came an extended hiss as the causeway depressurized.

Moments later, hacks plugged portable keypads into slots on the ship's broad hatch, then punched in codes and slid clearance cards through the keypads' scanners. Suddenly the monstrous hatch shifted and groaned, then swung slowly open. The cluster of labbies bottlenecked behind the portal began to shift and funnel into it. The passageway beyond was unlit, but tall, broad, and straight—the single access corridor in a crewless vessel. Hand-held lights strobed hypnotically through the titanium passage as labbies pressed on to the heart of the ship. I stumbled, dazed, through the hatch, following the flashing lights. The grim impression struck me that my postdoctoral practicum was turning out to be more a gang rape than a surgery. We had no right to coerce, invade, and mutilate a sapient this way. Surely CHRNS had no notion why she had been ordered to withdraw from the Peln Wars and report to Port Phoenix. I suddenly wished I had torn up that anesthesia sign-off. But the labbies needed no further sanction from me for the surgery: if I turned back now, I would only be denying CHRNS her right to a cybershrink.

The airlock at the end of the passage rattled open and the team sluiced into the pitch-dark inner sanctum. Hacks erected the spindle lights they had toted in while crews wheeled technosurgical apparatuses into the room. I entered just as the lights flickered and began to illumine the chamber. Then I caught my first glimpse of the CNU.

At first she looked to me like the butterfly paperweight I had had as a child—elegant and fragile. But not inanimate like the butterfly. No. She was vibrant and beautifully alive.

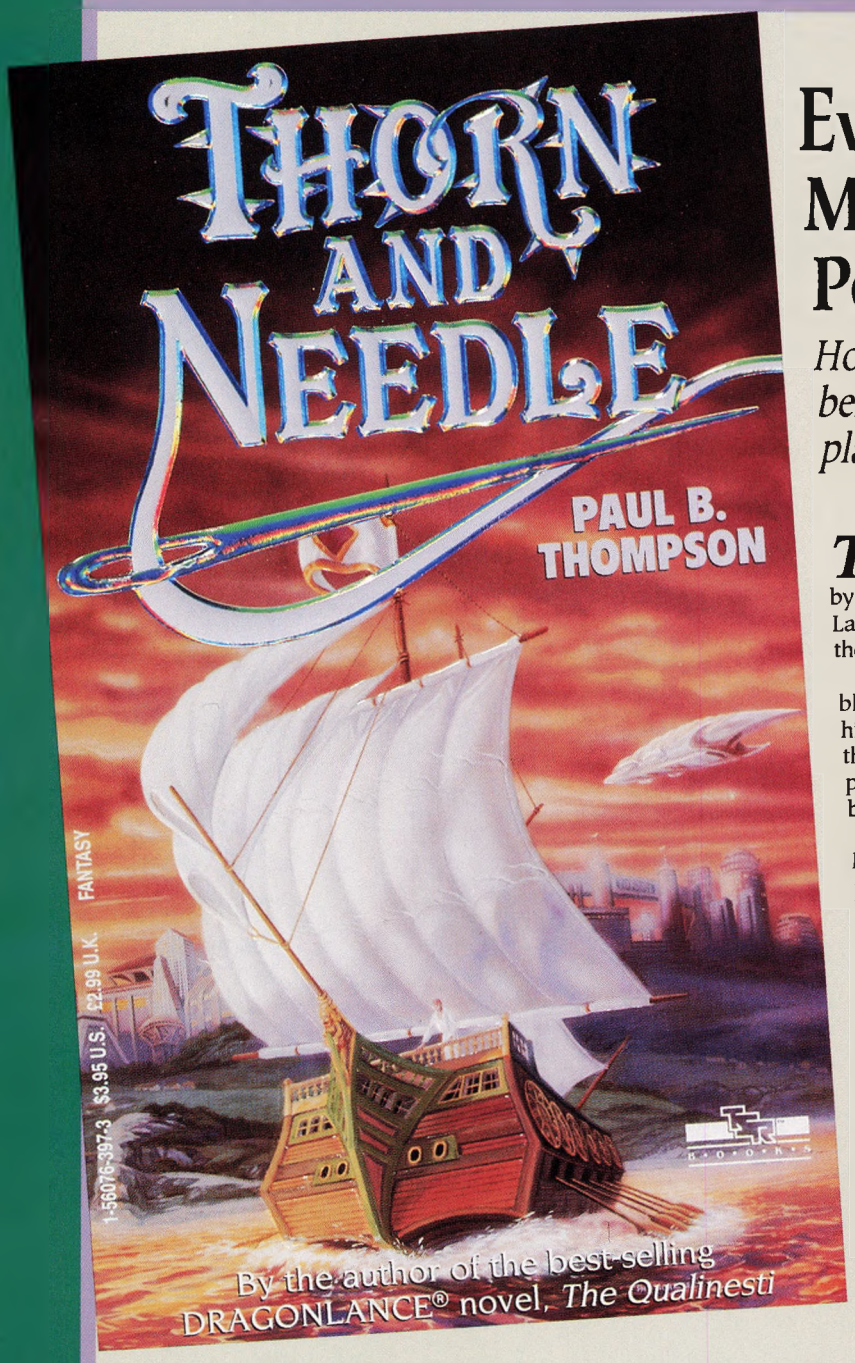
Her naked body was starkly white, suspended diagonally in a three-meter sphere of solid polyglass. Though I knew she was forty-six, she looked no older than sixteen. That must've been when they excised her pituitary and implanted her. Her pallid skin was still smooth, young, and spotless. She was beautiful—fully human, save for the wires: countless strands coursing from her skull, spine, thighs, arms, ears, nose, mouth—even where her eyes had once been, the filaments emerged thick. But she was no marionette: Marionettes take life from their wires; CHRNS *gave* life to hers.

Metallic and optical fibers flowed in silvery tresses from her cerebral cortex, then out of the polyglass and into a scintillating wall of circuitry behind her. Other filaments sprouted in dual bands along either side of her spine, then fanned out like angel's wings to meet the ceiling. She almost appeared to be suspended by these wings of wire, as though they formed the prow of an ancient galleon, and she the figurehead. More filaments emerged in clusters from her upper arms and thighs, where they tied into the humoral and femoral trunk nerves. The wires that tapped into her medulla, pons, and cerebellum exited her mouth in a thick band, then sprayed out like the breath of the North Wind. Fibers joined the corpus callosum through her nostrils, and the temporal lobes through her ears. And in place of eyes, countless silvery filaments emerged and switchboarded to the ship's myriad optical sensors.

To me she looked like a stark angel from a Grünewald painting—borne upon quicksilver wings, eyes radiating light, nostrils smoldering with fire, and mouth breathing the sinewed Word of God. She needed only a sword that flashed as lightning. But even without the sword, she was godlike; powerful; immortal.

3

In my preparation for this moment, I had conducted a clinical for seven high-functioning delta-series CNUs who



Everyone Said Miyesti was a Perfect Place....

However, disaster boils beneath the surface of this placid land

Thorn and Needle reveals Miyesti, a city where marvels transpire daily. Wagons roll by without horses. Voices emerge from clouds. Lamps blaze without wicks. This and more are the handiwork of a wondrous new god.

Then two mysterious travelers enter the fabled city — a seedy, arrogant nobleman and his sullen manservant. What brings them to this mystical place? Is it the new deity and its powers? Or the fear of what the nobleman left behind and is running from?

Soon two powerful forces lying beneath the Miyesti's veneer will collide: tradition versus progress. And the destiny of this marvelous land is held in the hands of the puzzling strangers.

Thorn and Needle is an imaginative new science-fantasy novel by Paul B. Thompson. He is author of several best-selling novels, including *The Qualinesti* and *Red Sands*. Look for this new novel at bookstores everywhere.

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Kingslayer
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Denise Vitola
Available in December

tested out "Poor for Implantation." Unlike the other eight hundred thirty-four whose shaping failed, these seven had not died from the complications that arose. But they still had emotional or psychological imbalances that would have made them extremely dangerous in a seventy-three-thousand-ton titanium body. I told myself we were keeping them alive on humanitarian grounds, but I knew the techs just wanted some guinea pigs to help them work the bugs out of the shaping process.

None of my seven CNUs was older than twelve, but all resided in prosthetic capsules—seeing through cameras, hearing through microphones, activating motors to move about and manipulate objects. Without their capsules, they were blind, deaf, dumb quadriplegics. But even the capsules could not compensate for the CNU's profound socioretardation. None could speak or even interpret words spoken to them, nor could they learn human languages: their temporal lobes were already so dominated and shaped by protoassembly languages that they couldn't even grasp the fundamentals of human grammar. They also understood nothing of human interaction: in fact, they recognized neither me nor themselves as human. Even the basic animal functions of eating and drinking were foreign to them. Their viscera had been removed to allow for a plasmapump implant, which pushed a bioengineered, oxygen-and-nutrient-rich fluid through their circulatory systems. They were utter strangers to their own humanity.

But inside their simulators, they brilliantly commanded destroyers. No, "commanded" is the wrong word. They *were* the starships they controlled.

In the sixth month of incubation that had followed the bioengineering of the CNU zygotes, the main conduits of their motor and sensory neurons had been grafted into the starship simulator. Thereafter, the natal CNUs learned about their complex titanium bodies just as normal babies learn about their complex biological ones. In place of rods and cones, the CNUs learned to see with compound optics, simultaneously assimilating visual input ranging from the binary bleeps of electric eyes to the full-color, digitized, binocular matrices of cameras. In place of muscles, they learned to activate, deactivate, and balance the drives of their countless thrusters and hydraulics. And their bioengineered cerebellums quickly learned the complex task of controlling and monitoring the ship's basal functions.

From that sixth month, their simulators trained them to reside among the stars, to see as gods see and move as gods move. Their universe was peopled not by humans, but by spaceports, satellites, cities, and destroyers like themselves—a pantheon of somatometallic gods.

CHRNS-775 was in these respects the same. She probably had no more understanding of the humans invading her hull than an ailing child understands the viruses in her body. But to me her ignorance of humanity was yet another proof that she was divine. Her form, human though it was, did not partake in the pettiness and profanity that defines our species. She was naked and unafraid. Could she be the destiny of our tragic genetic branch, a creature as oblivious of her *homo sapiens* forebears as we were of *homo habilis*? It was poetic justice: over two million years, technological adaptation to the environment replaced genetic adaptation, and thus human evolution stagnated. But with that same technology, CHRNS had crossed the next evolutionary threshold, and become *homo dei*.

I could not pull my eyes from her radiant form. I felt I should fall prostrate before her. But into this rapture crowded the sudden realization of why we had come. Not to worship the god, but to dismantle her.

The fickle technology that had given her birth considered her now inviable. She was a relic. Slower, weaker, more stupid than the theta series. The hardware was salvageable, but not the CNU. Though her naked body showed no sign of aging, her mind did not escape unscathed. In addition to using archaic modes of neural control, her reflexes had slowed and her intelligence become more concrete—less liquid. Clearly the destroyer had proven less and less deadly in the Peln Wars. The ship's refit and repair would be senseless unless a new Central Neural Unit were installed.

4

The only thing that could pry my gaze from CHRNS-775 was her replacement CNU. JPTR-1101 they called him: the young god. Despite the bulkiness of JPTR's prosthetic capsule, I could only glimpse pieces of him through the clutter of hardware and labbies. But after craning my neck for a moment, I caught sight of JPTR through the capsule's lateral port. His face was young—I guessed fourteen—but I doubted his pituitary had been cropped more than a month earlier. JPTR's face, like CHRNS's, was a mask shot through with wires. Only the occasional twitch of an undedicated motoneuron disrupted the stillness of that visage. And like her, too, he appeared unaware of what was about to transpire. He could not have known that his new life would come at the cost of hers.

I dropped to my knees and unslung the psychdeck from my shoulder. The telescoping legs detached easily from their housings, and I tightened the clamps at each articulation. Fighting my way through the chaotic preop, I positioned the deck as close to CHRNS's crystalline sphere as I could manage. If I were to read anything at all from vestigial neuronal firings in her face and body, I had to be positioned close. I clicked the psychdeck's power switch to the "1" position, and the deck's reactor set up a familiar hum. As the verbal interface booted, I activated the headgear over my ears and spoke into the condenser microphone.

"Test . . . test." The meter on the deck registered, and the words appeared on the screen.

I looked up to study CHRNS's face, but instead saw two shielded cables dangling loose from the polyglass sphere: her temporal-lobe interfaces had already been disconnected.

Rising, I pointed to the loose cables and shouted furiously into my intercom. "These interfaces should *not* have been removed until the psychdeck was ready to receive them! Any further breach of procedure in han-

dling CHRNS-775 will be reported and prosecuted!" No one seemed to be listening, except for the two young hacks who arrived at the psychdeck, fitted a string of converters to the cables, and plugged them into the back of it.

"Not like it had anybody to talk to," one of them muttered to the other as they walked away.

The psychdeck's voice, feminine and velvety, suddenly spoke in the headgear: "no equivalent . . . no equivalent . . . no equivalent . . ." My gaze fell to the screen, which echoed the phrase: "[no equivalent][no equivalent][no equivalent] . . ." Evidently, CHRNS was spewing out protoassembly syntax for which the psychdeck's parsers found no English equivalent. The CNU must have been frantically trying to contact all points of her unresponsive titanium body.

A lump rose in my throat. The first line of communication had opened between the besieged CNU and myself. I feared to make contact across that line; I felt as though I were telecomming my wife during her murder.

"[no equivalent][no equivalent][no equivalent] . . ."

I stared, mesmerized by the flashing screen. At length, as if by reflex, I muttered the enabling command, "Begin Gieson transmission." The screen cleared and the headgear fell silent. Then came the psychdeck's voice, reading to me the English equivalent of the message it sent to CHRNS-775. The feminine voice spoke with engineered concern.

"Remain calm. We mean you no harm. We are the guardians. Do not struggle. We are repairing damage. CHRNS can fly soon. Remain calm. We mean you no harm. . . ."

The message cycled on my screen three times, simultaneously sending CHRNS the protoassembly equivalent. Only after the third iteration did the words cease and the channel open to allow CHRNS a response. For a moment, more "no equivalent" responses filled the headgear and the screen. Then digital silence fell. I counted twenty-three heartbeats with no response from CHRNS-775. Finally, the psychdeck defaulted to the original recitation: "Remain calm. We mean you no harm. We are the guardians. . . ."

As the paragraph ran through its three repetitions, my gaze wandered the rest of the room. As per procedure, the technosurgeons had left the sensory intercepts attached while they disconnected the motor intercepts. Good. The eighteen hours of sensory deprivation might have killed CHRNS, as it did her elder sisters in the alpha line. Still, the process was far from sophisticated. Instead of eighteen hours of dead sensation, CHRNS would experience eighteen hours of electrical invasion.

When I looked back at the screen, the Gieson paragraph had cleared. Another string of untranslatables poured through the headgear and onto the screen. But in the midst of the string came a simple, cogent question.

"What is guardians?"

The interrogative repeated three times, then gave way to the "[no equivalent]" message. I spoke the command, "Q menu," and the question menu appeared. I found the question "Who are guardians?" With a trembling finger, I touched the screen to block the question, then touched the "respond" box.

The Gieson program sent the response to CHRNS-775. "Guardians repair damage. Guardians mean no harm. Guardians help you fly again. Guardians repair damage. Guardians mean . . ."

I shook my head grimly: the program's depth of logic matched that of the legislators who prepared it. After the third repetition of this message, the screen cleared. Once again, the "no equivalent" statements began to roll out. I wondered what essential questions the psychdeck could not relay between CHRNS and me. As my eyes scanned the line of "[no equivalent]" messages, the psychdeck's gentle voice asked, "What [no equivalent] CHRNS-775?" As the query repeated, I called for the questions menu. At the base of the list were the instructions: "Ignore questions containing untranslatables."

Damn. I couldn't just ignore the question: it clearly flagged CHRNS's self-awareness. She had referred to her own name, for God's sake! But the Gieson program offered no answer to "What [no equivalent] CHRNS-775?" And if I didn't answer in the next few seconds, the program would simply spit out the default paragraph.

Without my having willed it, my finger activated the "send" box on the screen. The box flashed, waiting for me to speak my message. Again the lump filled my throat. CHRNS's question burned its way into my mind. What could I say? If she were my daughter—not that I had a daughter—what would I have said to her?

"Do not fear," I said slowly, careful to pronounce the consonants.

The screen cleared, and now, instead of strings of untranslatables came the solitary question: "What is fear?"

Five, six, seven heartbeats. I had to respond before the program kicked in, but what could I say? It had to be simple. It had to be true. Fourteen, fifteen, sixteen heartbeats. I highlighted the "send" box. My psych training took over. "Fear is threat response."

"What is fear?" came the almost immediate reiteration.

For a moment, I thought she might be physiologically incapable of feeling fear. But only for a moment. She could obviously perceive threat, and her endocrines and sympathetic nervous system were still intact.

I slowly spoke. "Fear is what CHRNS-775 has."

"What is fear?"

What *is* it? It is the psychophysical preparation to deal with a perceived threat. But none of that would translate.

"Fear is damage before damage," I enunciated.

"Damage is fear?" came the response.

I smiled. "Yes! Yes!"

The screen remained dark, the headgear silent. Six, seven, eight. I checked the interfaces to see if one had come loose. Thirteen, fourteen, fifteen. We had made such progress. Nineteen, twenty, twenty-one—

The gentle voice came again over the headgear. "Damage is fear. . . . Guardians . . . is fear."

Her response was utterly lucid, utterly true, utterly poetic. But if I confirmed the statement's truth, I could jeopardize CHRNS's chance to survive the surgery. "No. Guardians remove fear."

"Guardians makes fear. Guardians damages CHRNS-775."

"Guardians repair damage. CHRNS-775 can fly soon." Yes, she would fly soon, but in a prosthetic simulator.

"CHRNS-775 can fly [no equivalent]. Guardians stops CHRNS-775 [no equivalent]."

"Guardians help CHRNS-775." I shook my head. Despite the sophistication of the translator, our knowledge of protoassembly syntax was remedial. Neither the CNU nor I were Neanderthals, and yet we were consigned to such primitive language.

"Guardians is fear."

"No, CHRNS-775 is guardian."

"[no equivalent][no equivalent][no equivalent][no equivalent][no equivalent][no equivalent][no . . ."

5

From that point on, her statements were untranslatable. I should not have mentioned that CHRNS was a guardian —a human. I was moving too fast. Maybe she couldn't translate the statement, or maybe she thought me a digital dream. I hoped the lack of cogent response from her bespoke anger, but I feared it showed terror instead. The psychdeck had proven too rudimentary for me to offer CHRNS any comfort. I may have been more horrifying to her than the surgery itself. Of course, she *did* survive the procedure, unlike her alpha sisters.

I sat in the blue-gray psych lab, writing a report on my observations of the surgery. Within ten feet of me sat the prosthetic capsule and simulator that held CHRNS-775. Though I had monitored her systems now for four hours and hadn't slept for twenty-four, I was bound by the Gieson legislation to observe for two more hours. Odd that techs only had to put in two post-op hours while shrinks had to do six. And CNUs weren't even legally sapient.

I glanced up, glassy-eyed. CHRNS's face was just visible through the forward portal in her capsule. She was as stoic as before. And as beautiful. But now, removed from the glare of the surgical lights, her face appeared dark and downturned. She looked less the angel now, and more the butterfly paperweight. No, not even that. She looked like a young girl tangled in seaweed and drowned.

I got up from my chair to get a cup of coffee but, remembering my legal obligations, sat down again. Two more hours before I could leave, or sleep. My eyelids felt stiff as cardboard: unless I found something more interesting than my report, I was sure to fall asleep. The central monitor atop the psych mainframe looked interesting. It was plugged into CHRNS's simulator and displayed what she was seeing from her fore viewscreen. Across the monitor played a beautiful blue-black starfield, and at its top, a curved sliver of the azure orb called Earth. It didn't matter to me that the planet and the starfield were simply simulations. They were beautiful, all the same. And I hoped that CHRNS found them so as well, for simulated worlds were all she had left.

So far she appeared to be adapting well. The simulation had started with her release from Spacedock Phoenix in orbit around Mars, and she had, in these four hours, entered Earth's orbit. Her epinephrine levels had dropped to normal, and she had set up a very routine flight plan. If at the start of this day I had known it would end like this, I would have expected to feel absolutely satisfied. But, strangely, I felt sad that she lived through it all. It seemed tragic that the warrior-god CHRNS would die in a silicon closet rather than in battle.

I must have stared at that screen for ten minutes before I nodded off. When I awoke, the monitor was glowing a fiery red. The starfield and blue world were gone, and the entire screen showed an overhead view of ice-capped mountains. They were growing larger.

CHRNS was nose-diving.

I leapt up from my chair and propelled myself unevenly toward the capsule. This was insane—it was a simulation. Her engines would not have failed unless programmed to do so. Even so, CHRNS was plummeting like a stone. I slipped on the controller headgear and shouted, "Halt procedure!" For a moment more, the monitor glowed blood-red with the heat of atmospheric friction. The ship had reached terminal velocity. Then the screen went black.

I quieted my voice and calmed myself, "Display engine systems." The screen lit up with stat matrices for CHRNS's simulated engines. All were fully operational. I scanned other matrices for damage, but all showed perfect function. What could be causing this?

I gazed through the portal of CHRNS's capsule. Her face hung there as becalmed as ever, but the optic fibers and wires that haloed that beautiful face glowed with overstimulation. Some forgotten neuron in her chin was firing, and her face, in its polyglass mask, quivered as though on the verge of tears.

She knew what she was doing. She knew these stars were not spinning orbs of hydrogen fusion, but coordinate matrices. Her cosmos had been replaced by a cheat —a world of backdrops and stage sets—and she knew it.

My heart thudded dully beneath my cold sternum. I would not consign a human, let alone a god, to a life such as this. I spoke the command word.

"Resume."

With utter fidelity, the simulator produced the chaotic sensations of a titanium destroyer impacting a mountain of ice and granite. I could not bear to watch the screen —not because I feared the collision, but because I could not tear my gaze from CHRNS-775. At impact, every filament that issued from her lit up for a brilliant instant and in that moment, she shone once again—an archangel breathing the Word of God.

Then within the capsule and upon the screen, all became dark. It was simulated death, but real enough to overload the mortal mind of the CNU. As tears of exhaustion and sadness welled in my eyes, I found myself strangely smiling: though I was the one who told CHRNS she was human, she was the one who proved it. ✦

Insomniac

Dan Stedronsky

Illustration by Rob Alexander

Inverse erosion. Fingers break the surface of rich wet earth, gripping for purchase. Heavy rain dots the mud, patterning, packing, pooling. The withered hand scavenges blindly in the night. Dirt is pulled back down, under . . . and again, in greedy fistfuls, the soil is reclaimed, to fill a deep hollowness and a deeper need.

A second hand joins the first and the hole yawns wider, with a harsh gasp of relief. *From within.* The hole, from within: A window peering out into the bright light of night. Very bright, that darkness. It hurts the eyes, where the eyes *should* be.

The aperture dilates further. Now we can see the head's crown peeping out, wary and anxious. It is in position.

There is a moment of stillness. Then—an eruption!—a fount of muddy placenta, and as lightning slashes the sky with talons of bright blue agony a figure claws and pulls its way from the moist, sucking embrace of the cold, dark womb.

It's a boy.

And it was named Arthur, nineteen years ago.

And it was pronounced dead of respiratory failure due

to a massive overdose of barbiturates on April 7, 1986, just thirty-seven days before.

And the labor for this new birth was all his.

Spent, he lay lax in the mud, sucking shallow gasps of the cool night air and reflecting that his lungs could no longer process this oxygen, that there was nowhere for it to go, no blood to nourish with each rattling intake. He could only expand them slightly—and this was a new feeling, strange and frustrating, because he had liked the sensation of breathing in very deeply and letting it out in a long audible sigh. . . . It had relaxed him, at one time. Now the lungs worked like some odd papery bellows in his chest, their habitual and meaningless sussurations an utter absurdity.

His fingers were torn and bent, but they did not bleed. His eyes itched terribly. Once, in the coffin, he had rubbed at them, but they had not been there—they had sunken into the sockets or dried up—and he had probed deeper, and had felt the tiny wriggling things that now inhabited the empty housings.

He had screamed then, a dry croaking sound that didn't hold very long, not nearly long enough. He had left his face alone after that.

He moved now, pushing himself up into a sitting position. Light danced in the sky suddenly, followed by a distant roll of thunder, and for a moment he glimpsed clearly the outline of surrounding trees and a closer scattering of carved stone markers squatting as grim witnesses all around him. Falling back to the earth, he shook convulsively to a harsh guttural sound that resembled not at all the laughter of wild elation it was.

So I can still see. He hadn't been sure of the dim, confused images when he had first broken the surface; and he hadn't had any way of knowing before, down in that perfect darkness. It was a great relief. He would need his sight.

Arthur Mandell, whose friends had once called Art, whose eyes had once been blue and a little sad, had risen from a place that was neither Hell nor Heaven nor even the neutrality of undreaming sleep simply because he could do no less, no other than this.

He forced himself up again on one knee and, stretching, peered closely at the small stone monument before him. It was too dark to read it. He ran his fingers over the surface, feeling the carved depressions dully, as if through rubber gloves. Two lines. A name, a date, and a second date.

Well, two out of three isn't bad.

He sat there for a moment longer, feeling the cooling rain massaging his scalp and the back of his neck, listening to it patter off the muddy grey suit coat he wore. Then, squatting back on the edge of the grave, he began to pluck the thin new grass from the mound, scraping a full inch of soil from the surface to make sure he got it all. He pushed the grassy clots into the yawning hole he had forced through the earth. Then he began to level and sculpt the mound.

He found a number of large decorative stones nearby, and used them as fill for the hole of passage, for much of the original soil had been displaced within the coffin. He covered this with more dirt from the mound, shaving it slowly and evenly from the surface with spiderlike movements of his fingers. He meticulously gathered the loose material that had spilled over onto the grass, using whatever momentary light the storm offered, and patted it back onto the mound with obsessive care. He stood to stamp the passageway deeper, the brilliant polish of the new shoes already long gone, then bent to repeat his earlier manipulations. He worked quickly now, and when he was satisfied with the basic shape, satisfied that the hole wouldn't sink noticeably, he ran cracked and brittle fingernails in little circles over the entire surface, then stood back and waited on lightning to illuminate the finished product.

Fire knifed the sky into dark fragments, and Art Mandell—short for Arthur, short for Artist—stood rainwashed and dripping and gazed upon his handiwork with eyeless sight.

It was fine, and the rain would finish it. *No one would know.*

As an afterthought, he bent and sleeve-polished the headstone's face and edge where his hand had muddily imprinted it in its braille caress. A small detail, hardly worth the effort. But Art's forte was detail. He hated loose ends.

He turned and moved away swiftly, determined to tie some of them up.

Art moved through the dark night in the town of his birth. He kept to the back yards and the familiar woods. The occasional bark of a dog or the sound of a lone car cutting the silence of the slick streets, streaking away on some special mission, all distant and strange, added counterpoint to the cacophony of rain dancing on treetops and filtering down to strike sharp notes on dead leaves strewn beneath. The wood he moved through was an intricate tapestry of crosshatched patterns of branch and bough, every conceivable form cunningly enmeshed within the living cloth, finding sudden life in the lightning's momentary illuminations. He felt acutely the soft friction of tattered fabric upon his waxen flesh, the tingling sensation of rain, running, cooled by the light breeze that made leaves stir and whisper in tremulous cadences.

Art paused. The sounds, the sights, all of it seemed *new* and *unreal* and *magical* to him. He stood quietly, taking it all in . . . and the tragic irony of his situation once more penetrated him, flooding his being with venoms both sweet and sickly sour.

To feel so *alive,* now. To feel the life pressing in on all sides, whispering and caressing and thrilling the air all around him.

Now.

And something else as well, a vague feeling of . . . expectancy?

Art moved on, and the incision of his passing closed, healed, left no scar on that life that sang and soared and ate and was eaten with equal relish. Art moved in on the dark, new and unreal and a little magical . . . a nightmare image driven by nightmare images of his own.

He was grinning . . . but then again, at this point, Art was *always* grinning.

Look back, Art; and see it all unfold there before you, like an old black-and-white movie flickering away to the accompaniment of strange, tinny piano music. It's an old print, one you've watched over and over, sitting in the cool theatre dark of your thoughts.

Relax now, and enjoy the show. Feel once more the oppressive ache of lethargy weighing heavily in your limbs and joints; taste the rich acid taste of pain and defeat and ridicule washing your mouth, frothing your lips; hear the subtle sound of shadows slithering across soft fabric surfaces to kiss you as you lie sleeping fitfully; touch unidentifiable objects, things cold, sharp-edged, and unyielding; smell sweat and fear and flight; see?

All in black and white. Heavy on the black.

Some scenes are speeded up, and the people and places are a mere blur of confused imagery; others are slowed down to such a degree that the unnatural clarity of the moment carries with it an intrinsic horror all its own.

You are in the fourth grade. It is recess, and you stand upon the icy driveway fronting St. Francis Elementary School, harsh winds pulling at your jacket, whipping your hair about your face. You are very cold, your hands pushed deep into your jacket pockets, reaching for a warmth that is not there. Three first-graders have gathered around you. They are all taller than you—all of the boys of the lower grades are taller than you, and most of the girls are too.

The three are taunting you for your longish hair. Suddenly the leader, a crewcut blond, reaches out his hand to grab at it. You dodge, but the boy's thumbnail catches and cuts cruelly into the upper part of your ear, exposing waxy cartilage to the chill air. The cut burns fiercely. You fall back in pain and shock, and the boys continue to laugh and taunt you. They call you a pussy. You turn and walk away from them.

The cut burns for three days. You feel anger and shame. You cannot understand why they attacked you, how the length of your hair could mean anything to them. But you think of the teachings of Jesus, and you try to remain philosophical.

You tell yourself that what you experienced wasn't worth fighting for, that it wasn't really important. You tell yourself that you are bigger than that, that you don't need to prove anything to anyone. You tell yourself that the small wound on your ear will eventually heal.

But it never does.

You are out in right field again, as usual. It's where they always put you. You are bored. There's only one other lefty besides you in the class, and he's never hit it past second base. Besides, he's on your team today.

You stand alone, frowning into the sun, wishing you were elsewhere. Anywhere elsewhere, you think with a grin.

Suddenly a pop fly goes up. It climbs slowly, gracefully, and as it hangs suspended in the clouds for a moment you see it's heading straight for you.

This is your big chance. This is the crucial moment. They're all depending on you, and this time you won't let them down, this time you'll show them what you're made of.

You don't even have to take a step. The ball plummets, lands safely in the webbing . . . and for an instant that stretches into eternity, an instant of triumph and joyous absolution, you are REAL, you are VALID, you're not just some little brain in a case spouting math and English lessons perfectly, not just some fairy freak-case with an armload of comic books, you are a REAL HUMAN BEING and you can compete, you can belong! . . . and then the ball bounces smoothly out of the glove and lands with a dull thud at your feet.

You are frozen in utter horror. You cannot believe what has just happened. And then you hear them. They are yelling at you, they are screaming at you to Throw It In, Idiot, Throw It In! The runners are moving around the bases. One is almost home. You reach for the ball, grasp it hard, and then you turn and throw it.

You throw it in the opposite direction, farther into the outfield. You throw it with all the strength and fury in your small arm. Your glove follows it.

You are sixteen tonight, and you stand before the house of Kathy Konick. It is two o'clock in the morning. You have been dropped off. You have been drinking, and you have remembered a movie you once saw at the drive-in, and tonight you feel a courage, an impulsiveness that is new and wonderful. You steal quietly to the window, and you knock lightly, and wait.

Kathy doesn't seem to mind your sensitivity, your intelligence. She understands your jokes. She likes your poetry. She doesn't run from you when others are near. Always you have desired her, and always you have been afraid to let that desire be known.

But tonight will be different. Tonight she will come to the window and you will call her, and she will come out into the summer night like a vision of hope come to a dying man, and she will take from you the thing that binds you to your fear. Tomorrow you will wake to find yourself a man, unafraid. Tomorrow you will begin to live again.

You hear the window's latch snap back, and your heart quickens in your breast. The window is raised and a shadowy figure looms in the frame. "Who is it?" a voice asks. It is the voice of Kathy's mother. You have knocked on the wrong window.

This didn't happen in the movie.

"I—is Kathy home?" you stammer idiotically. Why? Why did you say that?

"She's asleep. It's very late. Who are you? Is something wrong?"

She cannot see you in the dark. "No—never mind! I'm sorry—" You turn and flee into it.

You walk home, unbelieving. How could you make such a stupid mistake? Why is this happening to you? Tears of self-hatred well up in your eyes, and you begin

to shriek your anger and misery to the heavens. You are a world-class idiot. You are Jerry Lewis. You reach out and wrench the metal flag from a mailbox in passing. You grapple with it as with a hated enemy. "Hey!" a deep voice calls you.

Miracle. At two-thirty in the morning there are people sitting out on the unlit porch of a house, people whose mailbox you have just stupidly ruined.

You run, and a truck in the yard starts up and pursues you. It cruises up and down the street searching, and you evade it and all other vehicles that pass that night, hiding behind trees and bushes for the two and a half miles it takes to get home.

Two days later you call Kathy, and she asks if it was you at the window that night. You deny it and pretend to be intrigued by such an odd occurrence. You cannot admit this stupidity to her, but you believe she suspects anyway. You continue to see her for a while, but you can't help feeling awkward and embarrassed because of what you know you did, and eventually you stop. Kathy ends up going steady for the next two years with a guy you've always considered to be an insect.

Congratulations on your unforgettable sixteenth birthday.

Look back, Art, and see a world that somehow closed its doors to you, one by one, a world that could never be yours. There is nothing here that you can share, no part for you to play, no one you can touch in any real way, is there?

Is there?

Now move on, Art.

And don't look back.

He came to the hardware store through the back lot. Rain beat down upon the asphalt expanse, haloing the street lights beyond. He knew it had to be past one o'clock, for a strange encalmed silence lay all about him, the silence of a town asleep. He went in through the side entrance, using a brick from the stacks piled within the partially enclosed passage to punch a large hole in the thick glass of the door. An immense black Doberman met him on the other side. It stood eyeing him uncertainly, its jaws wrinkled in a vicious snarl, its entire body tensed for the spring.

After a moment's hesitation he stepped through, and the dog changed its mind.

He knew what he was looking for and where to find it in the murky grey interior of the place. He'd had plenty of time to plan, plumbing obscure aisles of memory. When he emerged a short time later, with fifty feet of nylon rope and a plastic bag containing, among other things, a notebook, a pen, and some envelopes and stamps found under the checkout counter, the big guard dog was still huddled, whining in hysterical agitation, in a far corner of the store.

Stepping through the jagged-toothed aperture, he paused and, turning back to it, stood staring silently for several moments, jaw slack. Then he dragged two large sheets of plywood in front of the door and wedged two more between them and the stack of mortar bags opposite, sealing it effectively.

He left no fingerprints. He was careful.

He went away from there, contemplating the incredible symmetry of fine shatterlines imbedded in crystal.

Art was eighteen when he met Tina. She had taken an immediate liking to him, something that had stunned him, and his first reaction was one of suspicion. After all, by his own admission he was not what you would call a likable type. Not that there was anything overtly wrong with him. He wasn't bad-looking, he showered often enough and he certainly couldn't be called antisocial, could he? If anything, Art was now a social overachiever, for his pride would not allow him to be relegated to the status of schmuck, at least not in the eyes of these people who could not even begin to understand him, to understand his special needs. Art had learned that things had their place, and one had to afford these territorial boundaries the respect that mass acceptance of such a concept required.

Art had learned to compartmentalize. He was still sensitive and intense on the inside, in that special place where it was okay to think and dream and ask questions; and now, on the outside, where all questions had been answered quite satisfactorily, thank you, and dreaming was something one did in one's sleep (when nothing of any real importance could be accomplished anyway), Art had learned to be a very different kind of thing. He had put away his poetry and comic books and had substituted for them with a clever line, an interesting turn of a phrase, a ready smile.

Art was sincere. He wanted to be liked. He liked people (what people could *be,* if they would only *think* a little, *the potential is awesome!*). So Art tried to appear *less* sincere, imitating life as he had now come to perceive it.

They hated. They cheated. They savaged each other without reason, swelling dark with bizarre poisons in his vision.

They were his race, his people.

Art was *all* fucked up.

And, of course, the drugs didn't help.

Of every size, shape, number, color, direction. Everybody's doin' it. Reefer, keefer, hash, toot, zip, downs, percs, poppers. Thai high, sky high . . . my, my. Stems and seeds, fun and games, whydoyouthinktheycallit Hope? Sinsi, nitrous, 714's, triple sixers. Black beauties, green meanies, yellowjackets, brown-and-clears, white cross, purple dot . . . and wash it all down with a shot of Johnny Walker Red.

Blues. Art spun the rainbow wheel and came up blue every time. The illumination that drugs did not, *could not* turn the blue monkey brown like the others slowly dawned on him, but was eclipsed by other benefits of constant drug use. One unexpected dividend resulting from this, slow-growing and subtle at first, was the strengthening of the only common bond now possible between himself and The Others: the bond of disdain and disinterest for this alien entity known as Art Mandell.

Art had few friends; and of those few, there were none he could truly trust, confide in. The mask Art wore was ill-fitting, but it was on tight. It *had* to be.

Because Art was still a virgin.

A virgin! At fifteen, a male virgin was rare. At seventeen, hideous. At eighteen, impossible! So he thought. So it seemed. So it screamed, from TV and radio and forty-foot, four-color billboard. Of course, he never told anyone. He knew of others, and they were not really diminished in his view—but it was *different* for him, and They could never understand that, that it was *different* for him because *he was different* so if the question ever came up he dodged, he lied and scrambled to keep the lies chronologically ordered and logical and synchronistic because *anything anything ANYTHING was better than being found out, discovered, stripped naked to the world to be scratched and bled by the cruelrazor claws of multitudes of peering, jeering, hate-filled eyes.*

Accusing eyes. Eyes that probed and observed and never never blinked, so as not to miss it when this uppity little bastard slipped and revealed himself just as base and cowardly as they. Eyes keyed into brains housing secret knowledges, X-ray specs to his mirrored shades.

Hate-filled eyes.

Oh, and there was that other problem, going on its second year; the problem with the name he didn't like, couldn't say. He had read all about the problem after the first time, and the articles he read all said that it was sometimes a cyclic thing, continuous . . . especially if it happened the very *first* time.

There was that other problem, the one that was squatting malevolently on top of his head and eating the brain through the skull, slowly.

He had to take the risk, sitting down in the pool of light fronting the deserted laundry in back of the bank building; but it was necessary, and he was a mercifully long way from the street. He knew that if someone, perhaps a cop, were to see him and make for him, he could run around the side of the building and lie down. If they pursued him, they'd round the corner to find a corpse lying at their feet. They'd forget their pursuit of that other guy (whoever he was, maybe *he* did this; whatever the case, he's gone now) and run for help. Perhaps someone would be left behind to watch over him until others came to cart him away—but who would want to stay in close quarters with a corpse, and a ripe one at that? His chaperon would likely step around the corner to have himself a smoke, and put a little distance between himself and this hideous reminder of the awful mutability of human flesh, of mortality.

Either way, Art could escape at his leisure.

The thought was almost humorous. But Art didn't want stories of an unidentified disappearing corpse circulating around the small town. That wouldn't fit into his carefully laid plans.

Time hung suspended delicately in the night sky, hovering above the unmoving town . . . and if Art *was* seen, it was as a lone, dirty figure wearing new white work gloves and a duckbill cap that shadowed his downturned features, sitting in the light under the overhang, out of the rain, scrawling careful symbols into a small green notebook.

Art was eighteen; Tina was seventeen, and very pretty, and somewhat different too. And he took a chance and asked her out; and he wore the mask, but they had a good time anyway. He started seeing her frequently, and he found it so easy to be around her, so amazingly effortless, that they soon became very close . . . and the first time Art tried to make love to her the mask got in the way, prevented it . . . *and Art knew undeniably that he was an alien creature* and that she wouldn't understand and that he would really kill himself this time and that it wouldn't matter, finally, it just wouldn't matter because the verdict was in: He was already as good as dead.

And because it didn't matter, because he was already dead, already buried and forgotten, Art didn't lie this time, like the two others he'd tried since that first time, faceless creatures he'd told he had too much to drink—and then just happened never to call them again *(how very coincidental)* which was probably fine as far as they were concerned *(just fine, considering)*—and he never knew how to be when he saw them at school, or the things they told their friends.

The things they whispered, giggling.

But Tina *did* understand, and said so; and she was loving and patient and a good listener. She wanted to continue seeing him (she *wanted him*!)—and she helped him, slowly, without pain, to pry the mask off; and when it finally came away she said that it was such a beautiful face, *really;* and they laughed and whispered softly, teased, caressed; kissed loudly and laughed again, louder and happier still; and they held each other very close, soft planes interfacing . . .

Wild lioness, she of velvet pad and autumn-windblown mane . . . she of clear liquid laughter that splashed and scattered in patterns of whispered promises of renewal, bright jewels under an exquisite sun . . . of wide eyes, of bright-ringed fingers trembling to touch, to test, to shake life like some skillfully wrapped birthday gift and delight in the resulting rattle of secret pieces . . .

Then there were days the color of wonder, and nights clothed in warm rare furs, and time spent trading smile for smile, giving and receiving and sharing the special luxury of their most intimate thoughts and emotions . . .

And Art knew love and more happiness than he could remember.

But he kept the mask . . . for The Others.

Art watched the car pass from the cover of a group of bushes. The smell of the serrated-edged leaves, wet and heavy, reached his dried nasal passages and it was pleasant, sweetening the light odor of rot that had sublimated itself long before. That feeling was still there, still growing . . . a vague familiarity.

It had stopped raining. He moved back onto the road and continued, watching the red taillights recede into the distance. It was the only car he'd seen since he had

left the town's center and taken to the back roads. He estimated the time at about three o'clock. Right on schedule.

Crickets sounded softly off to his left, and then another sound reached his ears. On the right, a small house sat white against the blue-grey night sky. Off the road the grass fell steeply for four or five feet, then leveled off for several more before meeting a wood-and-wire fence overlooking a small natural creek. Rainwater splashed dark from a wide drain tile set below the road farther on, and wound away gurgling into darker woods.

Art sat at the foot of a young oak and listened quietly to the sound of the water as it moved away into oblivion. He stared at the house and wondered about the lives lived there, the joys and sorrows played out within.

The storm clouds were gone now, spirited away to meet again with their lost moisture on the other side of the world. Absent, abstracted, Art turned his ruinous face upward and gazed upon a star he knew might well have blinked out many long millennia before.

He realized suddenly that he had stopped breathing.

He had forgotten.

He pulled himself back to earth. He had things to do.

Tina's house was only four doors away.

When Tina very quietly told Art it was over, he couldn't believe his ears. *Why?* Sure, they'd had some rough times over the past year, but nothing they couldn't work out *together*. He knew she didn't like all the drugs he did, they seemed like a lot to her, but you build up a resistance to these things, you know? And why did he need a *reason* to do them? He just *liked* to, that's all! Yeah, he knew that he was sometimes selfish and demanding and didn't always appreciate her intentions, but all that was *changing*, he was *trying* to change, couldn't she see? How could she *do* this to him, to them, when they had come so *far* together, when they were so *close* to being truly happy if he could only *stop being so suspicious of people and cut down a pack a day and get a decent job that didn't fall apart just because some asshole supervisor decided to hate his guts for no reason at all?*

Sitting in the car opposite her, Art saw the world outside the window darken, move away. He knew she meant it . . . *and somewhere within him small delicate creatures shrieked and were torn into a million meaningless questions.*

Art knew nameless terror.

And he cried. And he pleaded. And he promised. And he denied. And he accused. And he gibbered, And he clawed at himself. And he spoke in tongues. And he wailed. And he hit her several times in the arms and shoulders before he knew what he was doing. And he cried more at this, jackhammer sobs that shook him uncontrollably. And through it all she sat, tight-lipped, holding back tears as best she could . . . after all, it wasn't the *first* time he'd done any of these things.

When she dropped him off he said he was sorry, and he said goodbye, and he stumbled back to his room with arms outstretched to find the way. . . .

He tried calling her after two weeks but she was always out somewhere, always busy. He gave up after the sixteenth time. And nearly ten weeks later he saw her at the party, in the company of a large bearded thing that looked contented. She was surprised to see him there, and cut away from the thing to approach him. She smiled, and said hello, and asked him how he was.

He left her standing there, her fingers nervously working the wide woven brim of her feathered summer hat . . .

. . . and two days later he took the handful of tranquilizers that drifted him away, silently.

The business at Tina's was done, and Art was relieved that it had all come off without a hitch. The rope and pliers waited where he'd left them, the other things discarded. He did not need them any more; he was almost finished, there was only one detail left.

Getting rid of the body.

Images of fear. Yawning portals on dark, baroque machinery, apertures opening onto abysses black and limitless. Picture of a young girl holding a flower, standing before a blurred mass of foliage framed against a darkening sky; and as the depth of field shifts the girl blurs into a mass of soft-edged colors, the bush behind leaps into startling relief, revealing thousands of mad mocking eyes peering from every shadow and crevice within the leafy canopy.

Images of Hell. Something wet and vast snaking its way down an ill-lit corridor. Sharks mauling screaming human victims. Strange sucking sounds on the periphery of your hearing, hideously alien yet sublimely beautiful as well. A visit with a fat salesman with glassy doll's eyes staring fixedly from his otherwise normal face.

Images of madness. And a single image more, in pale blues and pale, deathly greys:

Two men are lowering a corpse with a severed noose around its neck to the ground. There is an air of haste and dread in their manner and expressions. A third, standing to the side, is pointing up at the wall and gaping in horror; for etched darkly in the light of the single lamp is the shadow of the suicide still hanging from the noose as they had found him.

This image will never go away.

He had decided to wait for the sunrise, to see it one last time. He sat on the slope of the small private lake where he could not be seen from the house lost in trees farther up. The grass was cool and damp, and a morning mist had settled about the waters, soft-focusing.

With a hard jerk he pulled the last tooth free with the pliers and tossed it far out into the water. He sighed from his exertions. He had heard that teeth could be used to identify a corpse. He didn't want to take any chances.

Art watched the world brighten in soft gradations. He knew now what that feeling had been; that magic, vaguely familiar, as if remembered from another life.

It was.

Memories of another life . . . as a child.

He had never been able to understand their capacity for cruelty . . . because as a child, life had presented itself to Art as the ultimate magic, the ultimate opportunity. He had loved school, had loved to learn and to excel, to discover the boundaries of self and push beyond them . . . and fear had been no part of him. It found no hold on this boy who bristled with excitement and curiosity, an armoring to which the caress of fear is frictionless.

As a child, he had raised his eyes to the world and he had beheld wonders! Men walking on the surface of the moon, men curing diseases, and lifting their hands up to help others less fortunate in far corners of the world! Men unlocking the secrets of ages, and finding new wonders hidden within, new and greater mysteries that challenged, that awed! . . . and yet promised a great and wonderful destiny for this race of tiny creatures who, for all their seeming insignificance, for all their piteous flaws and weaknesses, were somehow linked to a magnificent panorama of glorious, growing, infinite Life. He had raised his eyes to the world and had understood it to be a place where *nothing* was impossible, where all things *waited* to be done, to be *fulfilled* through the divine power of millions of tiny hands joined together in that spirit of wonder and loving cooperation.

He had never understood competition, not at first. He recognized it as an historic thing, something men had once engaged in out of necessity; but he could not understand how it could fit into an equation of limitless possibility, except as detriment to that equation. He *could not* understand their need to fight, to win meaningless games, to rise only by virtue of another's fall while the vastness and beauty of his vision were ignored! He *could not* understand these people who just could not *see* it, *there, right in front of you, don't you see, you must see!*

He understood now.

When had he lost touch? Why hadn't he noticed? The date of death recorded on his headstone was an inaccurate figure. He wondered idly what the true date might be.

He picked up the pliers and turned them in his hand thoughtfully. It hadn't been very painful. Then he stood and tossed them far into the water, and watched the ripples spread and disappear from sight.

The sun rose in pink and lavender and orange and lime and ultramarine and amber and indigo and chrome and sepia. Art stood at the end of the rainbow, tinted gold.

He had been gifted. He had awakened to find a world that was beautiful and amazing, a world that called him to be part of it, and he had understood it, completely and irrefutably within himself, as a place of good, of beauty, of opportunity . . . of wonder. He had understood it in its completion. How mournfully beautiful it was now, to see again that which had been lost to blue eyes gone blind . . .

. . . dead eyes . . .

. . . too late.

Slipping into the water with the rope slung over his shoulder, he thought of Tina, how she might react to the letter he had placed in her mailbox himself, just to be sure, written in his familiar script. He recalled the words, chosen so very carefully:

Tina,

I'm sorry about the other night at the party, and all the trouble, all the things I've said and done, the craziness . . . I want you to know that I'm beginning to understand, and I'd like to try to take some of it back.

I've been a fool, babe. You have done nothing against me, everything for me—and you've tried harder to help me than I myself. But I was too busy to notice . . . too busy running away.

I don't think I've ever hurt anyone in my entire life, certainly not on purpose. And now I've hurt someone who cared, and oh babe, I didn't want to do that. Please, please forgive me.

I hope we can be friends again one day. I'll stay away; there's a lot of things I need to work on right now, things only I have the power to change within myself. But I just wanted you to know I realize now that you really did love me, and love me still, in your way.

I will continue to love you then, in my way.

Always.

You offered me so much, and I turned you away. I'll never know why. Yet still you have given me more than I can say. I wish you nothing but happiness, love. Live well.

Love,
Art

Goddess, Witch or Angel;
Surely
You must be.
For you gave a dead man life
When first
You touched me.

He had dated the letter April 6th.

Letters are lost in the mail every day. Sometimes stamps go uncanceled.

He couldn't make it right. But perhaps it would be better, he thought as the waters rose to embrace him.

She is a marvel. She must not be taken before her time. There are too few live ones left.

When fish happened upon the body of Arthur Mandell, tied with extreme care and efficiency to the moorings of the dock deep beneath the lake, they found him sleeping. The feeding did not disturb him in the least. ✦

Natural Selection

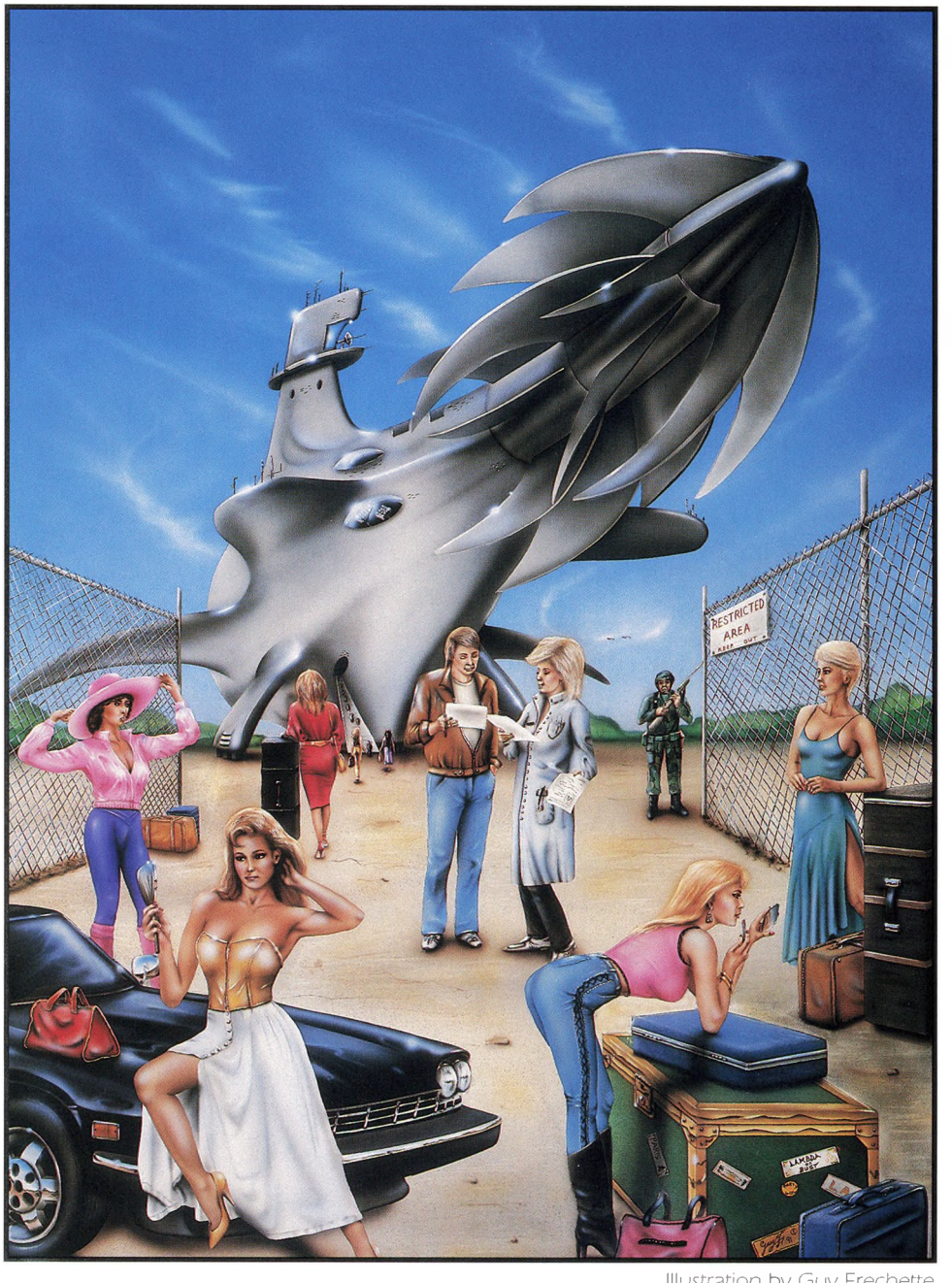

Illustration by Guy Frechette

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Report of the Committee
on Personnel
for Extraterrestrial Survival
May 3, 1996

Review:

This Committee was formed by executive order to advise and consult on the offer made July 23, 1995, by an extraterrestrial intelligence, through coded transmissions received at Andrews Air Force Base.

This offer was to transport six hundred seventy-six (676) human beings to a habitable planet orbiting the star Lambda Aurigae, so that the species would not be wiped out by the approaching supernova of our sun.

The Committee on Astrophysics has independently confirmed the statement by the extraterrestrial intelligence (hereinafter referred to as the ETI) that the sun will indeed go supernova within the next two to five years.

The Committee on Security reports that, to date, the general public remains unaware of the existence of the ETI, and of any impending threat to our planet or civilization.

The previous report of the Committee on Personnel covered arguments for and against several methods for choosing the six hundred seventy-six persons who would be transported to the Lambda Aurigae system, but reached no firm conclusion as to the best method to use.

This previous report apparently became irrelevant a few hours before its completion, however, when the ETI, for reasons it has refused or been unable to explain, informed its contacts at Andrews that final selection was to be made by a single individual, who would be chosen at random by the ETI itself.

Additional Background:

Since our last report, the ETI has made its selection. The individual chosen was one Jeremy Cathcart Rollins, age 19, of Ararat, Ohio; male Caucasian, 5'10", 175 pounds, brown hair, hazel eyes; graduated 1994 from Ararat Public High School; no college. Last known employment, day laborer with Tollerman Construction, laid off Jan. 4, 1996. Unmarried, no known children. Lives with his parents, Arthur and Dawn Rollins, at 114 Apple Street, Ararat. An older sister is married and residing in Cleveland with her husband and infant son.

Jerry Rollins was taken into protective custody by the FBI on March 27, 1996, and brought to Washington, D.C., for briefing and consultation.

Further discussion with the ETI in hopes of convincing it to alter its insistence on Mr. Rollins as the sole selection authority has been unavailing. The ETI is adamant that the transportees must be freely selected by Mr. Rollins and no one else.

Report on Conversations with Mr. Rollins:

Members of the Committee on Personnel have met repeatedly with Mr. Rollins between his incarceration on March 27 and yesterday, May 2. Every effort has been made to provide him with information that could help him in his selections, and suggestions for methods of selection, including the complete text of our previous report, have been provided as well.

We hoped to influence his choices, and increase the chances that the new community would survive and flourish, but we met with considerable resistance to our suggestions.

Naturally, the possibility of allowing selections to be made by others for his approval was brought up. A transcript of his response follows:

Rollins: You said this alien left it up to me, right?
Committee Chairman: That's right, Jerry. But you're free to take advice.
R: Hey, if I want your advice I'll ask for it! If I let you guys do the picking, I'll wind up with a bunch of hotshot politicians and generals, right? What the hell kind of world would *that* be?

Further argument proved unavailing.

The suggestion that selection be made on the basis of proven intelligence or value to society was also advanced and similarly dismissed:

R: Nah. I've known too many high-I.Q. geeks. If I'm gonna spend the rest of my life on some other planet, I don't wanna be surrounded by geeks.

The assumption that Mr. Rollins would himself be included among the transportees was noticed and commented on, and a reply given:

R: What, you think I'm stupid? Of course I'm goin'. I don't wanna fry, and if I get to choose, I'm goin'.

The possibility of a single planned community was then brought up.

R: You mean, like take an entire town? 'Cept with less than a thousand guys it'd hafta be a pretty small one; even Ararat's bigger'n that.
CC: Well, yes, the idea was that in a small town, the distribution of labor and the interpersonal relationships would already be well established, which would smooth the transition.
R: Who gives a shit about the transition? That's only gonna last a coupla years, tops. And I don't wanna spend the rest of my life surrounded by a buncha small-town rednecks, even if it is on some other planet. 'Sides, the only town I ever lived in is Ararat, and I sure don't wanna take half of that stupid little burg, and if I picked anywhere else I'd be kinda odd man out, wouldn't I?

The possibility of trying for a particular ethnic or geographic mix was greeted with the following:

R: Why?
CC: Why what, Jerry?
R: Why you wanna go and make trouble? You pick people that way, you'll end up with all the same crap we got here. If I take a Jew and an Arab, and a mick and a limey, and like that, we'll probably be fightin' wars before the alien even leaves.

In desperation, a lottery was suggested. Mr. Rollins was offended:

R: Christ, you think I can't do a better job pickin' 'em than a damn slot machine? What if you get a cripple or a buncha old ladies or somethin'?

Finally, on April 13, members of the Committee conceded defeat. Mr. Rollins was determined to make his own selections, using his own criteria, and he flatly refused to discuss those criteria with us in advance. We therefore provided him with a committee member to act as his stenographer, and asked him to make his choices.

We had assumed that he would select his own family and friends, which would provide a dangerously limited gene pool and cultural background. Our membership was startled by the following exchange:

CC: I suppose we should start with your parents, Jerry?
R: Nah. I mean, I love Mom and Dad, but they're old, they're all settled—what would they do on another planet? Besides, they ain't about to have any more kids, and the idea is to keep the human race goin', right? So they can stay. I'll miss 'em, though.
CC: You mean you'll knowingly leave them to die?
R: Yeah, I think so. We all gotta go sometime, and there's gonna be five billion other people dyin'—my folks are special, but, y'know, they ain't *that* special.

After that awkward beginning, Mr. Rollins went ahead with his list, which is appended to this report.

The Selection Process:

The actual choosing took some time, of course. Several interruptions were necessary while Mr. Rollins did research, after his fashion. We were called upon to provide several current magazines, as well as to accompany him on trips to the area's college campuses.

At first, we were shocked by his methods of selecting who should survive, out of all the five billion inhabitants of Earth, but we really should not have been. After all, this is clearly and simply a case of natural selection.

His choices include twenty-three old girlfriends and former classmates, one hundred and seven actresses, seventeen fashion models, three hundred thirty persons who had posed for men's magazines, one hundred ninety-one college students chosen from nearby universities, two people he encountered while walking on the streets of Washington, and two secretaries he saw working at the Pentagon. He did accept one suggestion, and included an obstetrician as his final selection.

They are all, needless to say, and including the obstetrician, female.

Conclusion:

Although there is some concern about the inbreeding that must occur in the coming generations, Mr. Rollins's selection certainly does provide for rapid population increase, and all the subjects chosen are obviously young and healthy. Since we have no say in who is to live, all we can do is hope for the best, and acknowledge that Mr. Rollins certainly could have done far worse.

For example, had he in fact chosen on the basis of past accomplishments in public affairs or the sciences, it is an unfortunate fact that the resulting group would have been composed mostly of males and largely older than optimum.

And in closing, at least one member of this Committee feels it necessary to point out that if the person doing the choosing was going to do it on the basis of sex appeal, it's a damn good thing that the ETI chose a heterosexual male.

The Committee wishes the best of luck to Jerry Rollins. He'll need it. ✦

The Flag Burners

J. A. Pollard

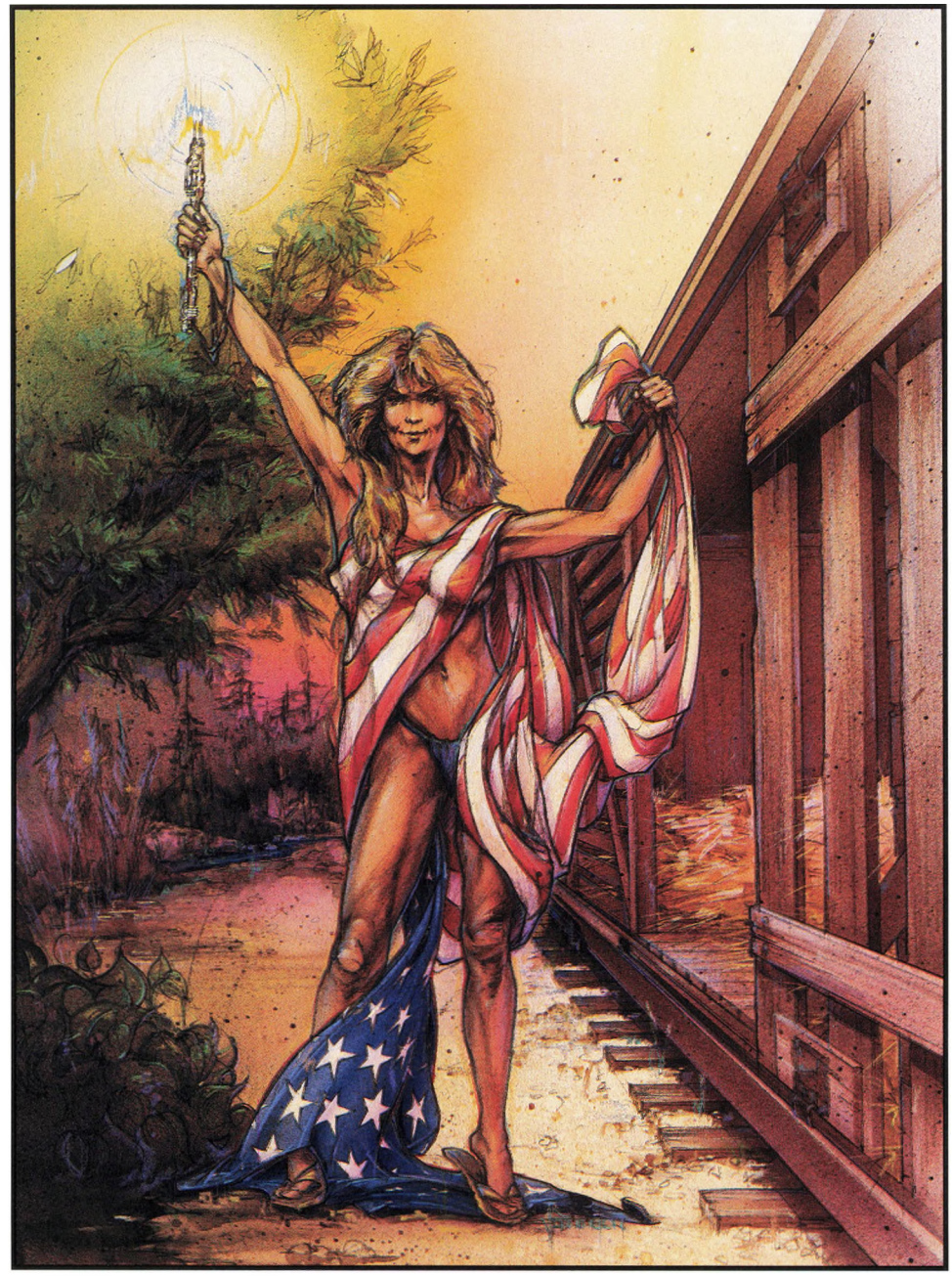

Illustration by Jack Pennington

"What is a flag but a sheet, percale, appliquéd? Just a sheet, but it expects you'll go to war and die over its three simple colors."
— Lucille Marsden, in *Oldest Living Confederate Widow Tells All*, by Allan Gurganus, Alfred A. Knopf, N.Y., 1989.

—

In 1990 legislation was introduced in the Congress of the United States to prohibit desecration of the flag.

—

We were, of course, naked. Except for the G-string which, they told us, was necessary to hide the monthly embarrassment of women. Though why such a natural occurrence colored red, for Burners' sake, should embarrass us was anybody's notion. There was usu-

ally blood enough everywhere. On anyone. To hide a more natural flow without question.

No, the G-string had to do with something else, something I kept thinking about as the cattle cars flowed northward, up from the deep south where we'd been working in the cotton fields. And my fingers were a mass of scars and scabs from the damned—"damned," a word from the past which surely had no meaning—from the damned bolls. Prickly damned things at best. And they said in the past—the past—cotton had been picked mostly by people with black skins, or at least browner than many—although it made little difference now, everyone being naked and proud of it. Skin-to-skin you might say. "As long as your skin shows."

I cackled aloud and the man in the straw next to me opened his eyes. He'd been napping.

"Sound like a damned hen."

"What's damned about hens?"

"Dunno. Word from the past. Sorry."

"Forget the past."

"Forget—"

"Scrap your mouth!" I liked being nasty.

He opened his lids, stared at me. "Scrap your own mouth." Kept on looking. Grinned.

"What's your name?"

"What's yours?"

I picked at a scab, dawdled, grinned back.

"Flag,"I said.

"For—!" He hissed, sucked in his breath, looked all around. "For Burners' sake, watch your language! You crazy?"

He gathered himself, started to get up. While I just sat there grinning, daring him to stay.

"Look—" He leaned over. "Where are you from, silly hen? What're you up to? Why're you—"

"Why not?"

"Go flag yourself!"

He resettled.

"You think they've got one on this train?"

"What?"

"A flag."

"Probably."

"What makes you say so?"

"Well, miss loud mouth, miss silly hen, we're being sent all the way up north to pick blueberries, aren't we? The whole contingent? Large crowd? Guarded. Cattle cars. Not exactly a reward."

"But—"

"And, yes, I know it's summertime, season just right for northern work; and, yes, I know it's pretty loose, nobody checking very often, food plentiful if not too good, hardly a rumor anywhere, but I have this feeling. . . ."

I decided to pay attention then. I don't usually. It's best to mind your own business, do your work, get a little teasing in here and there to make things interesting, get on by. Besides, I'm quite successful. Decided to say it to him.

"Listen, flagman—"

At which he started up again. "—I'm okay. I'm fine. Everything is ashes. Nothing smoky about me."

"Okay! Okay!"

"So what's your name?"

He looked me all over then. Head to toe. While I looked back. He had white skin, so white it appeared carved of marble. Like a statue I'd seen once. Somewhere. Sometime. Black hair. Little curls on his forehead. But then, I've got blond hair, straight, hangs to my waist. Blond hair everywhere. Buxom. Strong and buxom.

My blue eyes stared into his black ones and we smirked slightly.

"Probably a spy," he said.

"That's me. I'm a spy."

"Bound to be one."

"Me?"

"On the train. Somewhere."

"Why?"

"Isn't there always?"

"What?"

"A spy!"

I was one. Intelligence. The Head Burner, the one at least of Motown, down south there, he'd said to me, "Get on this train, Gretl—like the little girl who fooled the witch, remember?—get on this train and twirl your G-string, twiddle your tits, and listen hard."

"Why?" One thing I've got: nerve.

"You hear about anyone with an unburnt flag, see anybody wearing cotton, anything red, white, blue, you message me. Hear? (*You heah?)*"

"Extra pay?"

"Public duty."

"Awwww . . ."

"No soft-soaping me!" Heels together, eyes hard, back straight, the swagger-match in his hand—a big thing with a head on it smelling of sulfur, brimstone—things from history—

And I'd known, then, that I was official. Hot stuff! I was practically a member of the Flag Police! He even patted my left buttock as I turned to go. Didn't snap the string. A little too informal. And I swayed away until he snapped, "Silence! Heah?"

I'd turned. Pouch on his lower front throbbed, lifted, but he didn't move otherwise.

"Silence!"

And I got into the cattle car almost scared, memorizing the number he'd given me: two-one-thousand, number of the Flag Police. But not Motown. Midtown more likely. Headquarters! Somewhere between north and south. On the line maybe. Someplace secret. So the Flag Wearers wouldn't find it.

Best way to ferret secrets is to be brash. Nobody suspects a brash person. Secret-finders are supposed to be sneaky.

"So where's your flag?" I grinned at this black-curled bit of marble.

"Go burn!" he said. Got up. Moved down the car.

And I reflected on the situation. If I hadn't been chosen, if I weren't a spy—high priced, pricey, paid—I'd be up front in the seat section instead of in the straw. With the suspects, after all.

Grinned again. And fell asleep.

2

The first ruin we came to was rather large. Had once been a city. Cities were places where they all lived together, but not really together. Separate in their separate houses, driving their separate vehicles, wearing their separate clothing.

It's the clothing that makes for differences, that separates, that individualizes, Burners forbid! The clothing. Which is why, of course, in the New Society, clothing is forbidden. We've done away with a lot of conflict, eased a lot of tough decisions. If you look at a person you don't have to guess what he or she is really like any more. It's right there looking back at you. All of it. Nothing hidden. Only the skin color sends a little message. About antecedents, naturally. But we don't pay attention to that old silliness. I can't imagine hating someone or loving someone for the color of his skin. Too entirely tribalistic! No, it's the stance that counts, the way the body is carried, the way it's presented: no hidden fat deposits, blemishes, handicaps. It's all right there. Obvious. Which will make the human race more beautiful in the long run. Hiding underneath clothing was bringing us to ugliness. Had brought us to the verge! All that stuff—individuality, religious preference, nationalism—all the divisive factors—they're all gone. We're one big happy family now.

Which is why I'm happy/unhappy to be spying for the Flag Police. Because the flag, the harboring of a flag—(doesn't matter its size or color, although the most prevalent left-over samples are the red, white, and blue ones—the ones with the white and red stripes and the blue background with the stars on it—because the last battles took place here, you know, where they worshipped that bit of cloth—the battles that left the most survivors. Other places, called Europe, Asia, they were bombed out, we hear)—harboring the flag is the last fly in the ointment, you might say, before perfection! But scared too. Scared of people like the marble-man who might suspect. After all, I was alone and they were, well, many. And didn't care so much about—

You know what they, the Flag Wearers, do with one? Some of them cut it up, drape it over themselves. Before they're burned, of course. Once I saw a young woman with a blue star on her left buttock. Being led away. Pasted there. So she must have found a flag, you see, and hadn't reported it.

Now, if I wanted a star on my left buttock I'd go in for tattooing. But there she was, blue star pasted on. And when she came back they'd ripped it off, I guess, and there was a large brand mark on her backside. Covered nearly the whole thing. She couldn't sit properly for three weeks. Cried a lot. Silly hen.

I don't know why I think about her.

Or about getting a tattoo on my own left buttock. Wonder what the Chief Flag Burner would say? Or, for that matter, the marble-man with the black curls?

Who is watching me. I can see him watching from the far end of the cattle car as we slow down for the ruins. He's pretending not to. Maybe he's a spy! I've heard of that before. Spies spying on spies. Still, his curls are cute. The ruins are anything but. Mile after mile of solidified mess. All angles, melt-down, dust. The train crawls slowly past, huffing, throwing out yards of black smoke and cinders. From the wood, you know. Stuff they burn up there in the engine. It's an old thing. They haven't given us one of the modern coal-burning monsters. Not us. Not the work train crawling slowly, oh, so painfully, past the ruins, slowing down to give us a lesson probably, lesson in what individuality brought. Lesson in greed and status-seeking. Saluting. Saluting things like flags: "I pledge allegiance—" As if pledging to a piece of percale would mean anything.

People of the past must have been daffy! It's so much better now.

Man is still watching. He's got to take a leak. Why doesn't he just go to the door and do it? Spray the countryside?

He does after a little. And his stream is long and strong. LIke the rest of him. I get an urge to pee myself and hunker over the can in the corner, back of the screen. Women aren't allowed to do it in public. And then I remember the dream. I'm sitting at the edge of a forest, in short grass with high ferns all around, and the birds are twittering and there's a wide field of little bushes out there just in front. And people are bending over picking something from the bushes. Everything peaceful and perfect. Cooperative. And then this girl walks out of the forest and she's got this thing draped over herself, a sort of covering, and she stands there sort of waiting. Waiting and feeling scared apparently, but brave, thinking she's brave. And one by one the people, picking, look up, straighten, LOOK AT HER. And I'm awake. Sweating. And all I can smell is smoke.

I'm shivering in the car. The straw under me is soggy. I move over and let the wind, blowing in from the sliding opened door, dry me off.

The marble-man was watching. He was still standing at the opened door after his fountain experience, studying the grey rocks and the sprouting shrubbery, which looked like a bad green haircut with bald spots in between. And we seemed to have this awareness going between us like a little trickle: "I see you. You see me. I know you see me and you know I know you see me and we—" And there it was. Out of all that carful. Must have been forty people in that car, all of us sitting or standing, lying, snoring; some of us herded together, others of us standing apart, silent, watchful; me, pretending not to. All of us young or middle-aged, strong, healthy. Workers, mind. And, painted on one long car wall—so it meant this was a car used often for people-shuttling—the rules:

YOU SHALL BURN THE FLAG.

YOU SHALL DESTROY ONE WHEREVER IT IS FOUND.

YOU SHALL DIRTY IT, TRAMPLE IT, TEAR IT, LEAVE IT OUT IN THE RAIN UNTIL IT MOLDERS.

YOU SHALL USE NO PORTION OF IT FOR ANY REASON WHATSOEVER UPON PAIN OF PUNISHMENT. (WHICH MEANS BURNING.)

YOU SHALL SWEAR NO ALLEGIANCE TO IT OR BECAUSE OF IT.

YOU SHALL NEVER, UNDER ANY CIRCUMSTANCE, TOUCH IT! IT IS AN EVIL THING.

An evil thing. Yeah. A mind-bender. Wonder if there's one stashed somewhere in this car? Which is what the marble-man suggested.

As soon as that thought hit deep I began looking around. Furtively, of course. Carefully. We're trained for this. You begin looking at the walls, at certain piles of straw, certain people. Watch for reactions. See if anyone stares too long at something, or avoids staring. Little game. So I played.

And the marble-man, he just watched occasionally, looking mostly at the rocks outside. I finally went to stand beside him. "You like ruins?"

"It's a Flag Burner's paradise."

I jumped. "Scrap your mouth!"

He grinned. "Take your own medicine."

"You mean I'm brash."

"Let's just call it straightforward."

"Yeah. Let's."

"You have a permanent connection?"

"Me? A worker?" (Workers aren't allowed.)

"Just thought I'd ask."

"You've asked."

"Where'd you get your scabs?"

"Cotton fields. Where'd you get your scars?"

Because he had them. All across his back.

"Fell onto a hay rake."

"You're white as marble. Doesn't look like farmer's skin to me."

"Look like hospital white?"

"Maybe."

"Suspicious, aren't you?"

"Isn't everybody?"

"Nope. This is worker's paradise. Remember?" He grinned sardonically. "We's ahl equal, honey."

He gave it that southern drawl.

"Yuh?"

I thought about peeing behind the screen, about the G-string, wriggled uncomfortably, felt the breeze turning cooler blowing through the door.

"Getting up north now," he murmured. "No more magnolias, chile. Soon it'll be pines."

"What else?"

"Blueberry barrens. Where they'll break your back!"

Listening, hearing words, watching for undertones, all I could think was, "Yeah, being a worker will break my back!"

I awoke to scuffling. Man and a woman in the straw cursing one another. She was underneath. I wanted to go and touch him lightly with a swagger-match, see him jump, felt helpless without it. Put my head down, hiding. Woman broke away, sniveling, man came crawling over.

"Lie there quiet, sweetie, let old Donny do ya."

And I felt him come over me, hoped he'd keep on crawling, knew he wouldn't. Didn't dare to show my training. Lay there, let him. Made a grab at the last moment which sent him squealing. Got up, stomped around. "Don't anyone! Don't ever!" Was sorry the moment I'd done it because now I was noticed, center of attention. So I'd have to play it out.

"Cooperation doesn't mean exploitation." I pointed at the rules painted on the wall. "Burn the flag, but don't burn me! I say yes when I feel like it. Not until."

So my cattle-car image was going to be tough. Donny huddled over his groin, making obscene gestures in my direction. "Get you. Slut!" And I walked over, began pushing him toward the opened door. "Me first!" Because he'd never give me any peace.

He scrabbled but I was strong and he was hurt and out he went. Nobody else made a move. I knew I was behaving in a masculine fashion. So I sat down and pretended to cry. In a minute or two it came for real. And I kept thinking about my dream of the young woman wrapped in something coming out of the forest.

After a while the marble-man came to squat beside me.

"Might as well know your name," he said.

"Gretl." Between hiccups.

"Then you may call me Hansl."

And I began to laugh again.

"Hansl," I said, watching darkness sliding past the door.

3

Sitting on the rocks beside the train, eating the swill they called supper (*Flag! This car MUST contain a suspect!*), Hansl began talking about his work with alligators.

"You go into the waterway, see, where a 'gator is suspected, use yourself for bait. Flip your legs, waggle your arms, lug along a piece of dead meat. Preferably one that stinks. Rub it all along chest and arms. Some of us rub our legs as well."

"But isn't that—?"

"Yuh. Gets quick results. Old 'gator lying there, sunning, lurking underneath the reeds, smells the bait, comes sliding."

"Then what?"

"You know he'll come up underneath, put on your goggles, wait."

"What weapon?"

"Short, wide spear. But not too wide. Long enough for stability in the water. Keep 'em at arm's length. Shove it down that long, red throat."

"But—"

"Lots of us feed 'gators."

I found some dust underneath my G-string, rubbed it off. "Horrible!"

"But many points."

"That's why you're going north?"

"Easy living. Picking berries. Even if it breaks your back."

"But—"

He was looking at me steadily. Anyone bait for 'gators was being punished. So what was the line to take: that I was a tough lady, so I'd know about 'gator-punishment? That I was a spy, so I'd lie about 'gator-punishment?

"So why . . . ?"

"—was I being punished? Knew a person."

"Knew?"

The grit was making a rash. I kept rubbing.

"That's the folly. Guilty till proven innocent."

"Guilty?"

"The 'gators proved me innocent."

"Hansl—"

"Gretl?"

Made me grin.

"In the old story, Hansl, the kids kept scattering bread crumbs so they could find their way back home again."

"You think there's any hope of that these days?"

"Getting home?"

We were on dangerous territory and knew it. Flirted with it. *What if he's a spy?* I thought. *What if we're both spies spying on each other?*

I began to laugh. "I think, finally, the birds pecked up the crumbs."

"And that was when they found the gingerbread house."

"Reward, you mean?"

"After a while."

I wanted to say, "What are you getting at?" but he hunkered on his heels, black curls shining in the firelight, scooping up every last bit of gruel in his bowl. Held it out. "Weren't they given gruel by the witch, Gretl?"

"Wanted to make Hansl fat, I think."

"Who told you the story?"

And, remembering, I found myself pursing my lips and frowning. "Another kid. I've forgotten how it ends."

It seemed important suddenly to know. But he was saying, "That's the problem, really. How it ends." The words so low, head dipped down, I had to lean to hear.

And then he looked straight at me, eye meeting eye so close, direct, I think we were both surprised.

"Tough lady," he said, got up, walked off.

I sat on the rock, rubbing grit, saying "Go flag yourself!" silently over and over, feeling jeopardized, feeling unsure. Reached for more gruel, thinking, *The old witch fattened you up, little Hansl, getting ready for the stew. Maybe Gretl can fatten marble-man.* Laughed a little. Wondered what I meant.

And then the whistle blew and a shrunken little man, looking wrinkled like a raisin, wobbled along swinging a big lantern at the groups of eaters, urging everyone into the cars again, toothless gums shining in the light.

"Get on up now, pickers! Get on in yer cars ag'in. Settle down. Five more hours, then yer there. Heaven beckons!" Laughs, stoic gathering, strong people boosting weaker people into straw.

I stood outside, in darkness, watching the workers of my group. It was the youngsters who were most interesting. Apt to be radical. Which was maybe why I'd been given this particular job. I was young myself. Some were pushing their torsos onto the car's floor, getting friends to shove up their legs. Some were being pulled up from inside. There were squawks about straw and scratches.

When it came my turn I took a hop, slung myself sideways, almost like getting into a boat, landed sitting up.

"Neat," said marble-man. He'd come out of darkness behind, and all the time I'd thought he had already loaded. He flipped his body over the straw, flung up his legs.

"Neat for you too."

"Guess we're both in shape."

And his eyes were steady.

I nodded. "Keeps a girl healthy."

"You mean from diseases like little Donny a while back."

"Little Donny was malignant."

I crawled straight ahead and sat down against the wall. From this position I could still see out the opened door but the wind, which would grow colder as the locomotive picked up speed, would miss me, pile up in the rear of the car. Marble-man stepped over already recumbent forms, went back there. And I felt oddly disappointed. He didn't attract me, not in a sexual sense, but there was a rubbing, like the grit, between us, a watchfulness. I found it stimulating. So many people were mental ciphers. I could no longer see his face in the darkness once the little man with the lantern had shouted "all aboard," whisking back and forth from car to car, peering in with lantern held on high which, for him, was floor-height for us.

"We're all aboard, Sharkey," came a voice, and everybody laughed. Nothing less sharklike could be imagined. The comment came from a big boy with a crewcut, feet stuffed into heavy leather sandals; boy proud of physique and power.

But "Sharkey" came running back, held the lantern up, looking.

"Who say that?"

"Me!"

The young giant towered over him, while the wizened face peered up, cold, impassive, then grinning.

"I remember you!"

And a chill seemed to seep into the cattle car. The sticklike arm lowered, lantern following, and the boy's grin faltered. He sat down. "Sharkey" ran away. I remember sitting there, holding my breath, wondering if someone would come and haul the big boy off; which must have been what he was thinking, because he left the opened doorway suddenly, crawled into the blackness of the car's back end.

It was very silent. Nobody came. And then we lurched, wheels squealed a little, hammered forward, nearly stopped, then took up speed. In a few minutes we were moving along the tracks, wheels beginning to pick up the rhythm, long drawn wail of locomotive whistle coming back.

I got up and went to the opened door, squatted down watching the railway yard move past beyond us: occasional lights, the glare of rail, circle of lanterns where the lantern-bearers camped overnight. I pictured "Sharkey" arm-waving, maybe talking about us. And as we passed one group I saw them standing, glaring our way.

Glaring.

I was sure of it. They formed a tight little circle around their lanterns and someone pointed. I wanted to announce, "Better split up at the next stop, sisters and brothers. We got some goons back there don't like us."

But hesitated. And then, from somewhere in the box-car rear, someone said it for me.

"Sharkey got some friends, my friends. Swap cars next stopping." That was all. Deep male voice coming out of darkness, no fright, mere reportage. Marble-man? No, I didn't think so. But a man. Someone I hadn't heard before. Someone very much aware. Possibly of me?

Surely no one knew I was a spy!

But someone there had kept himself anonymous, on guard, someone who didn't sound so young or inexperienced.

I got up, scrabbled back to my position, not sure what to do. I hadn't been box-car'd before, didn't know the rules. They knew I was tough, but being tough and box-car-innocent didn't fit. We toughs, we workers, we were always being shunted around. Like cattle.

I chanced it.

"Why should we change?"

Nobody answered. Then some young people lying next to me shifted, leaned over whispering. "If Sharkey got friends, they may be waiting up ahead, next stop, come in with lanterns, sometimes whips, looking for big boy over there."

"Why'd he say anything?"

"He forget."

Or else, I thought, he's new. Like me. Maybe he's a spy.

Then the deep voice rumbled from the back again, "Keep calm, young things; tend your tender skins."

Made us laugh. Made me wish my rash would go away. I thought of scars on marble-man's white back.

4

Clackety-clack, clickety-clack—I slept. Kept dreaming about Sharkey. Only this time, instead of the big scared boy it was the girl he was after. The girl wrapped in something. Coming out of the forest. Which brought me wide awake again, sweating.

"Flag!" one of the boys next to me said. "Your dreams must be something!"

Because I was wet. All over.

I grunted, pushed my damp hair over my ears, shifted my body. I could feel the others near, all of us crumpled in the straw like rag dolls. Some were snoring. I tried to figure out the time. *Must be early morning.* The big sliding door was nearly closed but a narrow stripe of stars and clear black sky looked like a jar of jet with water bubbles in it. There was a loud swishing of air along with clack of wheels.

Then, the car leaning slightly for a long curve, there came the radiance of electricity lighting up the dark: small city somewhere ahead, all the lucky people who would enjoy blueberries on their breakfast cereal snug in bed. Their lights alone awake. *Some day I'll be like that. No more need to be a spy.*

"Motown of the North," someone giggled.

"It sure ain't Midtown."

"Outpost."

"Got they lights."

"That's all."

Giggles.

I saw the marble-man squatting in the door studying. Or maybe peeing. *Studying, probably.* Because he was like that. Didn't miss anything. And then another man, someone bigger, darker; heard a bass rumble. Then conversation. I could see their faces turning to each other, nodding, hands gesturing, wanted to get up and hear everything.

They turned together, seemed to look back into the car, and for a moment I thought they were looking just at me. One of them said a name and there was an answering rustle in the hay. Then the train slowed, sound of brakes squealing slightly, and words came indistinctly through the wind murmur. "Gonna stop, Hansl."

"Yes."

And I got up, then, came to visit. "What's out there?"

They weren't pleased to see me. For a moment neither moved. I could sense that the bigger man was darker in the skin, huge. Had a sense of power, muscle, danger. I felt his hand come into my hair, had a horrible moment expecting to be thrown overboard. Squeaked a little. Marble-man kept on squatting. And then the big boy, the one who had called the little man "Sharkey," came to join us.

"What's up? Lanterns!"

We could see them now, a pinpricked circle just ahead and the train slowing, slowing. Fingers tightened in my hair.

"Oh, Flag." Words soft, pained, the big boy shuddering. And I knew, then, what was up.

"Sharkey got friends," I whispered. "Flag it!"

And the fingers loosened some.

"Throw her out?" the bass voice rumbled, and I pressed forward slightly into marble-man.

"Why?"

He swung, incredibly agile, took my chin in his fingers, pressing hard. "You monkey, understand? See nothing, hear nothing, remember nothing. Live a little longer maybe."

"Gretl understand." I felt myself shoved back.

"Be sure you does." Bass voice right against an ear, fingers still in hair, low chuckle. And then the smell of him, deep and huge and sweaty squatting over me. "You not difficult to find." And lips suddenly against mine, mouth full of tongue, hands holding my big breasts not quite painfully. *The experienced one,* came to me. *The one who gave advice. I won't forget you either, brother.* Allowed myself weakness. Which was real. Felt myself slumping. Fell back into hay. Saw the two of them steadying the big boy by the legs, hoisting, until he clambered up the side of the door; heard him shift himself, mutter, "Flag it!" scramble onto the roof.

And then we'd slowed and the marble-man and the

bass-voice had disappeared into the blackness of the car and I could see the lights getting nearer. And scrambled back to my own position.

People were doing scrap well, I thought. Whoever had seen, pretended sleep. But as the brakes caught and wheels squalled, here and there a voice would mutter, "What's up? We there?"

And when the lanterns came swinging in the door, there were appropriate mutters of "What's up? Izzat the sun? Where are we?" Hands raised in sleepy protest, bodies turning sluggishly.

The men climbed into the car swinging their lights, serious. One waved a swagger-match.

"All right. Where is he?"

"Who?"

More sleepy mumbles, hands fending off brightness. Big search underway.

There were ten men and they walked over everyone, carefully at first, relying on surprise, then trampling. Women screamed. General pandemonium began.

Finally the carrier of the swagger-match withdrew all lantern-bearers to the door, stood there threatening.

"Where is he?"

And someone by the door, still rubbing eyes sleepily, demanded, "For Burners' sake, who? Where the flag are we?"

And when the lanterns turned in his direction he sat there angrily, peering around and blowing his nose on his fingers.

"The big boy."

"We've got a lot of big boys here!" This snorted by a woman.

"Yeah. We big boys here!" Chorus now. "Blueberry pickers!"

"Yeah!"

The car was definitely awake, full of able-bodied people, angry-voiced, buzzing.

"Get out of here!" This from a voice in the car's rear.

"Get out!"

The swagger-match man raised the weapon, smell of sulfur spreading, and I could see people cower, draw back. Because the damned thing could burn.

"All right. Got us a little problem, people. Someone in this car was reported by one of our lantern-bearers. Said he hit him."

"Hit him?" Laughs.

Voice from the rear saying gently, "Nobody hit nobody. Someone lying."

"Lantern-bearers don't lie."

Snickers. And Hansl moving up then, asking politely, "What do you need, sir?"

And the match-bearer looking him up and down, saying, "Big boy. Blond. Crewcut. Reported at your last stop. You give him to us, we give you no more trouble."

"Sorry about the trouble," Hansl replied. "But you see, we've been asleep." He made a sweeping gesture.

"Sure. Oh, sure," the bearer scoffed.

"Well come on in, then. Look around." Hansl turned to his audience in the car. "Anybody remember a big boy hitting anyone?"

People looked around, pretended to be serious, seemed to ask each other. Nobody seeing anything.

"Well, we'll find him, then!"

Tough people, came to me. *These are really tough people. Nobody's going to admit anything. Everybody laughed at the little feller. I wonder who knows the boy is on the roof? Where's the spy? Am I the only one? Is there a flag? If so—*

And the lantern-bearers were all through the car, then, shoving light into faces, pulling up a boy here and there, studying, growling, marble-man placating.

You're a real leader, Hansl-boy, I thought. And closed my eyes and waited. And then they were standing over me and I wondered if any of them knew I was official, if they'd take me out, pretend a search, ask questions. But of course they were looking at the body, studying the hair, the face.

"See anything, lady?"

"Lotsa things."

"Well, lady, what you see?"

"My name is Gretl."

"Then, sister, you see anything of a big, blond boy with a crewcut—like your hair would be if we might shave it?"

"Shave my hair?"

I put a hand up to it, saw them grinning.

"Shave my head?" Got out the big-eyed dumb look. "Like a man's?" Couldn't seem to get any further. Since cutting a woman's hair is the most demeaning thing that could happen.

They stood up, looked around some more.

Hansl was saying, "Must be another car, my friends." Watching them clamber down. "Cold up here. How far north already?" And a couple of the lantern-bearers, not bad fellows, simply doing their duty, answered, "Portland."

"Ah. Nearly there," said Hansl.

And they were gone. Crackling into the night along the rails, on the stones, smell of smoke coming into the car from the engine up ahead, nobody saying anything.

When will they get him down? Gotta be before daylight.

And everybody waiting, nobody going to say a thing, admit anything, wondering if a spy were watching, memorizing faces, waiting to report.

I felt sore from the big man's hands, exhausted, heard the brakes release, felt the car jerk, move again. And fell asleep waiting.

5

Waking wasn't pleasant. For just a moment I thought I was the girl in the dream, the one coming out of the woods wrapped in something. Light poured through the sliding door but it was grey and damp with morning.

"Is everything ashes?" I heard myself asking.

And somebody answering, "Nothing smoky about me!" Laughing. Which was cut off abruptly as the sliding door, which had been partly closed, crashed back along its runners.

"Gretl Hanover of South of Midtown stand up please!"

And I sat up, pushing back my hair, pulling my wandering G-string into place. Who was I? Oh yes, Gretl Hanover, some fine name, Intelligence network currently undercover, spying on—

Why were they calling me?!

I glanced around the car, seeing the face of marble-man in a faint glimmer, eyes steady on me, began getting up.

"Here," I croaked. "I'm here."

"The Flag Police!" hissed someone.

And there was a tall, gaunt Flag Burner in the opening, holding a swagger-match, looking grim. And as I stood I caught a glimpse, just a glimpse of something red and white shoved back of where I'd lain.

A flag? Someone said there'd be a flag on board. But —back of me? In back of me? Am I being framed?

"Gretl Hanover," I said, and went to meet him.

He watched every inch of me as I came toward him. There was no reaction except for his eyes which were cold and flat and stale with hating. *Oh, my flag! Does he know who I am? Why's he here? What part shall I play?*

And I didn't have to pretend to be afraid. He was one of those fastidious people who hate living.

"Gretl Hanover, I take you in for questioning."

"Why?"

"I ask the questions, lady!"

"Why?" I squalled it, hanging on the door frame.

"Get down quick!" He swung the swagger-match. I flinched.

"Ah!" He smiled. And I knew, then, what he was: a Torturer. From the northern precincts. After me!

I leaned against the door, looked down, glancing over his head seeing that we hadn't moved, seeing we were still in station, still in the shifting area where dozens of tracks came together, where cars were scattered. And nearly had to hold my head to keep from looking at our roof to see if the boy was there. *Is that who he is after?*

What would the people in the car be thinking?

"All right," I said. And clambered down. People were very still, watching. *Caught between a rock and a hard place,* I thought. *If he knows who I am, then we'll have a conversation, and I'll have to make up something for the car afterward. And if he doesn't know who I am, then he is likely—*

We were headed across the tracks for a little building. It looked stoic enough; just a small, square building with a peaked roof. But we didn't go in. On the other side was a handcar, one of those roofless rail models that are moved by hand-pumping. Two benches.

The Torturer got on before me. I was settled between two men in back. One took the handle. He pushed strongly, gave the car a jerk; we began to move.

"Where are you taking me?"

No answer.

"Why?"

I left it there, watched the rails go under, listened to the noise the man made as he shoved the lever, up and down, up and down, breathing going in and out.

"Where is the boy?"

He hadn't waited for our destination.

I decided to play it honest.

"I don't know. He was in our car, of course, but disappeared."

"Whom did he hit?"

"No one."

"Never lie to me!"

He turned and glared directly at me, light brown eyes with flecks of gold so that they seemed nearly yellow, so that they nearly matched the skin beneath them.

"I do not lie," I said, and looked directly back.

He allowed his arm to brush my breast.

"And do not touch me."

"No," he said. "Not here."

Someone just beside me laughed.

I might have to tell him, I thought. *I might have to tell him who I am, or he could kill me. Either that or he's a damned—that word again!—a damned good actor!*

And it came to me. Where the boy had gone. *Into another car, of course.*

But didn't they count us?

Sure. Somewhen. And some of the others had swapped. During the night, naturally. He's well hidden.

And suddenly I thought about Donny. About how I'd thrown him out.

A feeling of rage, of remembered power, swept over me and I stopped cringing, almost stopped worrying. I glanced at the Torturer. But we had come to another little building and this time we stopped. Got out. I could see the train like a black snake waiting across the rails, could see people in the opened doors of cattle cars. Watching, probably. And was amazed to find a stairwell going down inside the building, so that we walked into a dreary tunnel where the wind had flung leaves and brown grasses until they lay on the concrete floor in sad little dead piles.

"Why?" I asked as we stopped before a door. One of his agents opened it, and before I could speak again the Torturer had swung the swagger-match at my buttocks, hard, making me scream, sending me staggering with flailing arms into the cubicle. And what I saw as I fell against the concrete, hard, skinning my elbows and knees, was blood. As brown and cracked as all the dead leaves in the hall.

I was truly afraid then but also fighting mad, and I got up and came at him, shouting, "You idiot! Idiot! Idiot!"

While he, in turn, stood off, letting his agents hold my arms and body.

"Tie her to the chair," he said.

There was a bench made of concrete, and a square, black chair with arms and leather belts bolted to the floor, and I was determined not to get imprisoned there. I began to fight. They laughed at first, but I laid out one agent and came at the other until he began glancing at the Torturer instead of at me, and I got a good kick into his genitals doubling him over, and was whirling—and felt the first fire of the swagger-match strike my butt. Just a lick. Like a light basting. And whirled—and the Torturer was standing there, grinning, sweating a little, holding the match out toward me.

"Do go on," he said. "You're better than some others."

And I could feel the smart of my singed buttock beginning.

"For Burners' s-sakes," I stuttered.

"And now," he said, "perhaps you'll answer."

The first agent was very still. I wondered if my kick had crushed his larynx. The second was hauling himself up the wall.

"Don't put me in the chair!" I said.

"All right." He grinned, knowing he had all the power, the power to singe my body totally.

"You know about the swagger-match, I see." And grinned again. "But have no scars!"

"There was never any need!" I said. "There's no need now! What is it you want?"

"Oh, several things—more now."

"Why more?"

"You have a good technique."

We looked at the two agents, the Torturer not at all displeased. "Maybe you could give them lessons?"

"I'll give them lessons!"

I raised a foot again.

"Sit down. Not there. Sit over here."

"Make them go out."

"Go out," he said. The second agent crawled, breath hissing, still clutching himself. The first lay still.

"And now, my lady, you tell me what they did with the big, blond boy who, rumor has it, hit a Lantern-bearer."

"Threw him out," I said. I leaned against the bench.

"Threw him out?"

"Haven't you counted us?"

He pursed his lips.

"Don't you count us all?"

"Not always."

"You've hurt me with your fire."

He fiddled with the lever which would turn it on, send it shooting out, send it onto my feet, my hair, or across the railroad tracks.

"I don't really care about the boy who insulted one of our Lantern-bearers. I want to know what title you hold with the Flag Wearers."

"Flag . . . Wearers?"

I was completely shocked.

He smiled. The door opened and a very large man entered, head shaved, face shaved; one of those men with enormous sloping shoulders and hands which hang like an ape's; shambling walk.

"Yes, my dearie. Or where else did you learn to fight like that?"

"I'm not a Flag Wearer!"

"Oh, but you are, my dear."

"But—what makes you think I am?"

The big man stooped over the agent on the floor, put an arm around his waist and picked him up like a sack of something, walked away.

"Interestingly powerful, isn't he?"

The slope-shouldered man came in again, holding a razor.

Flag!

"What happened to Agent Freemantle?"

"Agent who?"

"Banner, shave her head."

"Shave my—?"

"Sit her in the chair and take those nice braids off."

I was open-mouthed.

"Unless, of course—"

"You'd shave . . . ?"

And I was in the chair. He'd picked me up as he'd done the agent, set me down, and the straps were over my wrists and around my ankles before I could think. And he came at me with the razor.

"My hair . . ." I squeaked.

"What happened to—"

I yelled. I yelled and yelled and could feel the razor bite into the rope of hair that he'd twisted; could feel it start at my hairline, ripping back. And all the time he questioned me, softly, clearly, repeating it, repeating it until my head was bald. Like an egg. And then he held up a mirror so I could see.

I kept on cursing, tears streaming down like rain until, in disgust, he turned away.

Will they let me go now? Now that I'm no longer—

"Banner, let her up."

The great hands took the straps, undid them, gave me a gentle push until I stood. Without my cape of hair I felt degraded, stripped.

"And now, perhaps? What happened—"

"I don't know who you're talking about!"

"Banner, do you like her?"

"Um."

It was a grunt such as a bull would give. A barnyard moan. I gaped.

"Then, Banner, give her attention."

And the big man turned. And there I was, caught between that rock and a hard place; between the apeman and the Torturer. I began to babble.

The big man picked me up. I hit with all my strength but it was like pummeling a mountain. Without a pause he threw me on the bench, took off his pouch, and leaned. I flailed, of course. Screamed. He held my legs. Grunted.

"Hold it just a second, Ban."

Groaned.

"Flag! I'll flag you! Have you flagged!"

"You will?"

I could feel grit beneath my back, feel my burned buttock throbbing, feel the weight of the monster hovering. And the Torturer put his face right down to mine so that it inserted obscenely between the monster's chest and my mouth, and whispered, "What happened to Agent Freemantle?"

"I don't . . ."

"Lean a little, Ban."

I squalled.

"Now, dear, you'll tell me all of it."

"I'll have him killed!"

Loud laughter.

"Someone shoved our Donny off the train."

"Donny?"

"He was our agent. Lean, Ban, just a little more."

I was screeching now, held flat as in a vise, the monster grunting slightly.

"Easy, Ban. Go easy now. In just a moment—"

"No! You let him rape me and I'll have him killed!"

"We little Flag Wearers sound quite tough. Lean, Ban."

And they were going to split me up between them. I could feel my flesh giving. Squalled again.

"What happened to Agent Freemantle, Gretl Hanover?"

The pain was so acute I couldn't answer. Couldn't make a sound. Blacked out. And when I was revived, feeling like a filleted fish, all I could do was mumble, "Two-one-thousand, burn your hides!"

6

"Who are you?!"

I wouldn't answer. Couldn't stand up. I kept fainting, coming to again.

"Tell me who you are!"

The Torturer sounded worried. The swagger-match was leaning in the corner and the ape had disappeared.

Tough lady, someone told me once. *You're one flag of a tough lady.* But I didn't feel tough now. I felt ruined. I'd been retching. The cement room with its bench and chair smelled foul. I began squawking.

'Tell me who you are!"

"Why the flag should I tell you anything?" I doubled up, clutching my abdomen, vomiting. "But I'll tell you this—"

And suddenly I knew I musn't threaten. That I could die here, nobody knowing anything. He was scared slightly, but he still had means.

"I'll have your ape killed!"

"Scrap your mouth! I'll—"

"Flag it! Flag it!" I made deprecating movements. No sense trying to sound omniscient with this crazy. Tough it out. "And as for me—"

"All right. I've called. Got your description. But who threw Donny out?"

"That's what you really want to know?"

"That's what I really want to know."

I groaned.

"And you're convinced I'm no Flag Wearer?"

"Convinced."

"That is really kind of you. I can't sit up. I can't sit down. I can't—" I put my naked head into my hands. "You've got to get me on that train again."

"I know."

"I swear—"

"I hear."

"And I don't know anything about the boy. Your Lantern-bearer lied. Or made something up to get someone into trouble. And I threw Donny off the train."

"You!"

"Tried to rape me. Isn't that ironic?"

He held out a hand. I swung my legs slowly over the side of the cement bench and managed to stand up.

"And now you'll bring me back to the train and I'll look all beaten up, and they'll never suspect me of being what I really am."

And the thought came: *What am I now, really?*

"Won't you, Torturer?"

He stood back a little, glancing at his swagger-match. I could almost hear his brain ticking: *If I kill her I can say it was an accident, that Ban— But they've got her on this train for special reasons. Must be a Flag Chaser. Mightn't they—?*

His hesitation gave me an edge.

"It's such a tremendously authentic interrogation no one in the car could possibly suspect. I suppose I ought to thank you."

I gulped blearily, shuddered, fell to massaging my belly.

He tapped his fingers, came to a conclusion.

"Great!" he said opening the door. "I'll write you a commendation. Send it to Headquarters. Now give them a good show!"

As if I could help myself! And the ape, waiting just outside, picked me up, carried me down the corridor, up the stairs where the leaves rustled, grunted once and put me on the handcar. Which rolled out to the first little building where the men, standing away as if I were poison, pointed at my train.

I could barely move. I felt stunned, knew I was going into shock, left a trail of blood on the seat as I tried to slide off it.

Someone gave me a shove. Staggering, dripping, I began to crawl back to the train. I could hear the handcar leaving, sound of breathing in and out, in and out, lever going up and down. My raw buttock felt cold as breezes touched it. I could hear myself whimpering.

When I was spotted, for they must have been waiting, bodies appeared in the cattle-car doorway. Nobody was allowed to leave, of course, but they gathered until the opening was a mass of faces.

I kept on falling, and once couldn't get up for several minutes. Marble-man and a huge black-skinned person who must have been my midnight kisser jumped down to help but were held back by Flag Police sweeping around the corner of the cars, readying the train for leaving.

"Gretl!" someone yelled.

I could hear steam hissing, brakes being released.

"Gretl!"

Raised a hand, flapped it, tried to stand. Thought, *After all, the train will leave without me.* Felt a sudden horror of being alone. Heard a rush of footsteps, shouting, felt myself being lifted, carried; heard a whistle shriek, heard the clatter of iron wheels on iron rails as cars shifted; heard metallic chatter; felt myself tossed aboard while people cheered. Felt myself going down into a black tunnel where leaves and grass made sad, dead litter on the floor.

Someone had bathed me. I was still bleeding, puking some, but there was salve on my buttocks and my bottom.

I thought, *I'm torn in two pieces.*

I said, "Someone—someone—" and a woman called, "Hansl! She's talking!" And there was hay rustling and the marble-man seemed to be there although I couldn't focus.

"Hansl," I whispered.

"Yes."

But it was necessary to be sure. And so I lay there, waiting, trying to open my eyes, trying to find him.

"Hansl."

"Flag them! Flag them! Flag them!" someone hissed passionately.

"Scrap your mouth!" said someone else.

"For Burners' sake—"

"Go flag yourself!"

"Hansl—Hansl, tell the boy—"

"Gretl—yes—"

"You tell him I convinced them he's not here."

"Not here?"

"The Lantern-bearer lied."

Someone laughed.

"Donny was an agent."

Silence.

"Did you know?"

"Do now."

A woman began crying.

"Don't forget." Felt myself drifting off again. "Don't forget—if he comes back." *Because maybe he wasn't killed when I pushed him off, you see. And he's talked. But you don't have to worry because I'm the second agent in the car and I—and they—and—*

"Let her sleep."

"Is she in much pain?"

"She'll die!"

Oh, no. Gretl wouldn't die. And the dream returned. As the car rocked. Only this time she was very conscious of everything that came before the scene in the forest. She was a child. There was the big house with all the children in it, fighting and squabbling, and the housemother who tore into them every now and then complaining, cuffing.

She noticed that some were favorites while she was not. When the housemother came at them Gretl was always one to receive a cuff, even if she hadn't done anything. Which was sometimes true.

She was rough, of course. She was big and blond and strong and could hold her own with any of the boys, even the older ones; and she had no sympathy for the slender doelike girls, the ones who cried a lot; the ones who were homesick. Because she'd never had a home. There was just the street and then the big house with the house-mother and then—

There was one memory. Of yellow leaves. Of a whole forest of red and yellow leaves blossoming—that was the only word—blossoming on the riverbank. And of a person holding her tightly, crooning; a warm, soft person coughing every now and then, saying, "We'll make it, darling. Like Hansl and Gretl in the fairy tale. Humans have been nibbling too long at the witch's house and now—"

And then had come the rumbling in the air, the ground cracking, and all the red and yellow forest thrashing in a wind, while overhead—

And the next scene was the street and someone picking her up, not gently, and the housemother cuffing.

And then the ape and the Torturer and—

But they came after Act Two; after the Head Burner's saying, "Get on this train, Gretl—like the little girl who fooled the witch, remember?—get on this train and twirl your G-string, twiddle your tits, and listen hard."

"Why?"

"You hear about anyone with an unburnt flag, see anybody wearing cotton, anything red, white, blue, you message me. Hear? *(You heah?)*" *(I think he said "massage." Meant "message" but said "massage." Because he was thinking of my body.)*

"Extra pay?"

"Public duty."

Hot stuff! Elation! Practically a member of the Flag Police!

"Hansl! Hansl!"

I could feel myself drifting in and out of Act 1, Act 2, Scene 3, wondered what I was saying, found myself asking, "Hansl, what do they do to Flag Wearers?"

And Hansl answering, "Burn them, darling."

And myself whimpering, "It hurts! It hurts!"

7

He was very tender. I think he sat beside me all that day, running north through summer, seeing ocean glinting past the opened door. We had started late, were shunted into villages, changed locomotives, finally sent northeast along the coast, two cars, a hundred people crowded in like fish, clattering slowly, little engine puffing, huffing.

"The Little Engine that Could," he said, and I nearly smiled, remembering the childhood book. *The little girl who couldn't. Tough little girl who—*

"Hansl?"

"Call me Hans."

"Call me Daria." *Why had I told him that?*

"Let's stick to Gretl."

"Feel naked without my braids."

No comment.

"Can't stand—"

"Bring her some water."

Bottle against my chin. Something between me and the straw. Something smooth and cottony. Pads on my bottom. Scent of disinfectant, salve.

"Am I infected?"

A hand came onto my forehead from behind.

"No."

"Who are you?"

"Emeline."

"How do you—?"

"Professional. I've been sent north."

I twisted my head.

"Don't move. You'll loosen your scabs. You're healing."

"How long—?"

"They've kept us shunting around. Four days now. But we're on our way."

"Thank you, Emeline."

"Sure," said someone. "They didn't want to lose a strapping girl like you!"

I kept my eyes closed, listened. Sounds of bitter voices.

So here I am, surviving. In a cattle car with other workers, going north to pick blueberries, going along to spy on someone with a flag. To find a flag. To get it burned.

YOU SHALL BURN THE FLAG, I thought. YOU SHALL DESTROY ONE WHEREVER IT IS FOUND. YOU SHALL DIRTY IT, TRAMPLE IT, TEAR IT, LEAVE IT OUT IN THE RAIN UNTIL IT MOLDERS. YOU SHALL NEVER, UNDER ANY CIRCUMSTANCE, TOUCH IT! IT IS AN EVIL THING.

Something evil had touched me already. I could smell myself. I could hear myself complaining. I could feel my head, like a new-laid egg, proclaiming my shame to everyone. I could feel the pain.

And Hans put his hand over my eyes, then, closing them, saying, "Sleep, Gretl. Sleep and stop worrying. Everyone in the car thanks you."

"Thanks *me*?"

Silence.

"Why?"

"For me, of course." Sound of big boy's voice: big boy who had called the Lantern-bearer "Sharkey."

"All for Sharkey," I whispered. "Sharkey."

I think I laughed. All of them laughed. The whole car erupted with hoots suddenly, released tension, and I fell asleep grinning.

I could smell berries. It was a purple smell, hot and ripening. They had taken me out of the cattle car and I was lying in a tent. The tent was made of yellow canvas, and light filtering through was like constant morning. *Or the yellow leaves on the river bank.*

It was a large tent, long. There were rows of blankets. I knew where I was, still felt confused, kept my mind away from swagger-matches, Flag Burners. Thought, *I'm supposed to be a spy.* Laughed a little. Got up, trying to be tough. Made it to the tent flap, stood there, hanging on.

And outside was blue sky and sunshine, smell of bruised fruit, whiff of ocean—like a razor—cutting through the heat.

I shivered, felt bandage pull across my burns, thought, *I remember the girl with the burned behind, the one with the tattoo. And now—* Stood up straighter, felt my abdomen pulling, felt the pain. *Flag! I could be pregnant!* Turned around, met Emeline.

"So how are you doing, Gretl?"

I put a hand to my naked head, felt tears begin, stood there heaving while she came to stand beside me.

"You were a virgin."

"Flag it, yes!"

"How was that possible?"

"I'm tough."

Emeline smiled. She was short, chunky, had thick brown hair. "You're tough, all right."

I stopped crying. "Now it doesn't matter. I'm just sore."

"You're very torn and bruised."

"I'll get him sometime!"

"Wouldn't bet on it."

We smiled forlornly at one another.

"I'm grateful for your care," I said.

"I'm good at my work."

Oh, flag! I thought. *My work!*

I looked beyond her at the field of blueberries; great shaved hillside, rocks showing through, berry bushes low and green, people with bent backs, raking.

"I've got to get out there."

"Not quite yet."

She hesitated. Then she added, "The Commander wants to see you first."

And alarm bells went off in my brain like screaming.

"What for?" I was going to lose it right there. Going to start running, sprawling, flailing off. *Not so tough after all.*

Unexpectedly Emeline remarked, "There are a lot of us, few of them."

I stared.

"We're way down east," she said. "Blueberry barrens. Hundreds of islands offshore. Bogs, woods, inland."

"Why are you telling me?"

"Just to give you the lay of the land."

"But—"

"Make you feel at home."

But it was something else. A message. And how was I to take it? Was I being tested? She was official. Was she a spy? Did she know—

I broke off thinking, stared up the hillside, sighed. Panic had gone and we were alone, the two of us, both women, one a healer, me a spy—

She said, "I shall ask him to give you two more days before your debriefing."

"Debriefing?"

"Everyone who's injured is interrogated."

She saw me wince.

"And I'll be present."

Workers were coming down. There was a shower shed and they filed in slowly, laughing, men and women together—"Like animals," someone had told me once. Although to me it represented equality. Like a lack of clothing. Everyone equal now. "Skin-to-skin and proud of it!"

"How soon can I wash?" I murmured.

"After the healing."

"And how soon the . . . interrogation?"

"Day after tomorrow."

She gave a glinting look and left.

And so, I thought, *either he knows I'm official or he doesn't. Like the last batch. And either he's concerned about me or he wants to get me working. Either he'll be intelligent or brutally ignorant. No! He couldn't be intelligent to be Commander.*

What traitorous thoughts!

Where did that thought come from?

I could see the Torturer's cold grin, hear Ban . . . grunting. *But you didn't tell them about the boy!* Stood up straighter, walked outside.

Everyone would know me. Everyone in the cars would know the bald one. I expected shame, got only smiles, wandered back to the shower tent, back of a row of tents, found an old apple tree with thick grass beneath, lowered myself gingerly, leaned on my side thinking.

And heard the voices.

"She's hurt. She's really hurt."

"Could be pretending."

"I'll put it in her tent."

"Why do it?"

"Test."

And I felt my eyes closing.

Heard, as if from far away, the low voice saying, "I know you like her, man, but she's too new."

And fell asleep.

8

He came to me himself, Hans, pulling Gretl to her feet by her hands, holding her around the waist until she made it back into the tent. And he lay me down and put a pillow underneath my head, a new one, harder.

"Thanks," I said.

He covered me with a blanket, squatted for a moment, touched my skull. I made a face. "It'll grow," he said.

"I feel ashamed."

He looked away, over the scattered blankets, up into yellow canvas.

He seemed to be making up his mind. Finally he said, "I thought you were"—paused—"because you seemed inexperienced—because you kept asking stupid questions—covering it by sounding brash—but now . . ."

I put my hands to my shaved scalp, shuddered. "Now?"

And he squatted there, looking at me, suddenly leaned down and brushed my mouth with his.

"If you ever think . . ." he said.

I opened my eyes. "Of what?"

"Hans!"

The big man with the dark skin and bulging muscles stooped into the tent, coming toward us. I found myself gazing tensely at him, thinking of Ban, thinking *jet-man*! And then two women entered, arguing over a towel, talking loud and spitting at each other; then a man complaining. And tears started flowing down my cheeks. I put my hands over my eyes, my mouth, turned away into the hard pillow.

I'd begun to see Ban everywhere; every time power became an issue. Between men. Between women. It was Ban all over again, leaning down, grunting. Mindless.

And Hans stood up, looked around quietly. Arguing stopped. Between my fingers, peeking, I saw him pointing at me, finger to his lips. And something warm, like a rush of blood, a little river, flowed out of me toward him. Flowed outward with a feeling I'd never had before—a feeling at once yielding but all the same powerful. *Like a mother hen,* I thought ("Where are you from, silly hen? What're you up to?). Remembering our first meeting. Protective! Furious! *But look at me!*

And at this moment a short, chunky man with a bulbous pouch waggling stamped in, making his sandals slap, making the tent shake and quiver. Making everyone snap to attention. He looked all around, moved the crossed shoulder straps of his rank, hefted his scrip—ancient word for little bag he carried—came to stand over me.

"Gretl Hanover?"

Who else?

"Yes."

"The rest of you can leave."

I saw Hans hesitate, saw the black man touch his arm—jet and marble, the two of them opposites yet somehow linked—saw eyes meeting, sliding off, saw them go outside. Saw a shadow linger.

"And so!"

And so I can't request to call two-one-thousand in this tent with ears listening to every word we say, can I? Even if I wanted to!

But he didn't seem intimidating. He stood looking down at me and I kept my hands over my head, feeling exhibited, ashamed. Then he said, "Well! How soon do you begin work?"

To which I replied, "As soon as possible."

"And when may that be?"

"Are you the Commander?"

"Yes."

"I thought to be—interviewed—day after tomorrow."

"Did you now?"

Did Emeline lie to me?

"Roll over."

"What?"

And fear streamed into me like fire from the swaggermatch.

"Don't—"

"I wish to see your burn."

I rolled, felt him lift the blanket.

"Messy."

Felt him pull the blanket back.

"Good worker, are you?"

"Very good."

"We'll give you a couple more days. Don't want to lose our best workers." And he turned, was gone.

Don't want to lose our best workers.

If he had hit, he couldn't have hurt me more. Emotionally. Because what I felt coming from him was utter non-concern. If I had died, he wouldn't have noticed. Except as he was minus one more pair of hands.

"Commander . . ."

He paused at the tent flap, looking back. "Two-one-thousand!" I wanted to blurt, wanting to get special treatment, special attention. Wanting to be seen! Shut my eyes. Thought I was too sore to game-play. Said, "Thank you, Sir."

He looked at me steadily a moment, nodded, left.

Another pair of hands. A tail. A head made shameful. All the little humps and bumps exposed. I felt under my pillow for my G-string, felt my bandages pull greasily, couldn't find it. And so I began rummaging around, driven by shame, by fear, finally by panic. And the

pillowcase fell open and my hand, shoving around inside, grew quiet.

The stuffing was folded up: some cloth.

I looked at neighboring sleeping blankets, saw various-sized pillows, saw places without pillows, removed my hand, lay very quiet. As if someone had said to me, "Danger, Daria, danger!" No Gretl Hanover now. Simply No-name Daria. After the yellow trees had fallen. And the soft woman had stopped coughing. After they found me in the streets. "Danger, danger, Daria!"

Lay there a long time waiting for evening. Waiting for the yellow canvas to catch shadows, the shade of trees, forms of people. Waiting for Emeline to bring dinner. I turned my mind off, rested, thinking about soup. Thinking about potatoes and carrots and celery swimming in broth; about how good it was; about its smell. Thinking there was never enough. And the hard bread. Thinking about its crust. About loaves in the orphan center. About how the housemother cuffed when I took two. Thinking how I was big and strong, how I used to take another from the little girls, hating them for their size, their weakness; how their eyes looked pleading. Knowing even then one had to fight and win to live! To truly live! To get so big even the housemother paused in cuffing.

"Think she'd make a good spy, Mother?"

And the housemother, sniffing. "Think she would!"

And how, after that, everything had changed: house, housemother, training.

I lay very still, seeing it for the first time really. As if I'd been a runaway engine, hooting loudly, never listening to myself. Seeing my trainers. My Flag Burners.

Flag, but I was hot!

Keeping myself solitary. Watching the others. Reporting. Seeing the girl with the tattoo, finally, and the burn on her buttock. Smelling smoke.

I closed my mind against the pictures there.

"You're up for promotion, Daria."

"Am I?"

"You are one tough lady."

"Sure."

And the inside jobs. The schools. Getting harder. The cotton fields. Now this. With the—"

"Hans!"

I said it out loud, seeing tortured bodies smoking. Hearing the voices saying, "When they burn you, you feel cold. Because your skin goes first." Remembering the cool breeze on my bleeding rump.

"Hans!"

And he came in. Quickly. Black eyes stabbing.

"Marble-man," I said.

And he squatted by my side again. I found myself putting my hands onto my head protectively.

"Have you ever seen anybody burned?" I whimpered.

"Yes," he said.

I closed my eyes.

"Where?"

"Down in 'gator country."

"Aren't you supposed to be eating?"

"Yes," he said.

"Then why—"

"I think you know—"

The feeling flowed again.

"But, Hans—"

"You talk to yourself," he said. "You talk in your delirium."

We were very quiet. We looked at one another for a long, long time.

"What do I say?" I managed.

He shifted. "Nothing much."

I was afraid to probe.

"They burned her for wearing a flag," I said. "I was just—remembering. She came out of the woods with it wrapped around her—no! No, that was just the dream! She—"

"Hush," he said. And looked around. "Keep yourself together, Gretl!"

"Hans?"

"Keep your head together!"

"Yes," I said. I shifted, felt the pillow.

"We're all suspects here."

"All of us?"

"Everyone. Hard core."

"Even you?"

He paused. "Especially me. So what have *you* done, Daria?"

Closed my eyes. Sniffled. While he left.

Tent darkened. Everyone was gone. Emeline was yet to bring me food. I put my fist against the pillow slit, felt my fingers slide inside as if they had a life of liberty. Touched the stuffing there. Felt my head moving, lifting, watched my eyes peeking inside.

Felt my whole body tense, waiting, knowing what was there.

Red, white, and blue. Stripes. Something with stars. Folded tightly.

Flag!

I closed the slit, tucked it under, felt my head fall backward. Lay there staring.

I have a new pillow. One harder than before. It hides—a flag! I can be burned. I can be—

Hans put it there.

9

Marble-man, jet-man. It wasn't hard to see them as a team. There was an underlying connection as the group lined up, picked out rakes, marched over the hillside. With the Overseers watching, black whips coiled. Overseers in broad-brimmed woven hats, the rest of us naked, me bald, weaving from one foot onto the other because the ground seemed to rise and fall. The world seemed to heave around me. *If they flick that whip and it hits my burn—*

I felt as if my skin didn't fit any longer. As if my insides had shrunk and my outside hung in folds, greyed and porous. As if my head were an egg half-cracked. *Oh, for my cape of hair! My hair!*

And the sun shone brightly out of the blue sky with ocean glinting on the horizon, and our backs were peel-

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ing, those of us with light skins, and we were squinting, and the flies were busy.

That was the worst part, really: flies. Giant deerflies. Taking a real hunk. Skin everywhere. A feast! And I wanted covering for the first time. Desperately. Wanted leggings to keep the bushes from scratching, wanted a shirt with long sleeves, wanted, above all, a wide-brimmed, woven hat. Felt my mind skittering.

I kept falling. I would hold the long rake handle and drop its teeth onto the bushes—like dentures, eating—pull back, hear the berries dropping into canvas shoved beneath, kept at it hour after hour, feeling the sun burning my burn! Checked out jet-man moving darkly, marble-man watching. Stumbled into bushes, tripped over my rake, felt something hit the side of my naked head smartly. Like a pebble.

I remember standing straight, putting my fingers up to my head, feeling another smart crack, and a hiss this time; turned to see where the hiss was coming from. And the Overseer coiled his whip.

I stared dumbly.

"Move it, lady!"

I felt very far away. I felt like I was sliding into the ocean's glint. Woke up and it was bushes: short, sharp brush all covered with little oval leaves; with round blue berries, frosted.

"Get up, I say!"

Lay there. Heard the whip again. Remembered a one-eyed man I'd met who'd drawled, "Sure can put it where it counts!" Pictured my eye being neatly wrapped and flung away.

"She not healthy."

"Don't—"

"No good for rakin' now. Leave her here, she die, you lost two hands."

The Overseer was a brutal little man, kept his tongue licking. Coiled the whip carressingly.

"Okay, Jet, you do double, then."

"Sure, boss." Low rumble. "Let's put her in the tent an' you congratulate youself. She be all right another day."

"You take her in and get yourself right back, you hear?" *("You message me?")*

"I heah."

And the arms picked me up, jet-man grunting slightly, making me cringe, and I was back on the blanket, head on the too-hard pillow.

He hunkered a moment, looking down.

"You eat," he said. "Get healthy. Sleep and eat. Weak ones don't survive."

I opened my eyes, stared up. "What happen to them, jet?"

He looked past the pillow, off into canvas. "Sometime get left behind. Sometime thrown to bears. Sometime . . . ocean close."

"Get thrown—in ocean?"

"Drowned. And fed to fish."

"Oh," I said.

"So you get strong. Get it in you head. That where it count."

And he was right.

I lowered my lashes, felt the cracks in my healing burn, felt the ooze.

He hadn't gone away. "I hurt you in the car that time. Thought you were one of them."

And my eyes flew open. He had said "them." Putting himself at risk.

"Them?"

He pushed himself up.

"Listen hard at the meeting tonight."

And I thought the ground heaved as he stalked out.

We were being brainwashed. It was an old term and I'd never thought about it much. Never until training. When they used it blatantly: "Most people are beasts. You've gotta keep them in line. For their own good, naturally. This is a society of equality now. No more saluters. No more individuals, no more coverings! Everything open, everyone doing his part. Equally. Skin-to-skin!"

I remembered that much. Sounded good. Sounded better than days of dog-eat-dog and cat-fight-cat, with your clothing showing your importance. Flag it! We'd improved!

And I sat very still in the darkness, feeling the night like a balm on my sunburned shoulders, on my skull. We'd marched down the hillside onto the road and up the road to a small, grassed field; and we settled there, watching one another, watching the Overseers with their coiled whips and scrip bags; watching the Commander and his waggling pouch.

He stamped around. There was a small slice of moon, and a fire in the field. He stood beside the fire, swinging his arms a moment.

"Workers!"

Eyes were focused.

"You're the most important people in society! Real workers! Nothing like the the insipid, flabby, ass-lickers of the past! Real workers! I salute you!"

Cheers. Hand-clapping. People leaning forward.

"This is hard work, Laborers! You will get fit here!"

Laughter.

"And I will see you do it!"

Quieting.

"I will see you do it for your own good! For the good of your mind, your body! There will be no shirkers here, no going back to the past! The Overseers see to that."

Eyes flickering.

"Overseers—necessary strength to help those without strength."

I rubbed the welts on my head, noticed hair beginning to sprout. Itch.

"I salute you!"

There was a pause.

"We do not live in luxury here, as you have noted. None of us live in comfort here! This is a place of reality, of necessity. None of us really wants to be here, yet all of us want to be here! For the responsibility of it! The importance!"

"Oh, blueberries for breakfast . . ."

The words were a low taunt, soft and subtle; and the Commander put his feet together, shifted his shoulder

straps, made a motion. One of the Overseers coiled his whip.

"What did you say?"

The Commander kept his eyes on the ground.

"Did somebody say something?"

"Blueberries . . ." came again. Like a whisper. Like a wind.

And now the Overseer felt the whip, lovingly, moved it gently up and down.

"Hard-core berrypickers."

And I thought, *It isn't better now. It isn't any better now!* Kept watching the coils on the grass. Found myself leaning forward to watch the coils, realized suddenly I was being watched. Exactly as I had been trained to watch: "Notice the one who moves. Notice who twitches, flicks an eye, notice what guilt produces." Realized I was looking guilty. Kept on looking, watching the whip coil and uncoil, feeling myself mesmerized. Saw it raised, heard it sizzle toward me.

"Egghead! Stand!"

And the crack it made was like a gunshot.

I shot to my feet, stood staring.

"Yes," I said. "Two-one—" Stopped myself. Thought, *I'm going mad. They'll kill me! And I'm innocent.*

I'm innocent.

Oh, flag! Oh, burners flag! No one is innocent!

Raised my head, looking at the Commander.

"Yes, sir?"

"Egghead (*egg-head, marble-man, jet-man—*), come forward!"

And I walked between the bodies, feeling the earth rise to meet me, feeling the sky falling down, seeing the girl—

"Why?"

I'd reached the center grass. Three Overseers waited.

"Are you fascinated by whips?"

Quite calm. "I am."

He pursed his lips. Thought a minute.

"Why don't you tell us all about it?"

Because I'm a spy. Well hidden. Because when you catch someone guilty, it's usually because someone like me has told—

The whip made a hiss, drew back. I stood there like a stone.

"Tell us about the whips," he said.

"They are eaters," I answered. And total hopelessness overcame me. *You shouldn't have taken me off the train!* "They are little mouths and they devour people."

"Curious."

He eyed me sagely.

"Are you afraid?"

"Yes!" I said.

"Then tell us why."

"They hurt. I have two welts—"

"What causes them to hurt?"

"Guilt," he wanted me to say.

But hopelessness buoyed me momentarily.

"Burns! Cuts! And scratches! Hairlessness!"

I broke. Began beating my thighs, hitting my fists together.

"Being hauled off trains! Accused unfairly! Assaulted by apes! Slit! Sliced! It's all unjust! Unfair! There's no equality! It's a lie! No justice! Only brutes! And whips!"

I was yelling, thrashing around, heard people jumping up around me, jumping away, running toward me. Bolted suddenly over the fire, away from the Overseers. Felt myself leaping like a hare escaping, running for shelter. *But where's there a briar patch?!* Saw myself skittering as if I were out of my body, watching from away up in the trees; seeing the little rabbit weaving through the group of people.

"Egghead! Egghead! Don't anybody stop her! Overseers, do your duty!"

Heard the crack of whips. Heard a melee behind me, turned, saw people jostling, falling down, thought, *What in the world—?* Realized suddenly they were hindering. Pretending to confusion. Getting in the way of the Commander, running like hens every which way. And, panting to a stop behind the apple tree, I saw marble-man skid toward me.

"Down the path!" he said.

"Wha—?"

"Down the path! I'll cover. Take the flag!"

Saw him pretend to hunt but couldn't move.

He caught my hand, then, hauled me off.

"Where—?"

"Get the flag! Go down the path!"

"But—" Saw it then, a little trail leading into woods.

"You'll find—get going!—safety!"

And he shoved, went howling back. "Where is she? I don't see her!"

10

My feet began to move. They took me down the pathway, kicking up the scent of sweetfern, stopped.

Safety!

Listen, Daria, get to the Commander. Tell him "two-one-thousand—" Make it loud.

Oh, sure. And what did it get you last time, lady?

Well, after a while . . .

After a while you could be dead!

Why me?

They've got you pegged: troublemaker. Remember? Remember the psychology training? "Get the troublemaker first," they told you. "Then the others fall."

"Why should I get anyone?"

"To protect society, Daria. Equality demands responsibility."

"Responsibility?"

"Watchfulness! Eternal vigilance!"

"I see."

There was screaming back in the field. There was shouting, crack of whips, sudden smell of sulfur. *Must be a swagger-match somewhere.*

My skin shuddered.

Hans trusted me! Told me about the flag.

Uh-uh. A test. He's got bears down there. And figures —if he gets rid of you, then—

Marble-man figures—
Jet-man figures—
"Emeline!"

I said the word out loud, thinking about my hurts.

And heard it growing: confusion. Chaos! War! Because the field was wild. And I hopped back down the roadway, found myself at the back of the tent where my blankets lay, heard myself thinking, *I'll go inside, get my blanket.* Ripped up one edge of the back wall, slipped in and slid.

No one!

Everybody out in the field, fighting. *How can they fight the Overseers? A swagger-match?*

Got my blanket, heard the yelling.

And it was marble-man's voice. "Flag! You Burners! Flag you! Flag you! Flag you!"

Screaming.

And I ran to the opened flap, peered out.

Saw him. Standing. Hands outstretched. Commander leering. Overseers whipping. Saw the burn across his belly.

"Hans!"

And the crowd quieting, everybody caught in action like the game of statues. Commander pointing, holding the swagger-match, turning the flame off and on, off and on so that the grass around his feet crisped.

"Admit it! You and Gretl! Threw him off the train! Agent Freemantle! Hid a boy who hit a Lantern-bearer! Troublemaker, Hans! Got it out of our other agent! How you threw him off the train!"

"Your . . . other agent?"

He was hurt. Could see it in his eyes. His belly hurt.

And they were lying.

"Listen, listen, man . . ." Jet-man reasoning.

"Get on back there." Commander playing with the lever, letting flames lick out, come back again.

And rage surged through me. And the power. As if I inhabited my skin once more.

They lie! They're burning marble-man! My Hans!

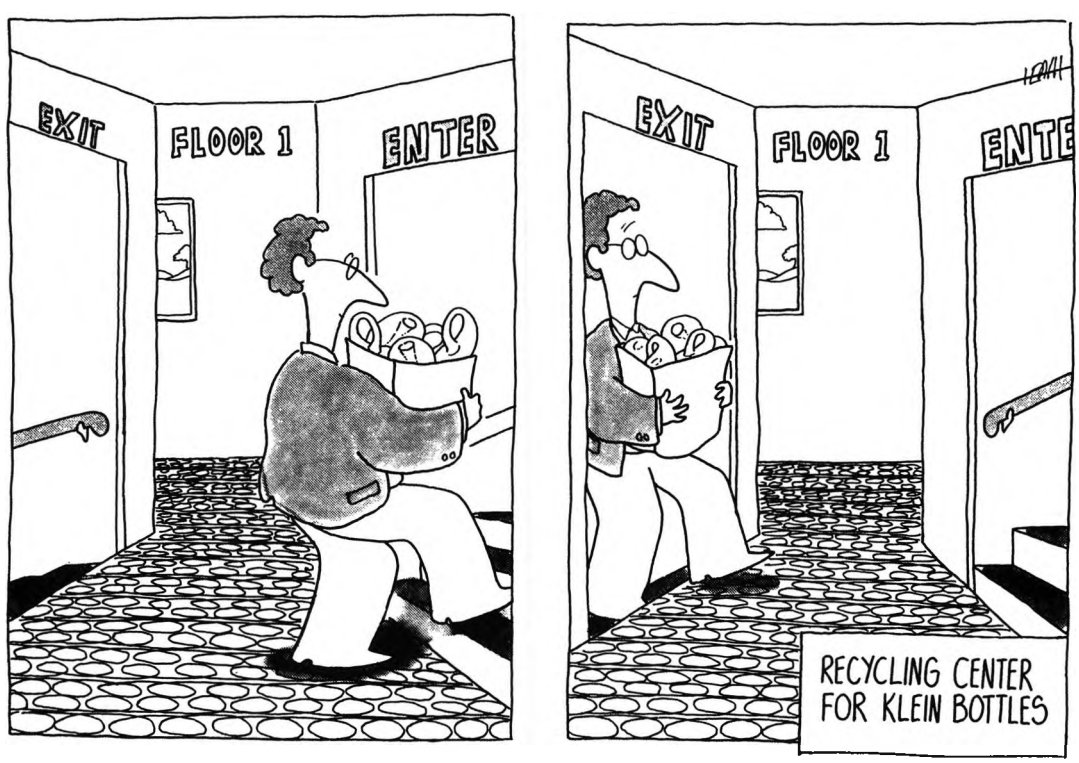
I ran back into the tent, directed now, gibbering. *It doesn't matter any more.* HE *matters!* Fumbling into the pillowcase, hauling out the red, white, and blue-starred thing, wrapping it around myself.

Oh, flag! Oh, burner's dish! Oh, skin-to-skin equality and liberty and justice—flag it! I will wear this thing!

Slow motion now. Remembering the dream. I'm sitting at the edge of a forest, in short grass with high ferns all around, and the birds are twittering and there's a wide field of little bushes out there just in front. And people are bending over raking something from the bushes. Everything peaceful and perfect. Cooperative. And then this girl walks out of the forest and she's got this thing draped over herself, a sort of covering, and she stands there waiting. Waiting and feeling scared apparently, but brave, thinking she's brave. Thinking she's making up for . . . One by one the people bending, picking, straighten up, and LOOK AT HER.

And I came on slowly up the road and to the field, some people pointing, to stand there, dreaming. Coming out of the woods, flag-wrapped, and covered, individual, so individual—to stand there—(*two-one-thousand, burn it!*)—stand there—

Smiling. ✦



Chameleon on a Mirror

Illustration by Jon Weiman

Howard V. Hendrix

Walk forward think back. Me and the boys. Wish the father of the thought. Child the father of the man. Many places in one time, many times in one place all singing through the brain the song of a gong in a hailstorm. Move with that roadrunner zen then the wily Coyote boys of the Sangre de Cristo won't touch. Be like Dracula don't show up in reflections from the few unbroken shop windows. Glass calls for a brick the way still water calls for stones, tossed skipped thrown stones, mirror smooth pond surfaces beckoning then breaking into wet shatter. Lifetimes of bad luck.

Tangled symphony of concertina wire accordion wire barbed wire strung along Venice Beach, up coast down coast. Metal crowns of metal thorns waiting for helmeted heads. Amen, Brother. Praise the Lord and pass the ammunition. Wind sings a hymn through the wire. Groups of shadow workers shouldering great scrap-iron crosses move

not up Calvary but down the beach over the sand into the surf. Outta town boys. Simon the Cyrenian. Wade in put up crosses at the edge of tides to ward off Terrorist Vampire Navy amphibs bringing their boys to surf Santa Monica. So the government says. Get thee behind me! Amen.

Walk forward think back. Never did let the streams flow free. Threw mud and rock dams across them like a good ten year old human beaver engineer kid back in the Midwest growing up. In the trickled leaks from the dams saw flatworms small black slow move over the sand. Planaria. Cut them in half, watch them regenerate. Neat trick. Splice that gene into the soldier genome. Take the strain off the medics.

Doing my part though the Army wouldn't bite. Me and my boys the Sons of God we *patrol*—the coast, if not Backyard Bananaland. Look up in the murky grey Pacific winter late afternoon see the flag fluttering there. Still remember when it had all those little white stars on the field of blue. Before the sticky summer when the empty dollars flowed like Martian myth blood through the streets of the world financial districts. Before the Backyard War. Before the Constitution protests the churchstate protests the martial law the Colonels in City Hall the General in Sacramento the Christian Soldiers in the White House and then just that one white cross on the field of blue now God's in His Heaven all's right with the world.

Look at the sand and think white think snow back home and the first one out in fields of snow pure and sweet as a blank white page and laid my body down and wrote a winged figure into those pages ten thousand times till my body got cold as a snow angel's.

Tried that in the sand once. Laid down on a flat spot moved my arms to and fro thinking of Michelangelo sculpting, of the boy who asked him Ay, Signore, why are you hitting that rock? and Michelangelo answering Because there's an angel inside who wants to get out. Stood up after and saw the sand shadow of Michelangelo's stone angel. But the angel had already flown.

A wish to fly now like an angel or a bat over Venice awaiting demolition. Had a rubberband airplane once. Turned that propeller, knotted and twisted that band again and again. The old man bought it. Said if there was one thing he'd learned in this life it was that people are like rubberband airplanes. The more twisted they are the farther they fly. Amen, Father.

See our target now. Coming out of the collapsing anthill condos. Somber grey black clothes shaved head Puritan punk. Moving on this way heedless of us. Truce between the Puritans and the Sangre de Cristos. We're chameleons dressed in the red coveralls, crosses, and scapulars of the Sangres. So he doesn't know, but he suspects. Uneasy truce about to grow uneasier. Still water on the surface but running deep inside scared. He lacks the roadrunner zen, the chameleon blend. Got him where we want him.

Like ants to torch up with the magnifying glass. Fascinated by them. Read about ant-wars in a kid's science book when I was eight. Red ants vs. black ants, ant Commies vs. ant Nazis. Put them in match boxes shook them up so they'd fight. Peered in stared fascinated as they battled to the death mandible to mandible biting off legs antennae thoraxes abdomens. War in a box. Ant *Illiad.*

But became Zeus the Thunderer only after the old man provided the magnifying glass. For examining leaf structures and flower parts, as he said? Or using it to burn things the way the science book at Guardian Angels Parochial School showed. Yeah. Where I thought myself called to priesthood of water and wine. Hah! In the diagram a hand lens becomes a burning glass focusing light to a tight combustion point. Dry leaves, bright sunny days. No comet tail diffusion. Pale last fall's leaf grows a spot dark with excess of bright, rim of ash, smoke rising, leaf solidly afire. Newspapers plastics wax hearts all aflame, then remembering the ants.

Still the Puritan comes on from his hole headed who knows who cares where.

A target that reacted lived moved. Crouched beside anthills hour upon hour lens in hand. Odin in the sky. Zeus hurler of thunderbolts. Sado-voyeur God of Old Testament and Revelation wrath. Bewildered victims twist smoke catch fire. As flies to wanton boys. Kill for sport. The pismire stench of their burning never leaves the altar boy with the burning glass. The incense of memory.

Walk rapidly me and the boys toward the Puritan. See a beautifully clear winter afternoon far away. Air taut as the drawn bowstring of archer, of violinist. Sky an aching sizzling blue burn-scar then. No snow on the ground but cold enough to make ice-lenses from two bowls of water frozen the night before. Too ungainly to use. Walk into the woods to the pond damned in the stream. Break loose chunks of clear ice from its surface, so thick and clear, must bear them cannot bear to part with them lug them home set them on the front porch beside the ice-lenses already there.

Fan out round the Puritan punk. Let him see the ice-lenses focusing cold mad blue in my eyes. That stops him.

Hunkering down on the dry grass of the winter-killed lawn of a dozen years ago where the old man cut down the beetle-infested maple tree, where there still were scattered punky sections of scrap wood rotted thin as paper. Try to start one of the rotted lengths on fire but succeed only in blackening it all over with burn spots, only getting it to smolder, grow convinced the piece must be wet despite its powdery papery appearance. Turn, walk away, hunker down beside another likely candidate for burning.

The Puritan's eyes lock on my blue ice. Good—his center of gravity is mine. Cross-bearing right hand shoots up righteously from right hip and strikes him right atop the forehead. He falls to the ground just as they always already have for faith healer Ernest Angel E. With the crucifix held an inch from his eyes say Repent O Ye Sinner of Your Sins Repent! The Kingdom of God is at Hand!

My God! Michael Christopher! What in God's name are you doing? The lawn's on fire!

Look quick over right shoulder see the piece of wood so long labored over has unbeknownst caught fire, the lawn too, paraclete tongues of flame licking toward the maple stump and wood scraps scattered about.

Two chameleon Sons of God suck vampirewise the green myth blood from the prostrate Puritan.

Blessed are the Poor! For Theirs is the Kingdom of God! God helps those who help themselves! The Poor you will always have with You!

My old man charges out of the house, ample-stomached figure in white undershirt grey workpants immense flopping unbuckled black rubber galoshes snatched in haste. Moves with the otherworldly motion of Americans walking on the moon who didn't look like Americans but like ungainly white styrofoam robots or angels traveling *in cognito* saluting the starred flag before we were old enough to walk. Rescue speed hampered by two prize ice chunks he's carrying one in each hand grabbed from off the porch.

The flames shine up through the flawless ice crashing down upon them. Ice blocks land with a hiss and a sizzle and the flames, tortured snakes, fan out round them. Again and again the fire shines up clearly through the ice descending upon it until the flames are no longer visible and the ice is ordinary water seeping into a lawn scorched first by ice then by fire.

Puritans erupt from the condos up the grey beach. Pull the crucifix away from the blank staring eyes. The priesthood of fire and blood must have its sacrifices. See the reflection of the shop window upon the deed. Hurl a rubble brick through its witness. Sirens sound law and order law'n'order lawn order. Silver bullets, wooden stakes. Leave behind the Puritan prone on the pavement waiting for the resurrection. Disappear into streets and alleys running jumping the barbed wire and the barricades of our fear. Dash down the Mobius Highway going nowhere but taking forever to get there. Everything has always already happened.

The more twisted we are the farther we fly. Fly, fly, fly away home. But Dad, you took away my magnifying glass without a word. I left. I have no home. I am no angel. How far can I fly? Sometimes the rubberband snaps.

I move closer to earth, a chameleon on a mirror of melted sand, beneath a melting mirror sky. Bless me Father for I have sinned. The ice in my eyes will not melt into tears. What color should I turn now? ✦

The Amazing Story

Mike Ashley

In 1991 AMAZING® Stories celebrated its 65th birthday. It has survived seven decades, sometimes as leader of the pack, other times by the skin of its teeth. However you look at it, the magazine's history has lived up to its name. In this seven-part series, noted SF magazine historian Mike Ashley will trace the development of the magazine a decade at a time, chronicling the major stories and authors it has published and looking at its influence on science fiction.

Part 1: The Twenties
By Radio to the Stars

Seventy years ago there were no science-fiction magazines. In fact, there was no such thing as "science fiction"; the name had yet to be coined. There were stories called scientific romances—H. G. Wells had written scores of them. There were also weird stories, off-trail stories, "different" stories, uncanny stories, and among all of these were stories we would now call science fiction—a rose by any other name. But before 1926 the category had yet to be created, and fans who enjoyed these weird-scientific stories had no regular magazine in which to find them.

In the years after World War I the interest in this type of story grew rapidly. For the best in escapist fiction, millions of Americans read the pulp magazines, and the magazines with the most escapist fantasies were published by Frank A. Munsey, in particular *The Argosy* and *The All-Story Magazine*. It was in *The All-Story* that Edgar Rice Burroughs first appeared, in 1912, with his adventures of John Carter in "Under the Moons of Mars." This was followed a few months later by "Tarzan of the Apes." The Munsey magazines became the principal market for scientific romances and fantastic adventures. By the start of the twenties they had a regular stable of writers, including George Allan England, Homer Eon Flint, Murray Leinster, Ray Cummings, Austin Hall, Garret Smith, and A. (Abraham) Merritt. These were the leading writers of the scientific romance in the pulps, one of whom—Leinster—would stay at that core for the next fifty years. The type of story they wrote then was light on science, high on adventure or concept, and high on fantastic imagery. The stories appealed to that desire we all have to escape from this mundane, depressing world and discover a world of wonder. The most popular of them all were Burroughs and Merritt, and each, in his way, set the standard for the scientific adventure fantasies of the twenties.

While this line of scientific adventure was emerging in the pulps, another development was taking place—a revolutionary development. The architect of this revolution was Hugo Gernsback, and it was from his errant hybrid that the early world of science fiction, and the magazine you now hold in your hands, would sprout.

Hugo Gernsback was born in Luxembourg in 1884, the son of a prosperous wine merchant. In his youth he developed a fascination with electrical gadgets, and by his teens he was a fertile inventor. He emigrated to the United States in 1904, after the death of his father, in the hope of making a fortune from his invention of a powerful dry-cell battery. The device proved too expensive to produce but, undaunted, Gernsback constructed a smaller battery, which he sold to the Packard Motor Car Company.

Gernsback's main interest at this time, though, was in radio. He was surprised how difficult it was to obtain the necessary parts to construct wireless telegraphy units in New York, so in 1905 he established a company to import electrical equipment. It was this Electro-Importing Company that was to be the foundation of his publishing empire. In 1906 Gernsback marketed a portable wireless telegraph transmitter and receiver at the seemingly impossible price of $7.50. Skeptics believed he was a

fraud, and a policeman was dispatched to verify Gernsback's claim. Gernsback demonstrated his device, though the policeman remained unconvinced. "I still think yez are fakers," he told Gernsback. "Yer ad here sez it is a wireless set, so what are all dem here wires for?"

It was this incident that spurred Gernsback on to publish a magazine. He later recalled, "It rankled me that there could be such ignorance in regard to science, and I vowed to change the situation if I could. A few years later I brought out the world's first radio magazine, *Modern Electrics,* to teach the young generation science, radio, and what was ahead for them."

It was the "what was ahead for them" aspect with which Gernsback became so closely associated. He loved to speculate about potential inventions and to encourage his readers to experiment. He targeted this encouragement chiefly at the young, who had the more fertile and flexible minds. To further encourage them he turned his speculative thoughts into a story, "Ralph 124C 41+," which was serialized in *Modern Electrics* during 1911-12.

Actually, to call this piece a "story" is rather generous, because Gernsback was only using the narrative form to liven up what was otherwise a catalogue of future inventions. He explored the world of the year 2660 from the viewpoint of one of the world's great scientists. Each month readers were treated to extravagant scientific speculations, and there was even a chase scene in one episode when Ralph's girl, Alice, was kidnapped by Martians, and Ralph pursued them. It was in that episode that Gernsback made one of his most remarkable predictions by describing exactly how radar would work, more than twenty years before it was "discovered" by Robert Watson-Watt.

The difference between Gernsback's adventures of Ralph and the stories appearing in the Munsey magazines was quite fundamental. The Munsey stories were high on entertainment, low on scientific accuracy. They were predominantly fantastic adventures or, at the shorter length, scientific mysteries, with the emphasis on the weird and wonderful. The writers were competent pulpsters able to unravel a strong, compelling story with a fanciful theme.

Gernsback's story was low on entertainment, but deliberately high on scientific accuracy and speculation. He was no storyteller; he was no writer at all. It was not his intention to entertain but to educate and, he hoped, to stimulate his readers to become creative and inventive. It was this motive that led, by stages, to the birth of *Amazing Stories*. And it was this difference that initially separated Gernsback's scientific fiction from the pulp scientific adventures.

In 1913 Gernsback sold *Modern Electrics* and founded a new magazine, *The Electrical Experimenter,* which broadened Gernsback's coverage beyond radio to all aspects of scientific achievement. Gernsback was now vociferously encouraging readers to become inventors and to build their own future. Along that road, Gernsback averred, lay fame and fortune, and he cited Thomas Edison, Nikola Tesla, and Guglielmo Marconi as model examples. Writing in the April 1916 *Electrical Experimenter,* Gernsback said:

A world without imagination is a poor place to live in. No real electrical experimenter, worthy of the name, will ever amount to much if he has no imagination. He must be visionary to a certain extent, he must be able to look into the future and if he wants fame he must anticipate the human wants. It was precisely this quality which made Edison—a master of imagination—famous.

The Electrical Experimenter began to publish fiction regularly by a variety of almost unknown writers—George F. Stratton, Charles M. Adams, Harlan Eveleth—names as remote and lost as the crew of the *Marie Celeste.* Every one of their stories was awful, but as scientific speculation they were enlightening. Because it was wartime, many of the stories speculated on devices to help win the war, such as anti-gravitation to cause havoc among the enemy, or a concentrated electron ray (not unlike a laser beam) to detonate enemy explosives.

In 1920 Gernsback retitled the magazine *Science and Invention,* to emphasize that he had moved beyond the basic role of the experimenter toward the vaster world of science and technology. Gernsback was an evangelist of science determined to educate the American public and even more determined to inspire them into scientific achievement. He, probably more than any of his contemporaries, opened the eyes of the American public to the possibilities of science and the wonders to come. Through the stimulation of his magazines, he could inspire them to build their future world.

The closest anyone came to publishing a magazine of scientific stories before *Amazing Stories* was with *The Thrill Book* and *Weird Tales. The Thrill Book* came from Street & Smith in 1919, and though its original concept had been to publish scientific romances, when it appeared it concentrated on adventure stories, a few with fantastic elements. *Weird Tales,* launched in Chicago in March 1923, was always intended as a horror magazine but did carry some stories of the monster-in-the-laboratory type, and later some space adventures, mostly by Edmond Hamilton.

Gernsback was so taken with the idea of promoting science through fiction that he seriously considered issuing such a magazine in 1923. That year he made the August issue of *Science and Invention* a "Scientific Fiction Number." It contained five complete stories, plus an episode of Ray Cummings's serial "Around the Universe." The stories were, by and large, boring, although there was something special in "The Man From the Atom" by precocious fifteen-year-old G. Peyton Wertenbaker. This story, about a man who escapes from our universe into a macro-universe beyond, is still readable today.

We do not know the reader reaction to the issue since, at that time, the magazine ran no letter column. When it did run a letter column, it was evident that the stories Gernsback published were favorably received, and that may well have been the case here. In any case, a few months later Gernsback gave thought

Covers that demanded a second look

One rule of publishing that hasn't changed in 65 years is this: A magazine cover, first and foremost, must be eye-catching. These three examples of Amazing Stories cover art from the Hugo Gernsback era certainly met that requirement. (On the far right is the cover of the last issue for which Gernsback served as editor.)

July 1926

August 1926

April 1929

to launching a new magazine, to be called *Scientifiction*. He made no reference to this fact in his magazines at the time, but, as he later recalled, he sent a flyer to his subscribers attempting to gauge interest. The response was, apparently, dispiriting, so Gernsback did not pursue the venture. He seemingly had enough to handle at that point anyway, since in June 1925 he launched his own radio station, WRNY, the first such enterprise in New York City.

Had there been a greater positive response to the circular, the history of magazine science fiction might have started two years earlier, and that turn of events may have had a significant impact on its later evolution, which, as we shall later see, became fast-paced. I imagine that the main reason why the response was lukewarm was that Gernsback targeted the wrong market. Those most likely to subscribe to his technical magazines would have been professional scientists, engineers and radio enthusiasts, both experimenters and hobbyists, who may have appreciated the stories in *Science and Invention* as novelty items but would have expressed no great interest in a specialist magazine. It was much more likely to have appealed to the newsstand browser (from which most of the general pulp readers came)—those who could not necessarily afford to subscribe to a magazine, or had no reason to. To the browser, it was much more fun looking at all of the pulps on display and relishing the thrills promised by the covers.

This Gernsback was to discover when, in 1926, he acted on impulse (as he so often did) and launched the world's first science-fiction magazine, *Amazing Stories*. Its premiere issue, dated April 1926, was released on March 10. It was in the same format as *Science and Invention*, having a larger page size (8 by 11 inches) than the usual pulp, which thus set it apart. In addition it had a gaudy, eye-catching cover by Frank R. Paul, an Austrian-born artist and draftsman who had been illustrating the majority of the stories in *Science and Invention* since 1918. The first issue, with a print run of 100,000, sold out. Gernsback was onto a winner.

Fortunately, Gernsback had not filled the magazine with stories that were typical of those in *Science and Invention*. The first issue contained all reprints, with classic selections from H. G. Wells, Jules Verne, and Edgar Allan Poe, a pulp reprint by Austin Hall from *All-Story*, and the two best stories he had previously published, Wertenbaker's "The Man From the Atom" and "The Thing From — Outside" by George Allan England, one of the more popular adventure writers for the pulps.

The success of *Amazing*, however, put Gernsback into a dilemma. The type of "scientifiction" (as he then called it) that readers most enjoyed were stories of scientific adventure that contained less technological speculation than he desired. During the preceding few years in *Science and Invention*, Gernsback had run a series of stories by Clement Fezandié, a New York teacher and businessman, under the general title of "Doctor Hackensaw's Secrets." These stories were really thinly disguised lectures. In each episode, Hackensaw waffled on about his latest invention, regardless of its effects upon the world or humanity. Forty years later, Gernsback still referred to Fezandié as a "titan of science fiction," which suggests the type of story that he most liked. But, when Gernsback asked the readership of *Amazing Stories* if they would like to see a continuation of the Hackensaw series in the new magazine, he got an emphatic NO. The demand was for stories by Edgar Rice Burroughs and A. Merritt —tales from the Munsey school of scientific romance. Although Gernsback claimed he had a number of Fezandié's stories in stock, he only published two in *Amazing*, in the third and fourth issues he put out. It rapidly became evident that his newfound readers were not so interested in scientific expostulation but cared far more for scientific extravaganza.

Striving to find a middle ground,

Gernsback balanced reprints from the pulps and classics by Verne and Wells against a variety of gadget stories that he hoped would educate and inspire. But he was soon being lectured to by his readers and writers. In a letter that Gernsback published in his July 1926 editorial, Wertenbaker, his first significant discovery, warned him that "the danger that may lie before *Amazing Stories* is that of becoming too scientific and not sufficiently literary."

Gernsback found that he had to compromise his principles. If he had to publish fantastic adventures in order to attract readers, then he would do so, provided that he could also inspire them with a selection of gadget stories. His biggest conflict in this regard came with the serialization of Merritt's *The Moon Pool* in 1927. He found himself justifying the inclusion of the story in the magazine by arguing about the advanced science projected by Merritt. Although the story does contain some scientific speculation, it's basically hocus-pocus that was included by Merritt when he wrote a novel-length sequel to his original fantastic short story, published in *All-Story* in 1919. In his heart of hearts, Gernsback knew that the science in this story was of dubious authenticity, and that knowledge played heavily on his conscience.

Another challenge was Frank R. Paul's garish covers. There was no doubt that Paul's exciting drawings attracted a wide readership, predominantly young males, but they also caused the magazine to become associated with sensationalistic trash. Yet when Gernsback experimented with a serious symbolical cover in 1928, that issue suffered a drop in sales of 22 percent.

In fact, by 1928—a year that saw an explosion in new writing talent—Gernsback had more or less accepted that *Amazing Stories* had outgrown his original premise. The kind of gadget story that he obviously liked and had intended to serve as inspiration—such riveting classics as "An Experiment in Gyro-Hats" by Ellis Parker Butler (June 1926), "The Automatic Self-Serving Dining Table" by Henry Hugh Simmons (April 1927), and "The Tide Projectile Transportation Co." by Will H. Gray (September 1927)—had become dead weight. Readers were clamoring for the scientific extravaganzas that had initially been represented by reprints selected by Gernsback's adviser, C. A. Brandt—"A Columbus of Space" by Garrett P. Serviss (August through October 1926), "The Red Dust" by Murray Leinster (January 1927), "The Land That Time Forgot" by Edgar Rice Burroughs (February through April 1927), and, of course, "The Moon Pool" by A. Merritt (May through July 1927), the most popular story published in *Amazing*'s first few years. All of these had first appeared in the Munsey pulps.

". . . at least an appearance of being scientific . . ."

For more than sixty years, readers of science fiction have been criticizing stories for playing fast and loose with scientific plausibility. And for just as much time, editors have been defending every decision to use a particular story . . . because, after all, who can predict what might happen?

As a case in point, this abridged transcript of a letter (from a renowned writer of the era) and response (apparently composed by an unnamed assistant of Hugo Gernsback) from the January 1929 issue of Amazing Stories:

Editor, Amazing Stories:

"Professor H. Ocus Pocus puffed at his cigar and looked at me triumphantly.

"'What color do you want next?' he inquired.

"'Make it green!' I gasped

"'All right. Green. With a cheesy consistency. Look!'

"He pressed the button. Right before my eyes, as I fazed out of his observatory window, the moon rapidly changed color and became a bright green, its surface at the same time taking on a texture faithfully suggestive of cheese. And before my amazed eyes, he moved his levers and pressed his buttons, and changed the moon to bright red and then to pale lavender. He rolled it up the sky, puffed it out like a balloon, and shrivelled it to a bright, sparkling point. . . ."

Does it sound just a little bit off to you?

Well, that is just the way Mr. W. Alexander's stories sound to me. Here comes a new one (The Ananias Gland) in which another wizard transplants organs from one body to another!

Just like that!

No one (including Mr. Alexander) who is not a biologist, can grasp how excruciatingly absurd the trasnsplantation of stomachs and glands and hearts looks in a story. If Amazing Stories were some sort of burlesque refuse-heap, the sport of innocent clowns, that might get by. But the stories in this magazine are supposed to carry an air of plausibility with them; they are supposed to be built on some sort of foundation that has at least an *appearance* of being scientific. Green-cheese phenomena should not appear in it, side-by-side with the intelligent efforts of people who have worked hard to build up some scientific ideas.

The fact of the matter is, the editorial staff of Amazing Stories seems to be thoroughly on its toes in respect to the physical sciences, but, reveals here and there, a distressing hiatus in the biological sciences. Mr. Gernsback would never permit such a raw fizzle as this to get by him in the field of physics, chemistry, or astronomy, but they get by him in the field of biology.

Miles J. Breuer, M. D.

(Mr. Gernsback, who read the above by Dr. Breuer, wishes to state, without being discourteous, that Amazing Stories tries to make it a rule that the science in all of the stories be as plausible as possible. Very often reference books of various kinds are consulted.

On the other hand, authors must be allowed a good deal of poetic license.

Yet, the staff of Amazing Stories is pretty well grounded in the various sciences, and biology is no exception. We must disagree with Dr. Breuer on the transplantation of glands, and we respectfully refer to one of the latest scientific works, "The Conquest of Life," by Dr. Serge Voronoff, who has transplanted hundreds of glands, particularly the interstitial gland from male monkeys into humans, with excellent results.

German investigators have transplanted heads of insects which lived for a long time thereafter.

It is, of course, absurd, at the present time, to think of transplanting stomachs or hearts, but, perhaps, a hundred years from now, it won't be quite so absurd.

Moreover, the writers now establishing themselves were not producing the gadget story in any quantity, but were writing the scientific extravaganza in emulation of the Munsey pulps. The first regular writer to establish himself in *Amazing Stories* was archaeologist A. Hyatt Verrill, who became noted for adventure stories set in lost valleys, typical of the Munsey locales. Then there was Edmond Hamilton, who became a regular after the January 1928 issue. He had been selling super-science sagas to *Weird Tales* for two years, and had cut his teeth on reading the Munsey pulps. Jack Williamson, who is still writing today, first appeared in the December 1928 issue with "The Metal Man," a story blatantly inspired by Merritt's writings. And we should not forget H. P. Lovecraft, the doyen of *Weird Tales,* who sold arguably his best story to *Amazing Stories,* "The Colour Out of Space" (September 1927). Lovecraft had also been a great fan of the Munsey pulps, and though this story was probably more inspired by Algernon Blackwood than by Abraham Merritt, it reflects far more the imagery of the Munsey visionaries than that of Gernsback's electro-philiacs.

Probably the only authors not directly influenced by the Munsey pulps were the doctors David H. Keller and Miles J. Breuer. Yet even these writers, despite their scientific training, turned more to the non-technological sciences.

Keller had a greater social conscience than most other writers, and in "The Revolt of the Pedestrians" (February 1928), "A Biological Experiment" (June 1928), and other stories he projected the human element of scientific advance. He had a sharp mind and an eye for detail, which lent strength to the messages in his stories. Breuer was fascinated by the mathematics of other dimensions and produced a range of fascinating stories exploring the concepts of the fourth and fifth dimensions.

By and large Keller and Breuer were the exceptions, not the rule. They wrote the intelligent novelty items, not the mind-blowing scientific adventures. The selling power of the latter was evident when, in celebration of the first year's success of *Amazing,* Gernsback released an *Amazing Stories Annual.* As the lead novel in this bumper issue—twice as thick as the regular monthly magazine—Gernsback secured a new Martian novel from Edgar Rice Burroughs, "The Master Mind of Mars." Even though the *Annual* was twice the price of the monthly, it sold out within a few weeks. Its success led Gernsback to establish an *Amazing Stories Quarterly* companion magazine featuring all-new material.

The old order of Gernsback's gadget stories was finally blasted out of existence with the August 1928 issue of *Amazing Stories.* This was the most important issue Gernsback was to publish, and is one of the most significant issues of *Amazing.* It contained two profoundly influential stories, E. E. (Doc) Smith's serial "The Skylark of Space" and Philip Francis Nowlan's novella "Armageddon — 2419 A.D."

Smith's work was the literary equivalent of a nuclear attack. Hitherto most of Gernsback's scientifiction had been relatively sedate, confined to Earth-bound experiments or explorations. Some stories had ventured to the Moon and neighboring planets, but only a rare few (those by Ray Cummings and J. Schlossel, plus some of the work of Edmond Hamilton in *Weird Tales*) had gone beyond the boundaries of the solar system. Smith blasted through all this. In his story, superscientist Richard Seaton discovers atomic energy, builds a spaceship, and sets off to explore the Universe, pursued by the villainous, though equally superscientific, Blackie DuQuesne. It was a scientific extravaganza *par excellence,* and the readers went wild. "The Skylark of Space" became the archetypical work of space opera.

Nowlan's novella did for the future what Smith's novel did for outer space. Anthony Rogers, an engineer, is trapped in a mine but is revived five centuries hence. The United States is now dominated by a superscientific Mongolian race, the Han. Rogers joins forces with a guerrilla faction to overthrow the enemy. In this story, and its sequel "The Airlords of Han" (March 1929), Nowlan creates a fascinating range of future weaponry, combining action, adventure, and scientific speculation. Anthony Rogers went on to be converted into the comic-strip hero Buck Rogers, a name synonymous with early science fiction.

This is what the readers wanted—superscience. Gone were the relatively mundane tales of everyday inventions and new uses for radio. The possibilities of science fiction were blown wide open. Readers wanted their imaginations stretched beyond the horizons of tomorrow, and Gernsback could deliver nothing less. His "scientifiction" brainchild had rapidly grown out of all proportion and was threatening to veer out of control. For the moment he was prepared to let it go, though he had no idea of the consequences.

Gernsback's original ideal had been to create a vehicle that would transport his experimenters into tomorrow, or more appropriately inspire his experimenters to create tomorrow. Within three years of its launch, *Amazing Stories* had become the vessel by which science fiction had set a course for the stars. But the science fiction that emerged was not Gernsback's baby. It was the Munseyesque-pulp scientific romance that ruled the day, with its fantastic excesses tempered by Gernsback's furnace of science.

Gernsbackian scientifiction, which had been born in *Modern Electrics* in 1911, had all but died in 1928, but it wasn extinct yet. While it was exerting its influence on the scientific romance to create the superscience epic, it was itself evolving and recovering, and would emerge anew in the 1930s.

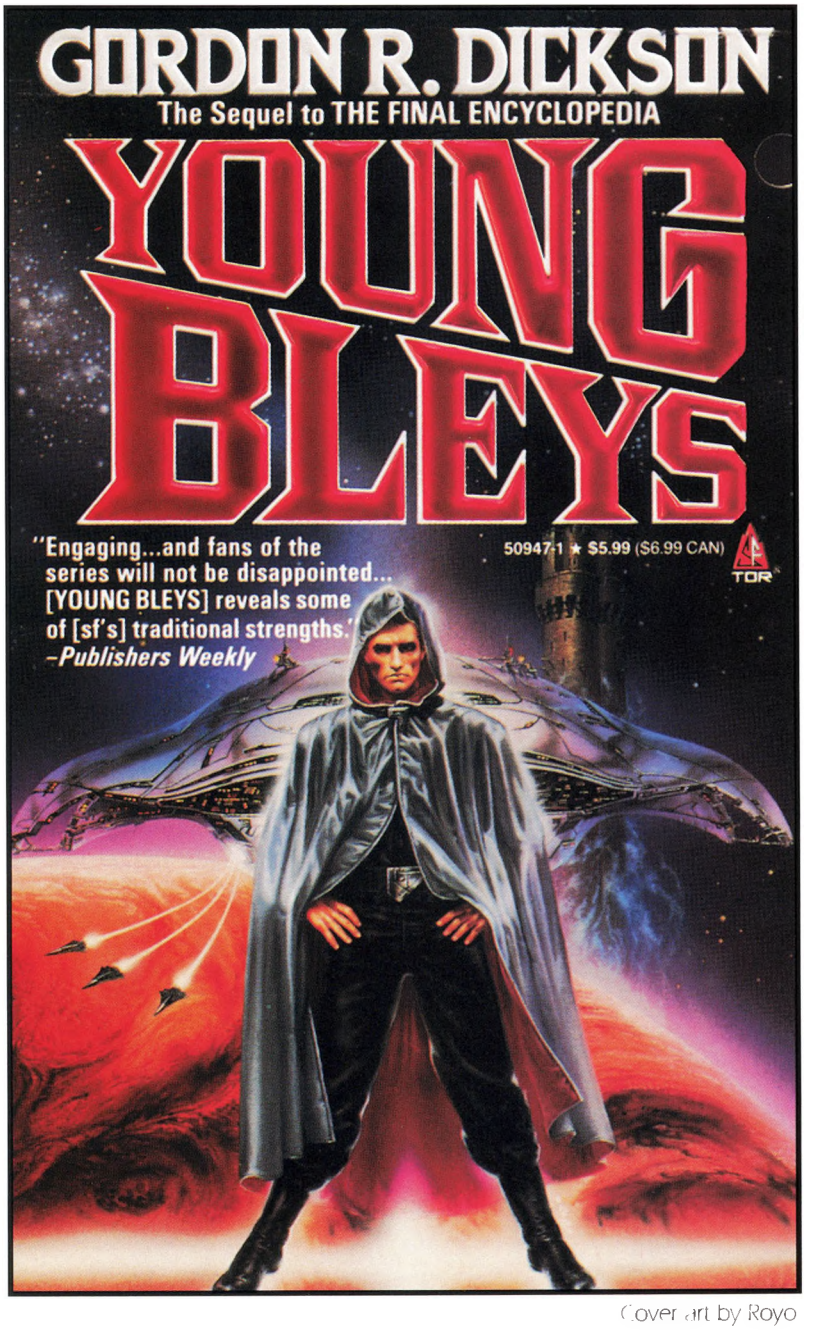
Within a few months of publishing "The Skylark of Space," Gernsback lost control of *Amazing Stories,* as a consequence of financial mismanagement in his many business dealings. (Those interested in the specifics of the incident will find it discussed in great detail in Tom Perry's article "Experiment in Bankruptcy" in the May 1978 issue of this magazine.) The consequences of this event were significant, and that's where we pick up "The Amazing Story" next month. ✦

Looking Forward:

Young Bleys

by Gordon R. Dickson

Coming in February 1992 from Tor Books



Cover art by Royo

Introduction by Bill Fawcett

Few authors can tell a more compelling story than Gordon Dickson. *Young Bleys* is one such tale. This novel is part of Dickson's masterwork, *The Childe Cycle*, which also includes the Dorsai novels and several other of his books.

The book follows the early life of Bleys Ahrens, the son of Hal Mayne (the hero of *The Final Encyclopedia*). Bleys is an "Exotic" with subtle but significant powers that set him apart from and often beyond normal humanity. Raised by an unhappy Exotic mother, Bleys is first sent away and then "rescued" by his half-brother Dahno. But the rescue turns dark when Bleys discovers that his brother heads a group known as the "Friendlies" whose stated goal is to overthrow the Dorsai rule of the human systems. Dahno's real goal seems to be the accumulation of wealth and power for himself, but Bleys has other ideas.

The following excerpt is taken from the opening of the book, in which the eleven-year-old Bleys confronts and then is cast out by his mother.

—

The woman sat on the pink fabric of the softly padded float, combing her hair before the oval mirror and murmuring to herself. Those murmurings were all repetitions of the compliments paid her by her latest lover, who had just left her.

The unbreakable but translucent brown comb slipped smoothly through the shining strands of her auburn hair. It was not in need of combing; but she enjoyed this little private ritual of her own, after the men who kept her in such surroundings as this had gone. Her shoulders were bare and delicate, with smoothly pale flesh; and the equally pale column of her neck was hidden from behind by the

strands which fell clear to the floor. A faint odor, as of musk and perfume mingled, came from her—so light as to make it uncertain whether she had actually touched herself with perfume, or whether it was a natural scent, one that the nostrils of another person could barely catch.

The boy stood behind her and watched, his reflection hidden from the mirror by her own image in the shimmering electronic surface. He was listening to the words she repeated, waiting for a particular phrase to come from her lips.

It would come eventually, he knew, because it was part of the litany she taught all her men, without their really knowing that she had trained them to say these things to her, during and after the time of their love-making.

He was a tall, thin boy, halfway only on his way to adulthood, and his narrow face had almost unnaturally regular features that would grow and firm into a startling handsomeness with maturity, just strong enough to be beyond all delicacy. At the same time they resembled those of the woman gazing into the mirror.

He knew this to be true, although at the moment he could not see her face. He knew it because he had heard many people say it; and had eventually come to recognize what it was to which they referred. It did not matter to him now, except in his rare encounters with other boys his own age, who, glancing at him, assumed he could be easily dominated—and found out differently. On his own, and watching the woman over his limited years, he had learned many ways of defending himself.

—Now. She was coming close to the phrase he waited for. He held his breath a little. He could not help holding it, in spite of his determination not to.

". . . *how beautiful you are,*" the woman was saying now to her image in the screen, "*never was anyone so beautiful . . .*"

It was time to speak.

"But we know different, don't we, Mother?" the boy said, with a clear calmness in his voice that only an adult should have been able to achieve—and only hours of rehearsal had made possible even for him, intelligent beyond his years as he was.

Her voice stopped.

She turned about on the float, which spun unsupported in the air to the movement of her body; and her face stared back into his from hardly a handsbreadth away.

In that moment her green eyes blazed at him. Her knuckles clenched about the comb were bloodless, holding it now like a weapon—as if she would rake its teeth across his throat to open both windpipe and carotid artery. She had not known, she had not thought—and he had planned on that—of the possibility that he might be standing behind her at one of these times.

For a long moment the boy looked at death; and if the expression of his own face did not change, it was not because the great fear of extinction was not on him, at last. It was because he was frozen, as if hypnotized, in no expression at all. He had finally taken this risk, knowing that his words might actually drive her to kill him. Because he had at last reached the point where he knew he could only survive away from her. And in the young the urge to survive is strong, even at the cost of risking death.

A few years from now and he would have known what she would do when he said what he had just said; but he could not wait to know. In a few years it would be too late.

He was eleven years old.

So he waited . . . for her to follow the impulse to kill that blazed in her eyes. For the cruelty of his words—even to her—was the utmost he could use against her. For what he had just said was true. A truth never mentioned.

They knew. They two—mother and son—knew. The woman was not bad looking, except for the heavy, squarish boning of her face. With the almost magical art of makeup she controlled, she could be taken for attractive—perhaps very attractive.

But she was not beautiful. She had never been beautiful and never would be; and it was to give her that word for which her soul hungered that she had used the great weapon of her mind, to teach those men she chose to parrot it to her at the right moments.

It was her lack of beauty, in spite of all else she had, that she could not bear. The fact that all her power of intelligence and will, that could give her everything else, could not give her this, too. And Bleys, at eleven years, had just forced her to face it. The comb, tines outward, rose in her trembling hand.

He watched the points of it approach. He felt the fear. It was a fear he had known he would feel; even as he knew he had no choice, for survival's sake, but to speak.

The comb, shaking, rose like a weapon unconsciously driven. He watched it come, and come, and come . . . until, inches from his throat, it stopped.

The fear did not go. It was only held, like a beast on a chain; though now he knew he would live, at least. In the end, what he had gambled on—her heritage and training as an Exotic, one of a people socially incapable of any violence—was making it impossible for her to do what her torn ego urged her to do. She had left the twin worlds of the Exotics, and all their teachings and beliefs, as far behind as she could; but she could not, even now, go against the training and conditioning they had given her, even before she had been able to walk.

The blood returned to her knuckles. The comb slowly lowered. She laid it carefully down on the table of honey-colored wood below the mirror behind her; setting it down carefully, as if it was fragile and would break at a touch, instead of being tough as steel. She was once more her controlled and certain self.

"Well, Bleys," she said, in perfectly calm tones, "I think the time has come for you and I to go different ways."

* * *

Bleys hung in space, solitary and completely isolated, light-years from the nearest stars, let alone from any

world holding even one of the human race. Cold, apart, and alone, but forever free . . .

Only, his imagination would not hold. Abruptly, he lost it. It was only a private screen in the ship's lounge that he stared into—and it was full of star-points of varying brightness.

He was alone; but back with the cold, scared feeling that had never left him since he boarded, seated in one of the great, green, over-padded swivel chairs in the ship taking him from New Earth, where he had left his mother two days earlier, to the "Friendly" planet of Association, which was to be his home from now on.

One more day and he would be there.

Somehow he had not thought about the future in any detail beyond the moment when he would confront his mother. Somehow he had expected that once he had won free of her, and his legion of ever changing caretakers who kept him encased in an iron routine of study, practice, and all else, things would automatically become better. But now that he was actually in the future there was no evidence that it was going to be so.

His docking place on Association was to be the large spaceport at Ecumeny. This city had one of only twelve such spaceports on that whole world; for it was a poor planet, poor in natural resources, like its brother "Friendly" world of Harmony.

Most of the religious colonists who had settled both worlds made their living from the land, with tools and machines that were made on the planet where they lived. For there were almost no interstellar credits to pay for imported devices; except when a draft of young men would be sold off on a term contract, as mercenaries to one of the other worlds where military disputes were still going on between colonies.

Bleys had been pretending to be absorbed in that destination on his starscreen. Particularly the star of the destination, Epsilon Eridani, around which circled both Association and Harmony. As Kultis and Mara circled the star of Alpha Procyon—the twin Exotic worlds on which Bleys' mother had been born and brought up; and which she had left forever in fury and disgust at her people, the Exotics, who would not give her the privileges and liberties to which she was sure her own specialness entitled her.

Association was only eight phase-shifts from New Earth—as restatements of the ship's position in the universe were ordinarily, but not correctly, called.

If it had been only a matter of making each phase-shift in turn, Bleys was already aware, they would have been at Association in a matter of hours after leaving New Earth. But there was a problem built into phase-shifting. It was that the longer the ordinary space-time distance that was disregarded by an individual restatement, the more uncertain became the point at which the ship would return to ordinary space-time existence after making a shift. That meant recalculation of the ship's position every time a shift was made.

Consequently, to be extra-safe for the paying passengers, this trip was being made in small shifts of position, taking a full three days. He would be met on landing at Association by the man who would take care of him from now on; the older brother of Ezekiel MacLean, one of the earlier men in his mother's life. Also, the only other permanent individual in Bleys' life along with her, for as far back as he could remember.

It was Ezekiel who had been the only bright spot in Bleys' existence. It was Ezekiel who had chosen to accept the blame not only for being the father of Bleys, but of Bleys' older half-brother, Dahno. Dahno, who had, like Bleys, been sent off to Henry MacLean and his farm on Association, some years back. It was like Ezekiel to do so.

In a strange way Ezekiel was both like and unlike Bleys' mother. She had left the Exotic worlds. He, born a Friendly on Association, had left that world as if he fled from it, rather than with the disdain and fury with which she had shaken the dust of her native world of Kultis from her feet. Ezekiel MacLean was the exact opposite of what those on other worlds imagined Friendlies to be. He was gentle, warm, easygoing—and somehow so good at all these things that he had been suffered to continue to hang around Bleys' mother and Bleys himself, through the succession of lovers that Bleys' mother had taken since.

Normally, Bleys' mother drove her former paramours from her, once she had chosen a new one. But Ezekiel seemed willing to take on a position that was half-friend, half-servant. His round, freckled face always cheerful, always obliging, he raised the spirits of Bleys' mother—and they were usually not high spirits. Ezekiel was useful to her, although he had long since been shut out of her bedroom.

An example of this convenience—for Bleys' mother had no idea of who his real father was—had been Ezekiel's contacting Henry on Association, two weeks back, to see if he would take in yet one more supposed bastard child of his wandering and irreligious brother. ✦

Looking Forward:

The Mountain Made of Light

by Edward Meyers

Coming in February 1992 from Roc Books

Introduction by Bill Fawcett

This novel is a brilliant approach to the classic theme of the unveiling of a lost civilization. Jesse O'Keefe, an anthropologist who's carrying around a bundle of nearly overwhelming personal problems, discovers a city in the Peruvian Andes inhabited by the descendants of Incas who fled the European invaders centuries earlier. Another outsider arrives at about the same time, and both men are drawn into an entangled prophecy that foretells the coming of a bearded savior. Soon both men find themselves at cross purposes on a quest for a fabled Mountain Made of Light in an attempt to save this unique strain of Incan people.

The following excerpt, taken from early in the book, describes what first happens to Jesse when he is led by a mysterious old guide to the lost Incan city of Hyoffissorih.

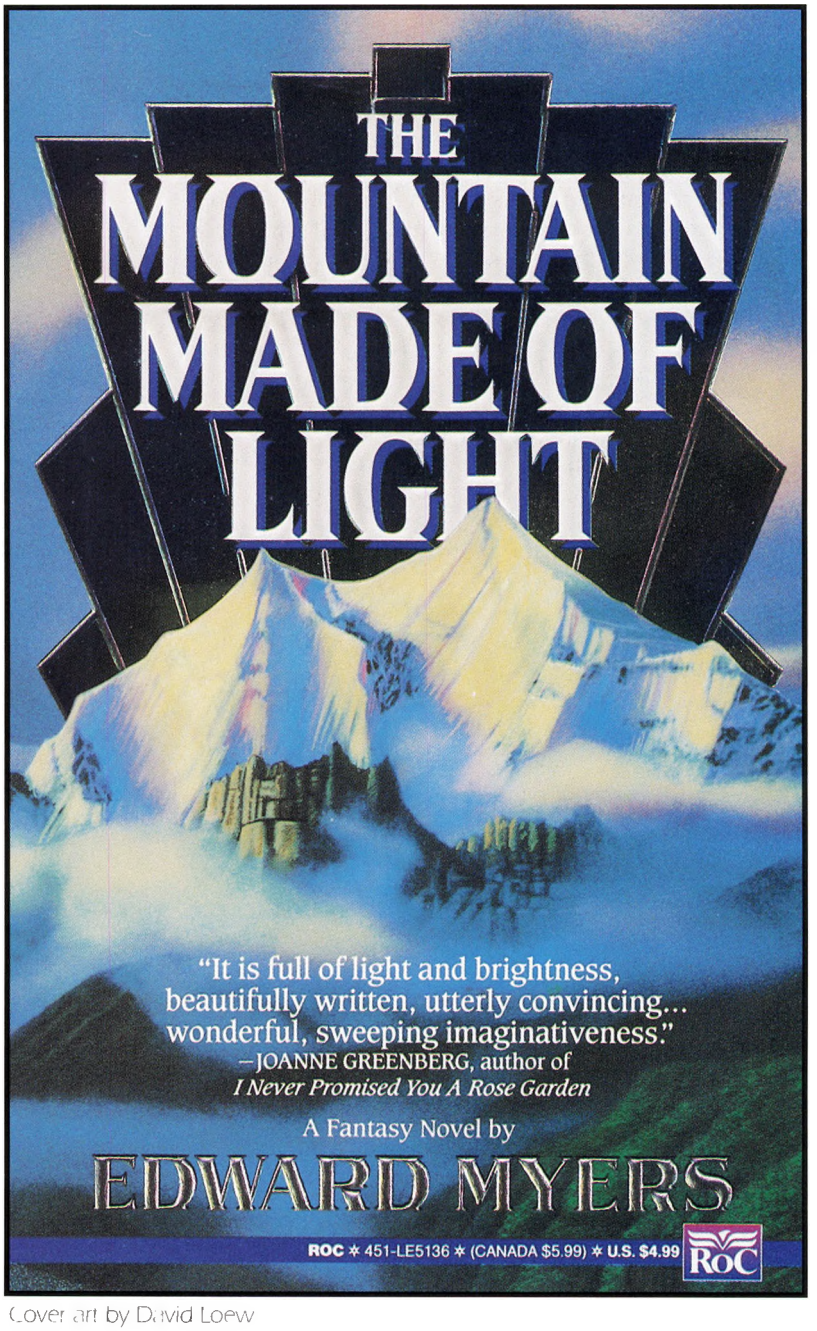
—

At once Norroi set off again. No explanation, no directions, no goodbye. Just the old Tirno on his way again.

I shouted after him.

Despite his sudden departure and quick pace down the path, he stayed well in view. He wouldn't leave me behind—I could see him clearly from my higher vantage. And of course I now knew our destination. After briefly watching the old man diminish against the landscape, I followed him.

The terrain made it easy. This side of the pass declined more gently than the other, sloping instead of plummeting. The trail simply curved against the bowl of the valley. Now and then it shifted, but not abruptly, and always back again after a few dozen paces. Before long I went on without much worry. Norroi was now just a short distance ahead. As we approached, I began to see



Cover art by David Loew

how the city could have been there while seeming not to be.

A hill rose from the mountain's base—an outcropping of stone perhaps two hundred feet high, rioughly conical in shape—and the city rose in turn from this hill. But Hyoffissorih wasn't so much *on* the mountain as part of it. Walls and roofs rose among the boulders forming that hill; these then rose among other roofs and walls, higher and higher, each level fitted unevenly into the previous, until they worked their way up the slope like steps in a massive ruined staircase. Because the same gray-black stone made up both the hill and the city, I could scarcely tell a dwelling from the unhewn rock. Now and then something glinted. A window, perhaps? A mirror? Otherwise nothing made this sight more comprehensible. Even as we reached the city's outskirts, I found I was mistaken time after time about what I saw. A house-shaped block of stone turned out to be just that. A nondescript boulder suddenly revealed slit-like windows and a doorway. Following the Tirno, I glanced about, stopping now and then to make sense of these sights, and rushed forth again to catch up.

Ahead I saw the uneven wall-like base of the city. In the wall was a gateway perhaps twenty feet tall but only a few feet wide. And awaiting us before the gate, people.

Three or four of them lingered in the gateway itself; a scattering of others stood before us on a kind of stone esplanade that our path had become. I saw still others: standing on rooftops, leaning out from windows. I couldn't see them distinctly—just that they were brown-skinned and clothed in colors atypical for this part of Peru. Most obvious even at a distance, though, was their attention to our imminent arrival. People watched us approach. More of them appeared with each step we took toward the city.

"Are you sure I'm welcome here?"

Norroi, a few paces ahead, had already reached the first people waiting for us.

He greeted them in a loud clear voice—not in Spanish or Quechua, but in that other language. The only words I understood were *Rixtirra* and Norroi's own name. And he gave them an odd salute: hands raised, palms down, fingers touching at the tips to form an upward-pointing angle that Norroi offered at eye-level to his observers.

The people saluted him back in the same manner.

Unsure what else to do, I performed this odd obeisance. I felt reassured when these people accepted the greeting and returned it, raising their hands high: each person offering a little peak, a summit.

Now many people crowded around us. Their clothing confused me, the variety of hues and textures, the unfamiliarity of the garments. Robes, ponchos, capes. Intricate embroidery. Decorations in copper, brass, silver, semi-precious stones, bright ribbons. And the hair: long, thick, black hair. Braids like rope. Not just the women's hair—the men's also.

I remember thinking how odd I must have looked in my dirty dungarees and windbreaker. I couldn't shake a sense of my own strangeness. Gazing at these people, at the men and women on all sides, at their ornate clothing, at their obsidian eyes, I felt a moment's temptation to back off and bolt and run up that trail to the pass and over the edge and away.

But a man's voice was calling out.

I couldn't understand what he said; didn't even know where he was. I turned to Norroi.

He said, "Tell them your name."

"My name? Jesse O'Keefe."

The Tirno looked up toward the city walls. He shouted, "Jassee! Kee! Jassikki!"

Well, I thought—that's close enough.

Then the gates swung open with a great sputtering noise, and we entered the city.

Everything thereafter took place so fast that I couldn't get a hold of any one event, let alone many at once. I could no more grasp what happened than grasp a river I'd fallen into. Like that river, the people around me rushed forth; I did, too, caught among them; and together we flowed through the streets of Hyoffissorih.

Bits and pieces, of what I recall from that wild ride:

The sweet musky smell of these people.

The commotion of their footsteps.

Faces in the open windows overlooking the street.

Leaves fluttering down like confetti, and berries, and feathers.

Small boys and girls running with the crowd.

A rhythmic chant I couldn't understand.

We were soon deep within the city. It was cool and dark, for in the mid-morning sun the streets still lay in shadow, but I went ahead, my vision adjusted, and I soon saw my surroundings. The streets weren't so much streets as fissures—the opposite sides were so close that I could have touched right and left simultaneously without much effort. In those tight spots, the procession slowed; everyone went single file. Then abruptly the passage would widen again. People would bunch together and hurry forth.

"What's happening?" I asked Norroi.

He only smiled.

"It is a celebration?"

Another smile.

This human river flowed upstream as well as down: we soon reached a series of stairways and began to climb. The first few steps came at me so fast I nearly stumbled. I saw legs and feet ahead, felt arms and heads brushing against me. Sandaled feet, thick brown calves, cloth of many colors. Brass-bangled arms. Hair plaited with fur. Sometimes the steps were steep enough that I went up on all fours. Soon I was out of breath. But there was no possibility of stopping—only a slower pace for a few moments when the street narrowed, faster again as the steps leveled off, more steps, an abrupt turn, still more steps.

We reached an open place, a kind of common or plaza, with an unobstructed view of the valley on three sides. At first I expected this place to be the market, but I saw no stalls, no merchants, no goods arrayed in piles and rows. It was nothing but a big open square. Anoth-

er difference: it wasn't flat. This place rose from the edges toward the center—gently at first, then more steeply—culminating in a stone object perhaps ten yards tall. A sculpture? Unlikely. But as Norroi and the other people led me toward it, I recognized its shape at once. It was a miniature mountain, a steep pyramidal stone monument.

There was no sense of haste in our approach, no pushing or shoving, no loud noise. I heard laughter and talk, but less than before. These people just made their way toward the high ground before them: children as well as adults, women as well as men, the old and the young alike. Sometimes one cluster within the group held back, making way for another, so that Norroi and I paused a moment before continuing. Sometimes everyone proceeded quickly. But there was no commotion or confusion, just the gradual gathering of people in this place.

We stopped. We had reached the mountain monument.

Norroi stepped up onto a kind of low platform supporting that block of stone. He turned, reached out to me, and said, "Give me your hand."

I reached back. He was disconcertingly strong. I scrambled up to where he stood.

People everywhere: a pool, a pond, a lake of people. All of them looked in my direction.

Norroi had begun to speak. I listened a while, reassured by the old man's voice, by his calm tone, by his gestures: both hands extended, palms out. Surely whatever the Tirno said would be in my best interests. Surely his words would put these people at ease about my coming here.

Then the Tirno finished and someone else began. At first I heard nothing of the words. I was too busy watching the speaker. He was a middle-aged man—fifty years old, perhaps younger—whose loud, clear voice and wide gestures made him seem almost adolescent. The clothing he wore accentuated his youthfulness: heavy, intricately woven robes of black, yellow, white, and red. Hair also: a single black braid wrapped once around his neck like a skinny feather boa. He spoke fast in a high, clear voice, less talking than singing.

Before I could even ask Norroi to explain, the man finished and stepped away.

I was alone on that platform with Norroi. Everyone gazed toward us. The crowd shifted slightly, but I heard no sound from these people. I shivered.

Norroi gestured at the stone.

"Are we done?" I asked.

"No, just beginning."

I glanced up. The monument rose above me at least thirty feet, maybe more. Although it wasn't vertical, it was plenty steep. In shape it was an acute-angled pyramid. It appeared to be granite: sparkly gray-white. The sun behind it made the stone look darker than it was, the surrounding air almost radiant.

I turned to Norroi abruptly. "You're not asking me to *climb* this thing, are you?"

"Only if you will be Rixtir."

"You *do* want me to climb it?"

"If you will be Rixtir."

I stood there a long time, though I don't recall for how long. The climb itself wasn't what bothered me. I've been climbing for years, have climbed rock faces far more difficult than that one. But I've never climbed before an audience of a thousand people, least of all a thousand *alpinistas cholos*. What should I have said? "Sorry, but I'm not really much of a mountain climber. I'm not even much of an anthropologist—I'm just a gringo passing through." Each culture has its own entrance requirements—a month at Ellis Island, a demonstration of hunting prowess, a religious offering, whatever—and this mock mountain apparently provided the test I had to pass. There was no way out. For a moment I caught myself wishing that Forster Beckwith could have faced it, too. No doubt he would have sized up this rock in a few minutes; would have told me how to attack it; would have climbed it first.

Even the thought of Beckwith pushed me ahead. What right did he have to mock me, dismiss me, brush my hunches aside like a climber whisking gravel and debris from the rock face before making his next move? Shades of Professor Taggart! Shades of Julie! I'd waited so long for this opportunity. I'd found a whole new culture and I'd damn well do anything necessary to get down to work and explore it.

Reaching up for a handhold, I found one easily. I let my right foot search for a place to rest. I boosted myself up without difficulty. So far so good: the rock surface was rough enough to let my hands get a firm grip. Soon I stood at the level of my own height. A good feeling—the task would be easier than I'd thought.

I continued, now confident. The granite was a tool, not an obstacle, an instrument I'd play. I felt awake and alert, tingling from the exertion. My effort drove the chill from my body. The smell of the rock—crisp, clean, simple—pleased me. I climbed beyond all danger.

But as I reached the halfway point, as the rock steepened, the effort grew more difficult. I couldn't keep my footing. The cracks and protuberances evaded me; even the ones I found were smaller and less helpful than before. My fingers felt large, clumsy, and slow. I pushed ahead anyway. Each handgrasp and foothold took me higher. Soon I was so far up the rock I could see the pinnacle.

Suddenly my head started spinning. I steaded myself, clung to the granite. I waited. My vision began to waver. I squinted, squeezed my eyes shut, opened them again. The pyramid had narrowed, but I was still an arm's length from either of its converging edges.

For the first time I knew that I was going to fall. I reached out for a handhold, but my fingers couldn't feel a thing—couldn't even feel themselves. I looked for a ridge, a crack, whatever would support my weight. I grappled about, clutching overhead for something, anything. My knees began to tremble. A swell of nausea hit me, almost shook me off the rock.

I grabbed overhead again. Nothing. Fighting the urge to vomit, I looked down to see how far I'd fall. ✦

Extinctions: 101 Ways to Obliterate a Species

Stephen L. Gillett

If you just read the papers, you might think that giant meteorite impacts are the only way of causing mass extinctions, at least till the destructive activities of modern, technological humans got under way. But though impacts are currently a trendy method of triggering extinctions, they're hardly the only way.

Even human-caused extinctions aren't modern. We've all heard about the modern extinctions: the passenger pigeon, the dodo, the Tasmanian wolf. But human-caused extinctions hardly need bulldozers and firearms. Around the end of the Ice Age, about 15,000 years ago, most of the large animals then living in the Americas became extinct: the giant ground sloth, the saber-toothed tiger, the horse, the camel, and many others. A probable cause for this "Pleistocene megafauna extinction" (as it's called) is the arrival in the Americas of the paleo-Indians, who had just crossed from Siberia. These were hunting cultures who, on encountering a continent full of huge animals, slaughtered them. Unlike the Eurasian and African megafauna, the large herbivores would have had no wariness of humans. And they got no chance to learn: The extinction occurred over the course of a few hundred years, while the hunting bands swept down from Alaska to Tierra del Fuego. Then, the large carnivores died out once the herbivores they fed on had vanished.

Similarly, the vanishing of the moas, huge flightless birds, in New Zealand corresponds with the arrival of humans—the Maori, a Polynesian people—at those islands. (So much for low-technology, non-agricultural peoples living in harmony with their environment! Tain't necessarily so.)

To be sure, modern humans seem to be getting better at causing extinctions. For example, plants have been less vulnerable to extinction in the geologic past. This is not surprising, when you think about it, because seeds or roots can stay viable for years even if all the individuals are dead. However, if modern humans (say) manage to eliminate the rain forest, it will probably be the most catastrophic extinction of higher plants, ever.

Still, we need some perspective. "Mother" Nature's catastrophes still exceed anything humankind has managed to do. For all the woolly paeans to "natural" beneficience, Nature doesn't care about species any more than she does about individuals.

For illustration, let's look at some extinctions, including the five biggest extinctions in the last 550 million years or so; that is, ever since the classic fossil record appeared. Geologists call this period of time the Phanerozoic. It corresponds to the appearance of the first critters with hard parts (shells or skeletons), which make good fossils.

Now, there were probably several —at least several!—major extinctions before the Phanerozoic, in the Precambrian. But since the critters living then had no hard parts, they didn't leave much in the way of fossils, and we don't know when or how they died out. For example, the strange soft-bodied fauna that is preserved here and there in rocks barely older than Cambrian may have been wiped out quickly—but on the other hand, it may have survived much longer. The record just became even more sparse, because once efficient scavengers had evolved, soft-bodied fossils got even rarer, because the body of a dead animal was in most cases rapidly eaten.

Even farther back, we know that till the very latest Precambrian—about 700 million years ago or so—there were no multicelled critters at all. All of Earthly life consisted of microbes—and as you would figure, the geologic record of them is sparse indeed. There must have been at least one catastrophic biological turnover, though: about 2.5 billion years ago some cyanobacterium "learned" to extract hydrogen from water while discarding the highly toxic, corrosive by-product: oxygen. Because oxygen is extremely reactive chemically, its appearance in the atmosphere left traces in the geologic record, as it corroded and destroyed minerals. But we have only a vague idea of the biological devastation that must have been wrought by this pollution.

So for hard evidence we have to stick to the Phanerozoic. The largest —by far—extinction in the Phanerozoic was that between the Permian

and Triassic periods, which is also the boundary between the Paleozoic and Mesozoic eras. It happened about 250 million years ago, and was truly catastrophic by any standard. Over 90% of all species died off, including all members of many groups that had been around for hundreds of millions of years—trilobites, for example. Trilobites were an entire superclass of arthropods, distantly related to lobsters and crabs. They were most characteristic of Cambrian rocks, the oldest Phanerozoic period, but some had managed to hang on throughout the Paleozoic—until the end of the Permian.

What caused this terrible extinction? It most probably was ecological collapse due to the coalescence of Pangea, the great supercontinent that contained all the Earth's land area, and that itself broke up again 150 million years or so ago. As plate tectonics shoves continents about, it gathers continents together, and sometimes most of the land becomes agglomerated into a single mass. After all, the Earth is a sphere, so continents can't disperse indefinitely. Now, continents wending their separate ways each support their own diverse ecosystems. When the ecosystems are melded by a continental collision, suddenly lots of critters are competing for the same ecological niches—and many succumb. It gets even worse if *several* independent land masses are merged.

To top it off, at the same time as Pangea was being scraped together, sea level dropped to its lowest Phanerozoic level ever. Shallow seas hosting a huge variety of organisms had previously covered much of the continents. Now those environments shrank drastically as the seas drained away . . . and the competition for the few remaining niches grew even fiercer.

Most living things didn't make it.

A more recent but much smaller example of ecological collapse happened only about 5 million years ago, when the Central American land bridge from North to South America rose. Till this point South America, like Australia, had been an isolated fragment of Gondwanaland, a huge piece of Pangea that also had incorporated Africa, India, and Antarctica. And also like Australia, South America had evolved a whole set of unique marsupial mammals, grazers and carnivores and herbivores.

But with the establishment of the land bridge, South America could be invaded by placental mammals from North America—and it was. Most of the marsupials lost out to this invasion. (Not all, though: the 'possum went the other way and successfully invaded North America!)

The oceans can also change drastically due to the shifting continents. In particular, a "salinity crisis" can arise. Most marine critters are adapted to "normal marine salinity," about 35 parts of salt per thousand. Get much more briny—or much more brackish—than that, and most marine life can't hack it. Only a few specialists, adapted to such unusual conditions, can survive.

Now, generally the salt content of seawater hasn't varied very much over geologic time. The oceans are large, and it's difficult to take enough salt out—or add enough—to make any difference over a big enough area. It happened at least once, though, and pretty recently at that (about 6 million years ago), during the "Messinian salinity crisis" around the end of the Miocene. Ever since the breakup of Pangea, a belt of shallow marine water—what geologists and paleontologists traditionally call the Tethys—had run along the southern margin of Eurasia, extending from Spain to the Himalayas.

Tethys came in for a squeeze, though, as fragments of Gondwanaland—India, Africa, Arabia, and smaller slivers—eventually came shoving up from the south. Slowly those shallow marine environments got throttled off by the encroaching continental pieces, becoming saltier and saltier as free interchange with the open sea was closed off. The environmental deterioration clobbered the Tethyan fauna; today few Tethyan forms survive. The continental collisions also eventually raised the mountain belts along the southern Eurasian margin—the Alps, the Caucasus, the Himalayas, and others.

The formation of those basins with restricted sea circulation may also have extracted a lot of salt from the oceans. If you just wall off a bunch of seawater and evaporate it, you don't get all that much salt. When fully evaporated, for example, a kilometer depth of ordinary seawater renders down to just a few meters of salts. To build up lots of salts, you need a "deep evaporating basin," which has only a small, shallow connection with the open sea. Evaporation then builds up the salinity so that the basin brine eventually precipitates salts, and the water (and salts) can be replenished with influxes of new seawater. Vast thicknesses of salt deposits in the geologic record have been generated this way: the Lou Ann salt under the Gulf Coast of North America; the Zechstein in northern Europe.

The Tethyan basins may have removed enough salt from the oceans to freshen them slightly, just enough to where marine life in the rest of the world was also stressed.

The Mediterranean and Black Sea basins are relics of the Tethyan closure. The Med in particular must have been a deep evaporating basin for a long while, because it contains thick salt deposits below its floor. For a time the Med may even have been evaporated dry (a notion that's now a science-fiction staple, of course).

A salinity crisis may also have contributed to the Permo-Triassic catastrophe. As Pangea melded, evaporating basins would have formed, and lots of salt may have been removed. This would have been yet a third major blow, on top of everything else.

The second biggest Phanerozoic extinction happened in the late Ordovician, about 450 million years ago. It probably also resulted from continental drift, but in a different way: from changes in global climate. As the continents scoot around, they change the circulation of the oceans and atmosphere, and if the polar circulation gets interrupted, the poles can get cold enough to start a glaciation. (During most of Earth's history, there have been no polar caps at all.)

This happened in the late Ordo-

vician. Icecaps grew on what is now North Africa (and is now the Sahara!) as this area moved over the pole. The Earth cooled.

Now, if the whole Earth—not just the poles—cools, the cooling hits the tropics the hardest. The temperate zones can just move toward the equator with cooling; but critters already at the equator have nowhere to go!

The onset of this glaciation also dropped sea level by a hundred meters or so, as water was extracted into icecap. Just as with the later Permo-Triassic extinction, this would have drained away highly productive, shallow seas—with untoward consequences for their inhabitants.

A final effect of a glacial age is cold deep seawater, which is formed by relatively dense icewater sinking at the poles. At best, this cold water clobbers all the deeper fauna. But more: if the cold water rises high enough, it can spill over into those shallow, warm water areas—with catastrophic consequences for the denizens! (This seems to have happened several times during the Cambrian period, at intervals of perhaps 5 million years. Abrupt, nearly complete die-offs of entire trilobite faunas occurred in a very short time. These faunas were slowly replaced by new forms evolving from the survivors—which were then extinguished in their turn. An abrupt invasion of cold water would have exactly this effect.)

The third biggest Phanerozoic extinction happened in the late Devonian period, about 350 million years ago. This is the so-called Frasnian-Fammenian—"F-F," for short—extinction, named after the subdivisions of the Devonian where it occurred. This is the first extinction for which scientists have seriously suggested an impact origin. One of the fingerprints of impact is high concentrations of the metal iridium in the sedimentary deposits right at the extinction level. Iridium is comparatively more common in meteorites than it is in the Earth's crust, so such an "iridium anomaly" may mean the sediment contains meteoritic debris.

An iridium anomaly has been reported at the F-F boundary in some areas, but alas, it probably has nothing to do with impact. The F-F extinction probably results from global cooling, just like the late Ordovician extinction.

Why? The anomaly occurs in layered rocks called stromatolites, which are formed by mats of algae or bacteria growing at the surface. Such microorganisms can also concentrate heavy metals such as iridium, and that's probably what's happened. Other geologic evidence shows that these stromatolites were probably at or near the surface for tens of thousands of years, so there was ample time to concentrate metal. And since we're dealing with such tiny amounts of material—a "high" iridium count is still a matter of mere parts per billion—a little biological concentration would go a long way. (This also shows how you have to be careful with your evidence; planets are complicated!)

The fourth largest Phanerozoic extinction is the one between the Anisian and the Norian. These are two subdivisions of the Late Triassic, about 210 million years ago. A paleontologist friend of mine calls this major extinction the "double whammy," because it came so soon after the Permo-Triassic catastrophe—a mere thirty million years or so later.

This extinction was just possibly caused by impact. The Manicouagan crater in northern Quebec, about 100 km across, is just about the right age.

And next comes the well-known major extinction at the Cretaceous-Tertiary (K-T) boundary, about 60 million years ago, when all the dinosaurs (as well as many other things) died out. As you can see, this is only the fifth largest Phanerozoic extinction. As AMAZING® Stories readers already know, this one's probably impact-related too. In fact, it appears the crater may now have been found. It's almost 200 km across, but is buried under a kilometer of younger limestone in Mexico's Yucatan peninsula.

Still, the impact origin of the K-T extinction is not quite as ironclad as you might think. A significant minority of scientists still think climatic disruption resulting from intense volcanic activity is more likely. A huge sequence of lava flows in India, each covering hundreds of square miles, is about the right age and has been suggested as the culprit.

In any case, the late Cretaceous die-off was already happening even before the final event. The number of species and groups was already declining. What seems to have happened is that some relatively sudden event then clobbered most of the survivors. Other such gradual tail-offs in species diversity had occurred before, but always before a few groups had survived, to become the nuclei of new species diversity later on. At the K-T boundary, that outcome was shut off—perhaps by an unusual, catastrophic event.

Maybe not, though. Major extinctions may happen even with no major "cause" at all. Under the right—or wrong!—cirumstances, a very small tweak might cause a major extinction. This notion comes from the new idea of self-organized "critical states," which is best illustrated with an example.

Pour sand out, grain by grain, onto a saucer. The sand will start to pile up, but the pile will grow sideways only until its edges reach the edge of the saucer, because there sand will start to spill off. Now sand will mound up into a conical pile, but only to a certain point. Sooner or later, any sand you add just slides off, leaving the sand pile looking pretty much the same.

And look at how the sand slides as the new grains are added. Sometimes nothing much happens. Other times the new grain triggers a small avalanche, as a bunch of other sand grains slide. And yet other times, a single falling grain triggers a major avalanche off the side of the sand pile.

And yet the sand pile always looks the same. You can't predict which outcome will occur just by observing it beforehand.

At this point the sand pile has reached "self-organized criticality." It's extremely finely balanced, and extremely sensitive to tiny changes. Further, for each perturbation (a new grain of sand falling), events of all sizes will happen, from nothing

at all to an avalanching of the side. But you can't tell which beforehand. This exquisite sensitivity, of course, is typical of a chaotic system (see my article "Courting Chaos" in the October 1991 issue).

It appears that a natural, complex network of ecosystems may also approach a critical state, at least in most cases. So, many times a little perturbation will have a little effect; but sometimes it has a large effect indeed. It might be, therefore, that a major extinction event occasionally results from very minor causes—perhaps another reason for caution on the part of modern humans.

Earth—and its galactic environment—are dangerous places, and humans aren't to blame for that. While no one advocates—or should advocate—causing extinctions, it's worth keeping some perspective. "Mother" Nature has slaughtered far more species than humanity has, or even than humanity could manage to.

In fact, in decades to come humans could become the protectors of the biosphere. At the least we could disperse species, so they would be less vulnerable to a single catastrophic event. Taking some species into (say) space colonies would even make their survival independent of the Earth's. And for things like impacts, humans could even prevent them, if we located the impacting object soon enough to deflect it. ✦

About the Authors

L. Sprague de Camp will soon celebrate his 55th anniversary as a professional writer of science fiction and fantasy. In all those years, counting *all* the novels, stories, and articles he has produced, Sprague's work has appeared in AMAZING® Stories exactly . . . once.

Yes. Strange but true: "The Round-Eyed Barbarians," this issue's lead story, is a first for both the magazine and the author. And we're pleased to mark this Historically Significant event with a piece of writing that is typically de Campian, which is to say that the story does have its satirical side.

But wait—Sprague has said he's not a satirist. "People sometimes accuse me of writing satire," he once wrote. "This, if not exactly a vile canard, is at least an inaccurate statement, because in the strict sense satire is ridiculing established conditions, conventions, or institutions by exaggeration or burlesque in the hope of changing them. In other words, it has social significance, which is just the thing I studiously avoid in my stories."

Consider that . . . and also consider two other points: He made that assertion in 1948, so maybe it's not applicable any more. And maybe, just maybe, he had his tongue firmly planted in his cheek when he wrote it. Only Sprague knows for sure.

In the second position this month is **J. Robert King**, another newcomer to AMAZING Stories—but one who's at the opposite end of the experience spectrum. Rob has a degree in theology, and that academic training is evident in "Death of a God," his first published story.

Dan Stedronsky made his professional sf debut in the January 1991 issue of this magazine, with a long piece of verse entitled "In Legend Lands." Now, a year later, he's back with "Insomniac." Both of his stories for us were written in English and submitted on white paper . . . but that's where their similarity ends.

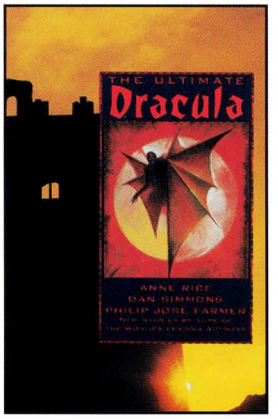
Not many writers have been published twice in the nine issues of the new-format version of the magazine, and **Lawrence Watt-Evans** is one of very few contributors who have appeared more than twice. "Natural Selection" was preceded by "The Drifter" (October 1991) and "The Ghost Taker" (May 1991), and we hope it will be followed by many more examples of his creativity.

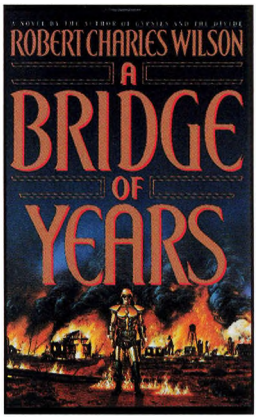
In an extremely varied writing career, **J. A. Pollard** has seen her work published in cookbooks, children's magazines, small-press magazines, and paperback anthologies—and in the summer of 1991 a collection of her poetry was published in the Soviet Union. But until "The Flag Burners," her contribution to this issue, she had never appeared in a professional sf/fantasy magazine.

When **Howard Hendrix** submitted "Chameleon on a Mirror," he expressed the hope that we would find it "interesting and stylistically innovative." Well, that's exactly what we did, and that's why you'll find it inside this issue. Since his debut in 1986, in *Writers of the Future Vol. II*, Howard has been published in a variety of magazines and anthologies. His first story for us was "Almost Like Air" (September 1991).

Short stories from **Pamela Sargent** have been few and far between in the last several years, which makes it that much more of a privilege for us to publish "The Sleeping Serpent." She was in this magazine not so very long ago ("Behind the Eyes of Dreamers," November 1990), but "Serpent" is only her third appearance in AMAZING Stories during a career spanning more than two decades. Pamela's latest book is the upcoming *Ruler of the Sky*, a historical novel about Genghis Khan—and a piece of work with an obvious, if indirect, connection to the story that anchors this issue. ✦

Book Reviews





Futurespeak: A Fan's Guide to the Language of Science Fiction
by Roberta Rogow
Paragon House, September 1991
409 pages, $24.95 (hardcover)

There should always be room on the bookshelf for another good SF reference volume, and a comprehensive dictionary of the related languages of science fiction and its fans is long overdue. And Roberta Rogow's credentials for tackling the job are impressive; she's a professional librarian as well as a prominent figure in SF fandom. But her high marks for effort are offset by startlingly sloppy execution, and *Futurespeak* must be regarded with caution as far as its reference value is concerned.

The problem is simple: too much of Rogow's information is either incomplete or downright inaccurate, and the errors are widely scattered rather than confined to single subjects. I'm no expert in fannish arcana, but a quick run-through uncovered the following:

—There are six novels in Frank Herbert's classic *Dune* series, not the five Rogow cites;

—The Batman entry emphasizes the TV series at the expense of the comic book character, and cites the term "Dark Knight" without mentioning the specific version of Batman to which it refers;

—The definition of Furry Fandom ("A group of fans who enjoy watching cartoons featuring cute, anthropomorphic animals") virtually ignores that subculture's significant erotic elements;

—The definition of trade paperback incorrectly includes only large-format books, and doesn't touch on the real difference between trade and mass-market paperbacks from a bookseller's perspective;

—The invention of the "Dungeons and Dragons™" (sic) game is credited solely to Gary Gygax with no mention of co-creator Dave Arneson, and the game's correct, trademarked name is misstated throughout the book;

—The definitions of prozine and semiprozine are inconsistently applied (*Aboriginal SF* is listed as a semiprozine in the text and a prozine in an appendix, TSR's DRAGON® Magazine is incorrectly described as a semiprozine, and AMAZING® Stories is not mentioned at all).

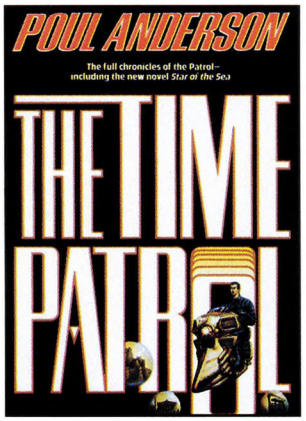
There are other omissions and errors, including two misspelled names in the author's acknowledgments(!), but the preceding examples highlight the volume's fundamental weakness: it's a reference without a well-defined audience. The dictionary format is information-dense, but intimidating and lacking in context for those with no background in SF, while readers familiar with at least one specialized fandom already know more than the definitions will tell them. Meanwhile, the novice fans most likely to acquire and devour the book are the readers most susceptible to Rogow's mistakes.

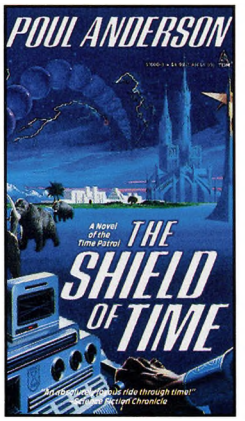
In fairness, *Futurespeak* does pack a great deal of obscure information into a moderately accessible package, and the majority of the data is fairly reliable. But while pretentious prose and occasional typos don't always prevent a novel from entertaining the reader, errors in a reference work make navigating the book as risky as crossing a minefield. Rogow deserves credit for a good idea, but students of fandom should use this volume with considerable caution. — *J. Bunnell*

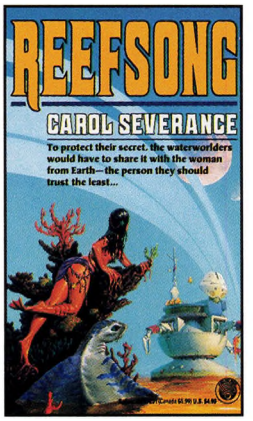
The Ultimate Dracula
edited by Byron Preiss
Dell Books, October 1991
358 pages, $10.00 (trade paperback)

The Ultimate Dracula is a self-defeating title. There will always be another vampire story to be told, and what was ultimate yesterday may be trivial tomorrow. But truth in advertising aside, the new tales of Dracula and his kin in this Byron Preiss anthology are a respectable gathering presented by an equally respectable cadre of contributors.

It's no particular surprise that one of the two most striking stories in the book comes from Kristine Kathryn Rusch, whose "Children of the Night" is a thoughtful yet properly horrifying exploration of the shattered lives left in the wake of a vampire's death. Rusch gives her tale a relentless immediacy that's unique in the collection, and well suited to its position as the book's final story. The second standout is a bit more







unusual; "Much at Stake" is a relatively quiet vignette in which cinematic vampire Bela Lugosi crosses psychic paths with the historical Transylvanian whose deeds inspired the Dracula legend. Kevin J. Anderson gives his character sketch a remarkably intimate, slightly ghostly air and provides a wealth of authentic-sounding atmosphere.

Other distinctive entries include a neatly crafted World War II vampire account from prolific mystery writer Edward D. Hoch, a stylish Hollywood whodunit from Dick Lochte, and Lawrence Watt-Evans's darkly imagined evocation of Dracula's possible beginnings. There's also a thread of black comedy running through the book, with Heather Graham's "The Vampire in His Closet" the most skillfully executed example and Ron Dee's "A Matter of Style" perhaps the most daring.

Curiously, the anthology's least successful tales come from some of its best-known contributors. Best-seller Anne Rice's "The Master of Rampling Gate" is wispily perfect when it comes to recreating the style of classic Gothic romance, but frustratingly vague on matters of plot, and award-winner Dan Simmons's "All Dracula's Children" takes its horrors from ancient and modern Romania alike, but sways a bit too far into polemic at the expense of its premise.

The nominal excuse for *The Ultimate Dracula* is that its publication celebrates the sixtieth anniversary of the 1931 movie that made the Count a full-fledged legend. To that end, Preiss includes a brief introduction and filmography from Leonard Wolf. But Wolf's comments, while cogent emough, are hardly fresh, the framing material is mostly irrelevant to the fiction, and horror-film buffs will find better reading elsewhere. Fans of the literary vampire, however, should flock to this anthology like bats to a belfry. — *J. Bunnell*

A Bridge of Years
by Robert Charles Wilson
Doubleday/Foundation, Sept. 1991
333 pages, $12.00 (trade paperback)

Something about the Pacific Northwest seems to attract thoughtful SF writers. Ursula Le Guin and Kate Wilhelm provide two obvious examples, and elements of *A Bridge of Years* remind me, at least, of both writers. As Wilhelm and Le Guin have done before him, Robert Charles Wilson anchors his narrative in the Northwest—and then makes a literary and science-fictional leap that gives his novel the sort of texture usually reserved for books that aspire to being Literature with a capital L.

We begin at an isolated house in semirural western Washington, where Tom Winter plans a slow, solitary withdrawal from a world that has consistently offered him happiness and dealt out tragedy. But the house is more than it seems; unseen servants take care of the dishes, and there's something peculiar about one of the basement walls. Before long, Tom learns that the house is at one end of a "time corridor" that connects with New York in the early 60s. That looks like an even more complete escape, and Tom takes it —only to find unexpected romance, followed by crisis when a cybersoldier fleeing a more distant future decides that Tom is a threat to his own safety.

An action-adventure plot? Possibly, in other hands. But Wilson relies on his characters to propel his story, and they do so with consistent, personable intensity. Tom in particular is on friendly terms with his own weaknesses, and warrior Billy Gargullo turns out to be a good deal more than a plastic adversary. But though the book clearly isn't a traditional thriller, it moves briskly and with purpose. Tom, Billy, and the rest of the cast don't weigh themselves down with ponderous dialogue, they pursue their goals through action and interaction.

At the same time, *A Bridge of Years* isn't especially complex. The story is multifaceted rather than multileveled, examining its chosen theme from several separate perspectives instead of focusing on different aspects of the theme through a single lens. It isn't that the novel lacks depth, only that Wilson's approach, while effectively understated, is hardly subtle.

The straightforwardness probably makes the book too readable for literary-establishment types to find it

intellectually challenging. But SF readers who enjoy cheerfully crafted angst ought to find this an eminently successful novel, and Robert Charles Wilson a welcome addition to the Pacific Northwest's growing cadre of first-class writers. — *J. Bunnell*

The Time Patrol
by Poul Anderson
Tor Books, November 1991
464 pages, $21.95 (hardcover)

The Shield of Time
by Poul Anderson
Tor Books, July 1991
436 pages, $4.99 (paperback)

Time travel is one of the classic themes in SF. One of the reasons for the continuing interest is the inherent paradox—if you can travel back into time, why can't you go back and change it? Or can you? What are the implications of going back and killing your grandfather?

Ray Bradbury posited that killing a butterfly in prehistoric times was enough to allow Hitler to win WWII. Robert Heinlein's "By His Bootstraps" gave us a universe in which you couldn't change the past, but were instead forced to act the way you did act—with the resulting implications about the lack of free will.

Now Tor Books has collected all of the works of Poul Anderson's Time Patrol, a organization of time-traveling police whose job it is to make sure that nothing changes the past radically enough so that the future that belongs to the Time Patrol never happens.

Anderson takes a middle ground between Bradbury and Heinlein. In his view, time is elastic and tends to correct itself when affected in minor ways. It is only at crisis points—places where a person or event has significant repercussions on the future—that time can be pushed from its course and the reality of the future altered. When that happens, the future as we know it ceases to have ever existed and is replaced with some alternative future. It can be corrected only by returning to the point of change and keeping the change from happening.

In *The Time Patrol,* Anderson has collected all of his previous short stories in the series, plus he has added a new novel-length work titled "Star of the Sea," as well as a novella-length work, "The Year of the Ransom," originally published in book form as a young-adult title. Much of the book (if not all) is likely to be new to the reader. The focus is Agent Manse Everard, Unattached. An Unattached agent has no base milieu, but wanders throughout time fixing whatever problems pop up. For Everard, these problems range from tracking down a missing agent in "Brave to be a King," to putting the future together again after a chance occurrence at a crisis nexus in "Star of the Sea," to protecting the future from a radical group called the Exaltationists, as well as a 16th century Conquistador who discovers how to run the time-traveling cycles for God and the Queen, in "The Year of the Ransom."

Other stories in the collection focus less on Everard and more on others—"The Sorrow of Odin the Goth" looks at the problems of a field agent in the past who gets too involved in his subjects. "Gibraltar Falls" concerns the period when the land bridge protecting the Mediterranean from the ocean has broken and the sea is beginning to fill.

The other book, *The Shield of Time,* takes up where "The Year of the Ransom" leaves off, as Everard and his companions make a final attempt to protect the future and destroy the last of the Exaltationists before they succeed in corrupting the future permanently. They then have to deal with another aberration in the 1700s that has caused the future, and a large part of the Time Patrol, to have never existed.

The strength of these books is the background. Anderson has a strong sense of history and has done an amazing amount of research into these stories, bringing to life a wide variety of times and societies from the first settlers across the land-bridge into America to post-*Homo sapiens* humanity. Every era he visits he brings to life with an amount of detail work and trivia that makes it feel like a story in contemporary-time America. You feel like you're there. This storytelling method takes an amazing amount of time, energy and research, and the idea is to make the research invisible; Anderson excels in making good historical fiction look easy.

These books are also exceptionally well written and compelling. I spent over a week engrossed in the almost 900 pages—reading during lunch, staying up late, picking up one of the books any time I had a spare moment. They drew me in and refused to let me go until they were done with me, and that's an unusual achievement that's a result of exceptional writing, an interesting plot, good characters and an ability to create a feeling of suspense.

The two Time Patrol books showcase the talent of a top writer working with interesting material with a commitment to do the best job he can. The term "classic" tends to be bandied about far too easily, but the material collected in *The Time Patrol* has shown itself to deserve that label over time, and the new material, both in that work and in *The Shield of Time,* make this series a stronger, more impressive piece of fiction. — *C. Von Rospach*

Reefsong
by Carol Severance
Del Rey Books, September 1991
311 pages, $4.99 (paperback)

In preparing for this column, books that are sent to me by the publishers get sorted into three piles: the donation pile (anything I know I don't want to read), the 'A' pile (anything I know I want to read), and the 'B' pile, which is everything else. Books in the 'B' pile get started, but I find that the vast majority of them end up on the donation pile within the first 50 pages—not necessarily because they're bad (there really is very little *bad* fiction being published in the field today) but because it isn't better than all of the other average, forgettable stuff I get. My reading time is limited, as is yours—so why waste it on something average? I bring this up be-

cause *Reefsong* is the first book from my 'B' pile to make it into this column, which means that it wasn't just good enough for me to finish it, but it was good enough to make me kick one of my original choices out just so I could write about it and tell you to go out and buy it.

It's also the reason why I plow through the 'B' list in the first place; once in a while a really good book gets stuck in the midlist, and unless you work at finding those books, you'll end up missing something special—such as *Reefsong*.

Using Hawaiian and Polynesian societies, Severance tells the story of Angie Dinsman, a troubleshooter for the U.N. who is manipulated by a mean, nasty megacorp into trying to resolve a problem on the water planet of Lesaat. What the World Life Corporation really wants is legal license to rape and pillage the planet, like it has so many others. Dinsman has other ideas, but her problem is to keep the situation from blowing up until she can find what she needs to prove that World Life has violated its charter and break Lesaat free from the corporation forever. World Life has other ideas, of course, and if people have to die and laws have to be broken to get what they need to add to their profits, well, that's life. (My only complaint about the book is that the corporation, and the people who work for it, are a bit too stereotypical, such as the evil, nasty, single-minded megacorp robot-droids. Things just aren't this one-dimensional in real life.)

At the same time, Severance is showing how an interesting and unusual society reacts to outside pressure, and has built a complex ecology and universe to house them in. Her writing is solid, the plot is well thought out with some interesting twists and it moves along at a nice pace, never running out of control or bogging down. At the end, the reader will be happy with the results and will have been told a complete, stand-alone-without-a-sequel story.

This is the reason why I have a 'B' list at all—once in a while, a gem like this comes packaged in costume-jewelry wrapping, and it's worth the time and energy to track these down and pass them along to you. — *C. Von Rospach*

Barrayar
by Lois McMaster Bujold
Baen Books, October 1991
389 pages, $4.99 (paperback)

Barrayar is the latest book in Bujold's series about Miles Vorkosigan, son of the Regent of the planet Barrayar. In this book, Miles is far off on the sidelines as we travel back into the earlier era of Barrayar, at the time when the Emperor dies, Miles's father is declared Regent and his mother, Cordelia, gets pregnant.

Bujold runs some risks in writing about this. Since other books (*The Vor Game, Brothers in Arms*) have already been published about the future of this milieu, we know that everything's going to turn out okay. Well, *almost* okay, since this is the time period in which the assassination attempt causes the physical deformations that create the character we've learned to love in the previous books.

While knowing the ending might ruin some books, it doesn't here. Bujold is writing a modern flavor of space opera, with an exhausting roller-coaster ride through scene after scene of nonstop action. I found that even though I knew that everyone was going to be okay, it didn't matter. Bujold built enough tension into the book that you don't care that you already know the ending.

After Aral Vorkosigan takes up the Regency, there are two assassination attempts. The second one, using a very nasty poison gas, almost succeeds in killing both the Regent and his wife. They're revived in time, but the antidote to the poison is horribly mutagenic—guaranteed birth defects. An abortion is recommended, but Cordelia refuses, and the fetus is instead placed in an artificial womb where it can be properly treated and perhaps cured.

A time later there is a coup attempt that tries to overthrow Gregor (the Emperor-to-be) and Vorkosigan, and the capital city is overrun for a time. Vorkosigan and Cordelia are put in the position of having to protect the Regent, destroy the coup attempt, restore order and get control of the capital city back before the space fleet decides to back the insurgents—and before the artificial womb that contains the Regent's son is found and destroyed, or before the nutrient system fails and the fetus starves from neglect.

I recommend *Barrayar* as highly as I do the rest of the Vorkosigan books. One nice thing about these books is that while they're a related series, they all stand alone and can be read in any order. Bujold is one of those authors whom I feel as though I can recommend without actually having read the book (although I'd never really do that), since she is consistently good and always entertaining. Her books are always near the top of my reading list. — *C. Von Rospach*

Our Lady of the Harbour
by Charles de Lint
Axolotl Press/Pulphouse Publishing
88 pages, $10.00 (trade paperback);
$35.00 (300-copy hardback);
$65.00 (75-copy leatherbound)

Mermaids. Either you love them or you hate them.

In de Lint's case, he blends his obvious love for mermaids (in particular the fairy tale "The Little Mermaid") with his interest in folk music to create a lovely little contemporary retelling of that story.

In this case our human protagonist is Matt Casey, a talented folk musician who has trouble interacting with others. He is not introverted—far from it, he's a popular and successful regional performer, and dynamite on stage—it's just that he has trouble interacting with others when it comes to anything except music. He remains cool, aloof: a dispassionate observer of the human experience, rather than a part of it.

One day Matt stays alone at a local (Canadian) lake, playing music just for himself. A mermaid overhears him and is smitten. She trades her voice for legs . . . and can remain a human if she can get Matt to

speak of his heartfelt love for her within a week. If she doesn't, she will die.

Of course Matt's problem interacting with people gets in the way, so you can see the trouble coming. However, Matt seems to open up to the mermaid-in-woman-form . . . but he's slow about it. . . .

Our Lady of the Harbour is a good story, solidly told, with enough sex to make it suitable for adults rather than children. (No Disney adaptation, this!) De Lint makes good use of his interest in Irish folk music (which he draws on often in his other works, too). All told, another minor masterpiece from one of the most talented contemporary fantasists currently practicing.

Since this is a specialty press item, you will have to look at a science fiction convention or specialty store to find it. Or you can order directly from the publisher: Pulphouse Publishing, Inc., P.O. Box 1227, Eugene OR 97440. All copies are signed by de Lint, by the way, so you get an added bonus. — *J. Betancourt*

Flying in Place
by Susan Palwick
Tor Books, May 1992
192 pages, $16.95 (hardcover)

Who is Susan Palwick, and where did she come from, and how did she come to write one of the best fantasy novels of the year?

I've been reading Palwick's (very infrequent) short stories with great interest for six or seven years now. To a one they are powerful tales, deep in characterization and carrying a heavy emotional impact. They also have a tendency to skirt the fringes of the fantastic: sometimes you have to look very hard to see why a Palwick story belongs in a genre magazine. (I suspect her work is so good that few editors can turn it down, even if the fantasy element is slim at times.)

Her first novel, *Flying in Place*, more than met my highest expectations. (As a side note, I'm not the only one who has been impressed: *Flying* was originally scheduled to be half of a Tor Double. Wisely, its editor decided this book was so special, he pulled it from the Double program and prepared to launch it as a major hardcover. Yes, it really is that good.)

The book's subject matter couldn't be more timely, either. As I write this review, it's three days since the Congressional interrogations of Hill and Thomas. Unless you've been living under a rock, you know those hearings involved allegations of sexual harassment. This book involves sexual harassment of a different sort—sexual molestation of a daughter by her father.

In this case, it's in a largely dysfunctional family. The mother is still mourning the death of her first daughter, a brilliant young gymnast. Second daughter Emma—overweight, ungraceful Emma, born a few months after the first daughter's death—is constantly being compared to an idealized version of her more talented and successful sister.

Of course, Emma can never live up to the comparison.

Emma's father is a Jekyll/Hyde almost literally: successful surgeon by day, child molester in the early morning hours, complaining to Emma that her mother is no longer able to satisfy him since Ginny's death. And, he says, if Emma tells anyone what's going on, it will kill her mother. Considering her mother's mental condition, this threat has some weight.

The signs of molestation are all there for anyone who isn't blind to them. The school nurse tries to help Emma, but is frustrated at every turn. It's a pathetic, hopeless situation in many ways. The reader feels a slow, building rage at the situation, at the unfairness of it all, at Emma's inability to get help or be helped.

Slowly Emma begins to withdraw from reality. She meets the ghost of her dead sister, Ginny, who has come back to help her. To Emma's surprise, Ginny isn't the perfect little angel. They have a lot in common and become friends, after a fashion.

That the ghost is real, and essential to the story, makes this book fantasy. The narrative has the feel of mainstream at its best, though: characters undeniably real; situations we have all heard of, or perhaps even have experienced; a voice that speaks plainly with the ringing clarity of Truth. This is what Literature-with-a-capital-L should be.

Search this one out. It will win awards if there's any justice. — *J. Betancourt*

[*SPECIAL NOTE*: Since this review was written, Tor Books has changed its marketing plan for *Flying in Place*. The book will now be published as mainstream.

It's a shame. The genre is poorer for it. — *JGB*]

Song of Kali
by Dan Simmons
Tor Books, October 1991
311 pages, $4.99 (paperback)

Lastly, one of the more memorable suspense novels (I hesitate to call it horror) of recent years: Dan Simmons's first novel, newly reprinted by Tor Books.

Song of Kali has a simple enough premise: Robert Luczak, an American journalist working in Calcutta, loses his daughter. She's been kidnapped by the underground cult of the goddess Kali (one of the more terrifying religions to come out of India: the British tried to destroy it during their colonial rule, and pretty much succeeded. One of the ways to worship Kali is to strangle a random victim and hide the body).

The story concern's Luczak's search for his daughter through the underworld of Calcutta, surely one of the most hellish places on Earth. As the story darkens, so does the writing. Finally, in nearly a hallucinogenic nightmare in prose, Luczak confronts an incarnation of the goddess Kali with his daughter at stake.

It's a powerful story, and won the World Fantasy Award the year it was published (something rare for a first novel). If you're looking for intense, dark suspense without the splattered blood and gore so common in horror these days, this is a good one to pick up. — *J. Betancourt* ✦

The Sleeping Serpent

Pamela Sargent

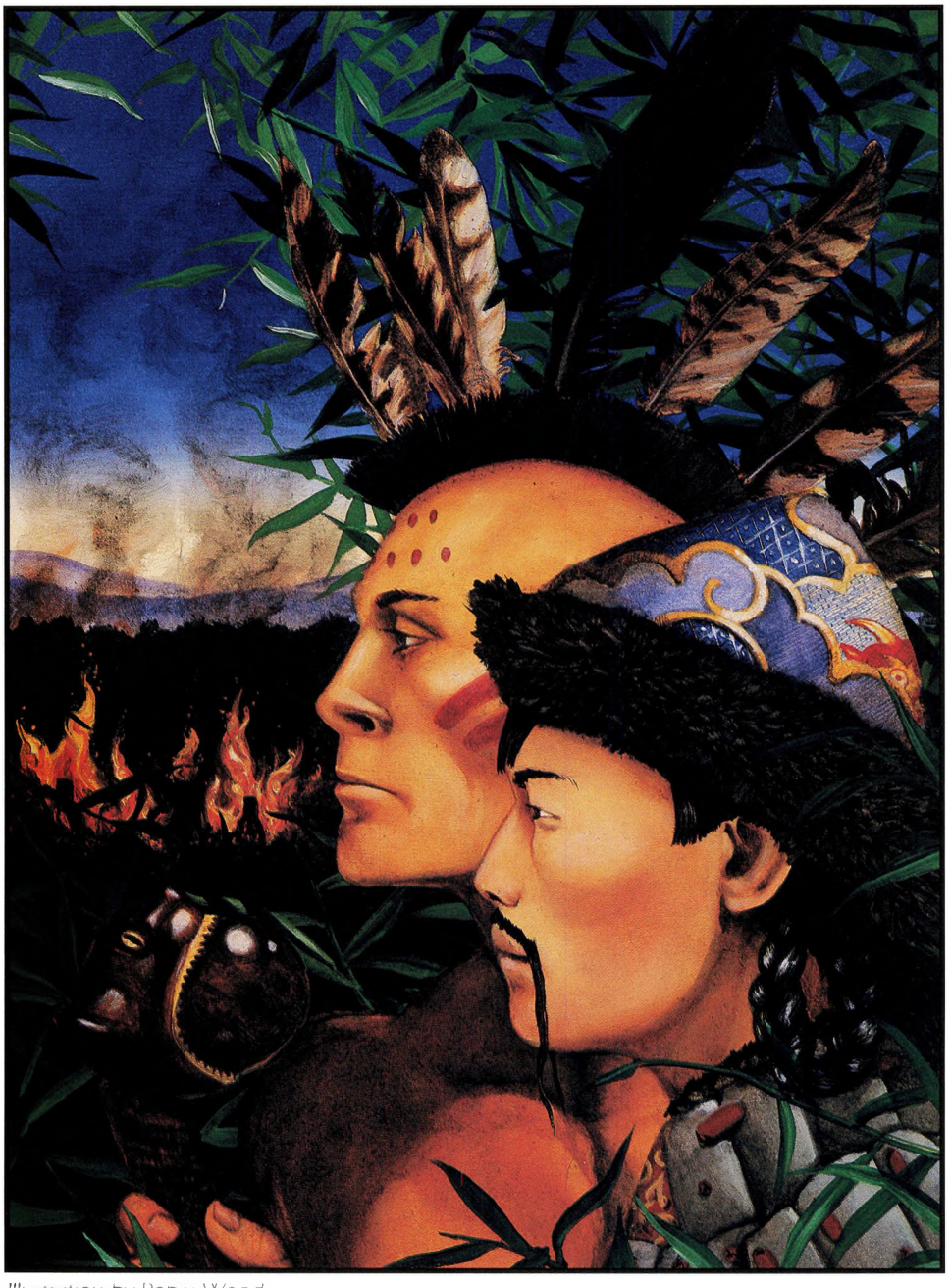


Illustration by Robin Wood

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Yesuntai Noyan arrived in Yeke Geren in early winter, stumbling from his ship with the unsteady gait and the pallor of a man who had recently crossed the ocean. Because Yesuntai was a son of our Khan, our commander Michel Bahadur welcomed the young prince with speeches and feasts. Words of gratitude for our hospitality fell from Yesuntai's lips during these ceremonies, but his restless gaze betrayed his impatience. His mother, I had heard, was Frankish, and he had a Frank's height, but his sharp-boned face, dark slits of eyes, and sturdy frame were a Mongol's.

At the last of the feasts, Michel Bahadur seated me next to the Khan's son, an honor I had not expected. The com-

mander, I supposed, had told Yesuntai a little about me, and would expect me to divert the young man with tales of my earlier life in the northern woods. As the men around us sang and shouted to servants for more wine, Yesuntai leaned toward me.

"I hear," he murmured, "that I can learn much from you, Jirandai Bahadur. Michel tells me that no man knows this land better than you."

"I am flattered by such praise." I made the sign of the cross over my wine, as I had grown used to doing in Yeke Geren. Yesuntai dipped his fingers into his cup, then sprinkled a blessing to the spirits. Apparently he followed our old faith, and not the cross; I found myself thinking a little more highly of him.

"I am also told," Yesuntai went on, "that you can tell many tales of a northern people called the Hiroquois."

"That is only the name our Franks use for all the nations of the Long House." I gulped down more wine. "Once, I saw my knowledge of that people as something that might guide us in our dealings with them. Now it is only fodder on which men seeking a night's entertainment feed."

The Noyan lifted his brows. "I will not ask you to share your stories with me here."

I nodded, relieved. "Perhaps we might hunt together sometime, Noyan. Two peregrines I have trained need testing, and you might enjoy a day with them."

He smiled. "Tomorrow," he said, "and preferably by ourselves, Bahadur. There is much I wish to ask you."

Yesuntai was soon speaking more freely with the other men, and even joined them in their songs. Michel would be pleased that I had lifted the Noyan's spirits, but by then I cared little for what that Bahadur thought. I drank and thought of other feasts shared inside long houses with my brothers in the northern forests.

Yesuntai came to my dwelling before dawn. I had expected an entourage, despite his words about hunting by ourselves, but the Khan's son was alone. He gulped down the broth my wife Elgigetei offered, clearly impatient to ride out from the settlement.

We saddled our horses quickly. The sky was almost as gray as the slate-colored wings of the falcons we carried on our wrists, but the clouds told me that snow would not fall before dusk. I could forget Yeke Geren and the life I had chosen for one day, until the shadows of evening fell.

We rode east, skirting the horses grazing in the land our settlers had cleared, then moved north. A small bird was flying toward a grove of trees; Yesuntai loosed his falcon. The peregrine soared, a streak against the gray sky, her dark wings scimitars, then suddenly plummeted toward her prey. The Noyan laughed as her yellow talons caught the bird.

Yesuntai galloped after the peregrine. I spied a rabbit darting across the frost-covered ground, and slipped the tether from my falcon; he streaked toward his game. I followed, pondering what I knew about Yesuntai. He had grown up in the ordus and great cities of our Frankish Khanate, been tutored by the learned men of Paris, and would have passed the rest of his time in drinking, dicing, card-playing, and claiming those women who struck his fancy. His father, Sukegei Khan, numbered two grandsons of Genghis Khan among his ancestors, but I did not expect Yesuntai to show the vigor of those great forefathers. He was the Khan's son by one of his minor wives, and I had seen such men before in Yeke Geren, minor sons of Ejens or generals who came to this new land for loot and glory, but who settled for hunting along the great river to the north, trading with the nearer tribes, and occasionally raiding an Inglistani farm. Yesuntai would be no different; so I thought then.

He was intent on his sport that day. By afternoon, the carcasses of several birds and rabbits hung from our saddles. He had said little to me, and was silent as we tethered our birds, but I had felt him watching me. Perhaps he would ask me to guide him and some of his men on a hunt beyond this small island, before the worst of the winter weather came. The people living in the regions nearby would not trouble hunters. Our treaty with the Ganeagaono, the Eastern Gatekeepers of the Long House, protected us, and they had long since subdued the tribes to the south of their lands.

We trotted south. Some of the men watching the horse herds were squatting around fires near their shelters of tree branches and hides. They greeted us as we passed, and congratulated us on our game. In the distance, the rounded bark houses of Yeke Geren were visible in the evening light, wooden bowls crowned by plumes of smoke rising from their roofs.

The Great Camp—the first of our people who had come to this land had given Yeke Geren its name. "We will build a great camp," Cheren Noyan had said when he stepped from his ship, and now circles of round wooden houses covered the southern part of the island the Long House people called Ganono, while our horses had pasturage in the north. Our dwellings were much like those of the Manhatan people who had lived here, who had greeted our ships, fed us, sheltered us, and then lost their island to us.

Yesuntai reined in his horse as we neared Yeke Geren; he seemed reluctant to return to the Great Camp. "This has been the most pleasant day I have passed here," he said.

"I have also enjoyed myself, Noyan." My horse halted at his side. "You would of course find better hunting away from this island. Perhaps—"

"I did not come here only to hunt, Bahadur. I have another purpose in mind. When I told Michel Bahadur of what I wish to do, he said that you were the man to advise me." He paused. "My father the Khan grows even more displeased with his enemies the Inglistanis. He fears that, weak as they are, they may grow stronger here. His spies in Inglistan tell him that more of them intend to cross the water and settle here."

I glanced at him. All of the Inglistani settlements, except for the port they called Plymouth, sat along the coast north of the long island that lay to the east of Yeke Geren. A few small towns, and some outlying farms—I could not see why our Khan would be so concerned

with them. It was unfortunate that they were there, but our raids on their westernmost farms had kept them from encroaching on our territory, and if they tried to settle farther north, they would have to contend with the native peoples there.

"If more come," I said, "then more of the wretches will die during the winter. They would not have survived this long without the aid of the tribes around them." Some of those people had paid dearly for aiding the settlers, succumbing to the pestilences the Inglistanis had brought with them.

"They will come with more soldiers and muskets. They will pollute this land with their presence. The Khan my father will conquer their wretched island, and the people of Eire will aid us to rid themselves of the Inglistani yoke. My father's victory will be tarnished if too many of the island dogs find refuge here. They must be rooted out."

"So you wish to be rid of the Inglistani settlements." I fingered the tether hanging from my falcon. "We do not have the men for such a task."

"We do not," he admitted, "but the peoples of these lands do."

He interested me. Perhaps there was some iron in his soul after all. "Only the Hodenosaunee, the Long House nations, can help you," I said, "and I do not know if they will. The Inglistanis pose no threat to the power of the Long House."

"Michel told me we have a treaty with that people."

"We have an agreement with the Ganeagaono, who are one of their five nations. Once the Long House People fought among themselves, until their great chiefs Deganawida and Hayawatha united them. They are powerful enough now to ignore the Inglistanis."

Yesuntai gazed at the bird that clutched his gauntleted wrist. "What if they believed the Inglistanis might move against them?"

"They might act," I replied. "The Hodenosaunee have no treaties with that people. But they might think they have something to gain from the Inglistani presence. We have never given firearms to the people here, but the Inglistanis do so when they think it's to their advantage. By making war on the Inglistani settlements, you might only drive them into an alliance with the Long House and its subject tribes, one that might threaten us."

"We must strike hard and exterminate the lot," Yesuntai muttered. "Then we must make certain that no more of the wretches ever set foot on these shores."

"You will need the Long House People to do it."

"I must do it, one way or another. The Khan my father has made his will known. I have his orders, marked with his seal. He will take Inglistan, and we will destroy its outposts here. There can be no peace with those who have not submitted to us—the Yasa commands it. Inglistan has not submitted, so it will be forced to bow."

I was thinking that Sukegei Khan worried too much over that pack of island-dwellers. Surely Hispania, even with a brother Khan ruling there, was more of a threat to him than Inglistan. I had heard many tales of the splendor of Suleiman Khan's court, of slaves and gold that streamed to Granada and Cordoba from the continent to our south, of lands taken by the Hispanic Khan's conquistadors. The Hispanians were as fervent in spreading their faith as in seizing loot. In little more than sixty years, it was said that as many mosques stood in the Aztec capital of Tenochtítlan as in Cordoba itself. Suleiman Khan, with African kings as vassals and conquests in this new world, dreamed of being the greatest of the European Khans. How easy it had been for him to allow us settlements in the north while he claimed the richer lands to the south.

But I was a Bahadur of Yeke Geren, who knew only what others told me of Europe. My Khanate was a land I barely remembered, and our ancient Mongol homeland no more than a setting for legends and tales told by travelers. The Ejens of the Altan Uruk, the descendants of Genghis Khan, still sent their tribute to Karakorum, but the bonds of our Yasa, the laws the greatest of men had given us, rested more lightly on their shoulders. They might bow to the Kha-Khan of our homeland, but many of the Khans ruled lands greater than his. A time might come when the Khans of the west would break their remaining ties to the east.

"Europe!" I cleared my throat. "Sometimes I wonder what our Khans will do when all their enemies are vanquished."

Yesuntai shook his head. "I will say this—my ancestor Genghis Khan would have wondered at what we are now. I have known Noyans who go no farther to hunt than the parks around their dwellings, and others who prefer brocades and perfumed lace to a sheepskin coat and felt boots. Europe has weakened us. Some think as I do, that we should become what we were, but there's little chance of that there."

Snow was sifting from the sky. I urged my horse on; Yesuntai kept near me.

By the time we reached my circle of houses, the falling snow had become a curtain veiling all but the nearest dwellings from our sight. Courtesy required that I offer Yesuntai a meal, and a place to sleep if the snow continued to fall. He accepted my hospitality readily; I suspected there was more he wanted to ask me.

We halted at the dwelling next to mine. Except for a horse-drawn wagon carrying a wine merchant's barrels, the winding roads were empty. I shouted to my servants; two boys hurried outside to take the peregrines and our game from us. A shadowy form stirred near the dwelling. I squinted, then recognized one of my Manhatan servants. He lay in the snow, his hands around a bottle.

Anger welled inside me. I told one of the boys to get the Manhatan to his house, then went after the wagon. The driver slowed to a stop as I reached him. I seized his collar and dragged him from his seat.

He cursed as he sprawled in the snow. "I warned you before," I said. "You are not to bring your wine here."

He struggled to his feet, clutching his hat. "To your Manhatans, Bahadur—that's what you said. I was passing by, and thought others among your households

might have need of some refreshment. Is it my fault if your natives entreat me for—"

I raised my whip. "You had one warning," I said. "This is the last I shall give you."

"You have no reason—"

"Come back to my circle, Gêrard, and I'll take this whip to you. If you are fortunate enough to survive that beating—"

"You cannot stop their cravings, Bahadur." He glared up at me with his pale eyes. "You cannot keep them from seeking me out elsewhere."

"I will not make it easier for them to poison themselves." I flourished the whip; he backed away from me. "Leave."

He waded through the snow to his wagon. I rode back to my dwelling. Yesuntai had tied his horse to a post; he was silent as I unsaddled my mount.

I led him inside. Elgigetei greeted us; she was alone, and my wife's glazed eyes and slurred speech told me that she had been drinking. Yesuntai and I sat on a bench in the back of the house, just beyond the hearth fire. Elgigetei brought us wine and fish soup. I waited for her to take food for herself and to join us, but she settled on the floor near our son's cradle to work at a hide. Her mother had been a Manhatan woman, and Elgigetei's brown face and thick black braids had reminded me of Dasiyu, the wife I had left among the Ganeagaono. I had thought her beautiful once, but Elgigetei had the weaknesses of the Manhatan people, the laziness, the craving for drink that had wasted so many of them. She scraped at her hide listlessly, then leaned over Ajiragha's cradle to murmur to our son in the Manhatan tongue. I had never bothered to learn the language. It was useless to master the speech of a people who would soon not exist.

"You are welcome to stay here tonight," I said to the Noyan.

"I am grateful for this snowstorm," he murmured. "It will give us more time to talk. I have much to ask you still about the Hiroquois." He leaned back against the wall. "In Khanbalik, there are scholars in the Khitan Khan's court who believe that the forefathers of the people in these lands came here long ago from the regions north of Khitai, perhaps even from our ancestral grounds. These scholars claim that once a land bridge far to the north linked this land to Sibir. So I was told by travelers who spoke to those learned men."

"It is an intriguing notion, Noyan."

"If such people carry the seed of our ancestors, there may be greatness in them."

I sipped my wine. "But of course there can be no people as great as we Mongols."

"Greatness may slip from our grasp. Koko Mongke Tengri meant for us to rule the world, yet we may lose the strength to hold it."

I made a sign as he invoked the name of our ancient God, then bowed my head. Yesuntai lifted his brows. "I thought you were a Christian."

"I was baptized," I said. "I have prayed in other ways since then. The Long House People call God Hawenneyu, the Great Spirit, but He is Tengri by another name. It matters not how a man prays."

"That is true, but many who follow the cross or the crescent believe otherwise." Yesuntai sighed. "Long ago, my ancestor Genghis Khan thought of making the world our pasturage, but then learned that he could not rule it without mastering the ways of the lands he had won. Now those ways are mastering us." He gazed at me with his restless dark eyes. "When we have slaughtered the Inglistanis here, more of our people will come to settle these lands. In time, we may have to subdue those we call our friends. More will be claimed here for our Khanate and, if all goes well, my father's sons and grandsons will have more of the wealth this land offers. Our priests will come, itching to spread the word of Christ among the natives, and traders will bargain for what we do not take outright. Do you find this a pleasing prospect?"

"I must serve my Khan," I replied. His eyes narrowed, and I sensed that he saw my true thoughts. There were still times when I dreamed of abandoning what I had here and vanishing into the northern forests.

He said, "An ocean lies between us and Europe. It may become easier for those who are here to forget the Khanate."

"Perhaps."

"I am told," Yesuntai said then, "that you lived for some time among the Long House People."

My throat tightened. "I dwelled with the Ganeagaono, the Owners of the Flint. Perhaps Michel Bahadur told you the story."

"Only that you lived among them."

"It is a long tale, but I will try to make it shorter. My father and I came to these shores soon after we found this island—we were in one of the ships that followed the first expedition. Cheren Noyan had secured Yeke Geren by then. I was nine when we arrived, my father's youngest son. We came alone, without my mother or his second wife—he was hoping to return to Calais a richer man." I recalled little of that journey, only that the sight of the vast white-capped sea terrified me whenever I was well enough to go up on deck to help the men watch for Inglistani pirates. Perhaps Yesuntai had also trembled at being adrift on that watery plain, but I did not wish to speak of my fear to him.

"A year after we got here," I went on, "Cheren Noyan sent an expedition upriver. Hendrick, one of our Dutch sailors, captained the ship. He was to map the river and see how far it ran, whether it might offer us a passageway west. My father was ordered to join the expedition, and brought me along. I was grateful for the chance to be with the men."

Yesuntai nodded. "As any boy would be."

"We went north until we came to the region the Ganeagaono call Skanechtade—Beyond the Openings—and anchored there. We knew that the Flint People were fierce warriors. The people to the south of their lands lived in terror of them, and have given them the name of Mohawk, the Eaters of Men's Flesh, but we had been told the Owners of the Flint would welcome strangers who came to them in peace. Hendrick thought it wise to

secure a treaty with them before going farther, and having an agreement with the Ganeagaono would also give us a bond with the other four nations of the Long House."

I swallowed more wine. Yesuntai was still, but his eyes kept searching me. He would want to know what sort of man I was before entrusting himself to me, but I still knew little about him. I felt somehow that he wanted more than allies in a campaign against the Inglistanis, but pushed that notion aside.

"Some of us," I said, "rowed to shore in our longboats. A few Ganeagaono warriors had spied us, and we made ourselves understood with hand gestures. They took us to their village. Everyone there greeted us warmly, and opened their houses to us. All might have gone well, but after we ate their food, our men offered them wine. We should have known better, after seeing what strong drink could do to the Manhatan. The Flint People have no head for wine, and our men would have done well to stay sober."

I stared at the earthen floor and was silent for a time. "I am not certain how it happened," I continued at last, "but our meeting ended in violence. A few of our men died with tomahawks in their heads. Most of the others fled to the boats. You may call them cowards for that, but to see a man of the Flint People in the throes of drunkenness would terrify the bravest of soldiers. They were wild—the wine is poison to them. They were not like the Manhatan, who grow sleepy and calmly trade even their own children for strong drink."

"Go on," Yesuntai said.

"My father and I were among those who did not escape. The Ganeagaono had lost men during the brawl, and now saw us as enemies. They began their tortures. They assailed my father and his comrades with fire and whips—they cut pieces of flesh from them, dining on them while their captives still lived, and tore the nails from their hands with hot pincers. My father bore his torment bravely, but the others did not behave as Mongols should, and their deaths were not glorious." I closed my eyes for a moment, remembering the sound of their shrieks when the children had thrown burning coals on their staked bodies. I had not known then whom I hated more, the men for losing their courage or the children for their cruelty.

"I am sorry to hear it," Yesuntai said.

"Only my father and I were left alive. They forced us to run through the village while rows of people struck at us with whips and heavy sticks. The men went at us first, then the women, and after them the children. I did not understand then that they were honoring us by doing this. My father's wounds robbed him of life, but I survived the beatings, and it was then that the Ganeagaono made me one of them. I was taken to a house, given to a woman who admired the courage my father had shown during the torture, and was made a member of their Deer Clan. My foster mother gave me the name of Senadondo."

"And after that?" he asked.

"Another ship came upriver not long after. We expected a war party, but Cheren Noyan was wise enough to send envoys out from the ship to seek peace. Because I knew the Ganeagaono tongue by then, I was useful as an interpreter. The envoys begged forgiveness, saying that their men were to blame for violating the hospitality of the Flint People, so all went well. In the years to follow, I often dealt with the traders who came to us offering cloth and iron for furs and beaver pelts—they did not make the mistake of bringing wine again. After a time, I saw that I might be of more use to both my own people and my adoptive brothers if I returned to Yeke Geren. The Ganeagaono said farewell to me and sent me back with many gifts."

Speaking of the past made me long for the northern woods, for the spirits that sang in the mountain pines, for the sight of long houses and fields of corn, for Dasiyu, who had refused to come with me or to let our son depart with me. The boy belonged to her Wolf Clan, not to mine; his destiny was linked to hers. It had always been that way among the Long House People. I had promised to return, and she had called my promise a lie. Her last words to me were a curse.

"I might almost think," Yesuntai said, "that you wish you were among those people now."

"Is that so strange, Noyan?"

"They killed your father, and brought you much suffering."

"We brought that fate upon ourselves. If my father's spirit had not flown from him, they would have let him live, and honored him as one of their own. I lost everything I knew, but from the time the Ganeagaono adopted me, they treated me only with kindness and respect. Do you understand?"

"I think I do. The children of many who fought against us now serve us. Yet you chose to return here, Jirandai."

"We had a treaty. The Flint People do not forget their treaties—they are marked with the strings of beads they call wampum, which their wise men always have in their keeping." Even as I spoke, I wondered if, in the end, my exile would prove useless.

How full of pride and hope I had been, thinking that my efforts would preserve the peace between this outpost of the Khanate and the people I had come to love. I would be, so I believed, the voice of the Ganeagaono in the Mongol councils. But my voice was often ignored, and I had finally seen what lay behind Cheren Noyan's offer of peace. A treaty would give his men time to learn more about the Long House, and any weaknesses that could later be exploited. Eventually, more soldiers would come to wrest more of these lands from the natives. Our Khan's minions might eventually settle the lands to the north, and make the Long House People as wretched as the Manhatans.

"I came back," I continued, "so that our Noyans and Bahadurs would remember the promises recorded on the belts we exchanged with the Owners of the Flint. We swore peace, and I am the pledge of that peace, for the Ganeagaono promised that they would be bound to us in friendship for as long as I remained both their brother and the Khan's servant. That promise lives here." I

struck my chest. "But some of our people are not so mindful of our promises."

Yesuntai nodded. "It is the European influence, Bahadur. Our ancestors kept the oaths they swore, and despised liars, but the Europeans twist words and often call lies the truth." He took a breath. "I will speak freely to you, Jirandai Bahadur. I have not come here only to rid this land of Inglistanis. Europe is filled with people who bow to the Khans and yet dream of escaping our yoke. I would hate to see them slip from their bonds on these shores. Destroying the Inglistani settlements will show others that they will find no refuge here."

"I can agree with such a mission," I said.

"And your forest brothers will be rid of a potential enemy."

"Yes."

"Will you lead me to them? Will you speak my words to them and ask them to join us in this war?"

"You may command me to do so, Noyan," I said.

He shifted his weight on the bench. "I would rather have your assent. I have always found that those who freely offer me their oaths serve me better than those pressed into service, and I imagine you have your own reasons for wishing to go north."

"I shall go with you, and willingly. You will need other men, Noyan. Some in Yeke Geren have lost their discipline and might not do well in the northern forests. They wallow in the few pleasures this place offers, and mutter that their Khan has forgotten them."

"Then I will leave it to you to find good men who lust for battle. I can trust those whom I brought with me."

I took out my pipe, tapped tobacco into it from my pouch, lit it, and held it out to Yesuntai. "Will you smoke a pipe with me? We should mark our coming expedition with some ceremony."

He accepted the pipe, drew in some smoke, then choked and gasped for air before composing himself. Outside, I heard a man, a sailor perhaps, and drunk from the sound of him, call out to another man in Frankish. What purpose could a man find here, waiting for yet another ship to arrive with news from the Khanate and baubles to trade with the natives for the pelts, birds, animals, and plants the Khan's court craved? I was not the only man who thought of deserting Yeke Geren.

"I look forward to our journey," Yesuntai said, "and to seeing what lies beyond this encampment." He smiled as he passed the pipe to me.

That spring, with forty of Yesuntai's soldiers and twenty more men I had chosen, we sailed upriver.

2

The Ganeagaono of Skanechtade welcomed us with food. They crowded around us as we went from house to house, never leaving us alone even when we went to relieve ourselves. Several men of my Deer Clan came to meet me, urging more of the game and dried fish their women had prepared upon me and my comrades. By the time we finished our feast, more people had arrived from the outlying houses of the village to listen to our words.

Yesuntai left it to me to urge the war we wanted. After I was empty of eloquence, we waited in the long house set aside for our men. If the men of Skanechtade chose the warpath, they would gather war parties and send runners to the other villages of the Ganeagaono to persuade more warriors to join us.

I had spoken the truth to the people of Skanechtade. Deceit was not possible with the Ganeagaono, and especially not for me. I was still their brother, even after all the years I thought of as my exile. The Ganeagaono would know I could not lie to them; this war would serve them as well as us. Whoever was not at peace with them was their enemy. In that, they were much like us. A people who might threaten their domain as well as ours would be banished from the shores of this land.

Yet my doubts had grown, not about our mission, but of what might come afterward. More of our people would cross the ocean, and the Bahadurs who followed us to Yeke Geren might dream of subduing the nations we now called our friends. There could be no peace with those who did not submit to us in the end, and I did not believe the Ganeagaono and the other nations of the Long House would ever swear an oath to our Khan.

I had dwelled on such thoughts as we sailed north, following the great river that led to Skanechtade. By the time we rowed away from the ship in our longboats, I had made my decision. I would do what I could to aid Yesuntai, but whatever the outcome of our mission, I would not return to Yeke Geren. My place was with the Ganeagaono who had granted me my life.

"Jirandai," Yesuntai Noyan said softly. He sat in the back of the long house, his back against the wall, his face hidden in shadows; I had thought he was asleep. "What do you think they will do?"

"A few of the young chiefs want to join us. That I saw when I finished my speech." Some of our men glanced toward me; most were sleeping on the benches that lined the walls. "We will have a few bands, at least."

"A few bands are useless to me," Yesuntai muttered. "A raid would only provoke our enemies. I must have enough men to destroy them."

"I have done what I can," I replied. "We can only hope my words have moved them."

Among the Ganeagaono, those who wanted war had to convince others to follow them. The sachems who ruled their councils had no power to lead in war; I had explained that to Yesuntai. It was up to the chiefs and other warriors seeking glory to assemble war parties, but a sign that a sachem favored our enterprise might persuade many to join us. I had watched the sachems during my speech; my son was among them. His dark eyes had not betrayed any of his thoughts.

"I saw how you spoke, Jirandai," Yesuntai said, "and felt the power in your words, even if I did not understand them. I do not believe we will fail."

"May it be so, Noyan." I thought then of the time I had traveled west with my adoptive father along the

great trail that runs to the lands of the Nundawaono. There, among the Western Gatekeepers of the Long House nations, I had first heard the tale of the great serpent brought down by the thunderbolts of Heno, spirit of storms and rain. In his death throes, the serpent had torn the land asunder and created the mighty falls into which the rapids of the Neahga River flowed. My foster father had doubts about the story's ending, although he did not say so to our hosts. He had stood on a cliff near the falls and seen a rainbow arching above the tumultuous waters; he had heard the steady sound of the torrent and felt the force of the wind that never died. He believed that the serpent was not dead, but only sleeping, and might rise to ravage the land again.

Something in Yesuntai made me think of that serpent. When he was still, his eyes darted restlessly, and when he slept, his body was tense, ready to rouse itself at the slightest disturbance. Something was coiled inside him, sleeping but ready to wake.

Voices murmured beyond the doorway to my right. Some of the Ganeagaono were still outside. A young man in a deerskin kilt and beaded belt entered, then gestured at me.

"You," he said. "He who is called Senadondo." I lifted my head at the sound of the name his people had given to me. "I ask you to come with me," he continued in his own tongue.

I got to my feet and turned to Yesuntai. "It seems someone wishes to speak to me."

He waved a hand. "Then you must go."

"Perhaps some of the men want to hear more of our plans."

"Or perhaps a family you left behind wishes to welcome you home."

I narrowed my eyes as I left. The Noyan had heard nothing from me about my wife and son, but he knew I had returned to Yeke Geren as a man. He might have guessed I had left a woman here.

The man who had come for me led me past clusters of houses. Although it was nearly midnight, with only a sliver of moon to light our way, people were still awake; I heard them murmuring beyond the open doors. A band of children trailed us. Whenever I slowed, they crowded around me to touch my long coat or to pull at my silk tunic.

We halted in front of a long house large enough for three families. The sign of the Wolf Clan was painted on the door. The man motioned to me to go inside, then led the children away.

At first, I thought the house was empty, then heard a whisper near the back. Three banked fires glowed in the central space between the house's bark partitions. I called out a greeting; as I passed the last partition, I turned to my right and saw who was waiting for me.

My son wore his headdress, a woven cap from which a single large eagle feather jutted from a cluster of smaller feathers. Braided bands with beads adorned his bare arms; rattles hung from his belt. My wife wore a deerskin cloak over a dress decorated with beads. Even in the shadows beyond the fire, I saw the strands of silver in her dark hair.

"Dasiyu," I whispered, then turned to my son. "Teyendanaga."

He shook his head slightly. "You forget—I am the sachem Sohaewahah now." He gestured at one of the blankets that covered the floor; I sat down.

"I hoped you would come back," Dasiyu said. "I wished for it, yet prayed that you would not."

"Mother," our son murmured. She pushed a bowl of hommony toward me, then sat back on her heels.

"I wanted to come to you right away," I said. "I did not know if you were here. When the men of my own clan greeted me, I feared what they might say if I asked about you, so kept silent. I searched the crowd for you when I was speaking."

"I was there," Dasiyu said, "sitting behind the sachems among the women. Your eyes are failing you."

I suspected that she had concealed herself behind others. "I thought you might have another husband by now."

"I have never divorced you." Her face was much the same, only lightly marked with lines. I thought of how I must look to her, leather-faced and broader in the belly, softened by the years in Yeke Geren. "I have never placed the few belongings you left with me outside my door. You are still my husband, Senadondo, but it is Sohaewahah who asked you to come to this house, not I."

My son held up his hand. "I knew you would return to us, my father. I saw it in my vision. It is of that vision that I wish to speak now."

That a vision might have come to him, I did not doubt. Many spirits lived in these lands, and the Ganeagaono, as do all wise men, trust their dreams. But evil spirits can deceive men, and even the wise can fail to understand what the spirits tell them.

"I would hear of your vision," I said.

"Two summers past," he began, "not long after I became Sohaewahah, I fell ill with a fever. My body fought it, but even after it passed, I could not rise from my bed. It was then, after the fever was gone, that I had my vision and knew it to be truth." He gazed directly at me, his eyes steady. "Beyond my doorway, I saw a great light, and then three men entered my dwelling. One carried a branch, another a red tomahawk, and the third bore the shorter bow and the firestick that are your people's weapons. The man holding the branch spoke, and I knew that Hawenneyu was speaking to me through him. He told me of a storm gathering in the east, over the Ojikhadagega, the great ocean your people crossed, and said that it threatened all the nations of the Long House. He told me that some of those who might offer us peace would bring only the peace of death. Yet his words did not frighten me, for he went on to say that my father would return to me, and bring a brother to my side."

He glanced at his mother, then looked back at me. "My father and the brother he brought to me," he continued, "would help us stand against the coming storm —this was the Great Spirit's promise. When my vision

passed, I was able to rise. I left my house and went through the village, telling everyone of what I had been shown. Now you are here, and the people remember what my vision foretold, and yet I see no brother."

"You have a brother," I said, thinking of Ajiragha. "I left him in Yeke Geren."

"But he is not here at my side, as my vision promised."

"He is only an infant, and the Inglistanis are the storm that threatens you. More of them will cross the Great Salt Water."

"A war against them would cost us many men. We might trade with them, as we do with you. Peace is what we have always desired—war is only our way to prove our courage and to bring that peace about. You should know that, having been one of us."

"The Inglistanis will make false promises, and when more of them come, even the Long House may fall before their soldiers. You have no treaties with the Inglistanis, so you are in a state of war with them now. Two of the spirits who came to you bore weapons—the Great Spirit means for you to make war."

"But against whom?" Dasiyu asked. She leaned forward and shook her fist. "Perhaps those who are on your island of Ganono are the storm that will come upon us, after we are weakened by battle with the pale-faced people you hate."

"Foolish woman," I muttered. "I am one of you. Would I come here to betray you?" Despite my words, she reminded me of my own doubts.

"You should not have come back," she said. "Whenever I dreamed of your return, I saw you alone, not with others seeking to use us for their own purposes. Look at you—there is nothing of the Ganeagaono left in you. You speak our words, but your garments and your companions show where your true loyalty lies."

"You are wrong." I stared at her; she did not look away. "I have never forgotten my brothers here."

"You come to spy on us. When you have fought with our warriors in this battle, you will see our weaknesses more clearly, the ways in which we might be defeated, and we will not be able to use your pale-faced enemies against you."

"Is this what you have been saying to the other women? Have you gone before the men to speak against this war?"

Dasiyu drew in her breath; our son clutched her wrist. "You've said enough, Mother," he whispered. "I believe what he says. My vision told me he would come, and the spirits held the weapons of war. Perhaps my brother is meant to join me later." He got to his feet. "I go now to add my voice to the councils. It may be that I can persuade those who waver. If we are to follow the warpath now, I will set aside my office to fight with you."

He left us before I could speak. "You'll have your war," Dasiyu said. "The other sachems will listen to my son, and ask him to speak for them to the people. The wise old women will heed his words, because they chose him for his position."

"This war will serve you."

She scowled, then pushed the bowl of hommony toward me. "You insult me by leaving my food untouched."

I ate some of the dried corn, then set the bowl down. "Dasiyu, I did not come here only to speak of war. I swore an oath to myself that, when this campaign ends, I will live among you again."

"And am I to rejoice over that?"

"Cursed woman, anything I do would stoke your rage. I went back to speak for the Long House in our councils. I asked you to come with me, and you refused."

"I would have had to abandon my clan. My son would never have been chosen as a sachem then. You would not be promising to stay with us unless you believed you have failed as our voice."

Even after the years apart, she saw what lay inside me. "Whatever comes," I said, "my place is here."

She said nothing for a long time. The warmth inside the long house was growing oppressive. I opened my coat, then took off my headband to mop my brow.

"Look at you," she said, leaning toward me to touch the braids coiled behind my ears. Her hand brushed the top of my shaven head lightly. "You had such a fine scalplock—how could you have given it up?" She poked at my mustache. "I do not understand why a man would want hair over his lip." She fingered the fabric of my tunic. "And this—a woman might wear such a garment. I used to admire you so when I watched you dance. You were the shortest of the men, but no man here had such strong arms and broad shoulders, and now you hide them under these clothes."

I drew her to me. She was not as she had been, nor was I; once, every moment in her arms had only fed the flames inside me. Our fires were banked now, the fever gone, but her welcoming warmth remained.

"You have changed in another way, Senadondo," she said afterward. "You are not so hasty as you were."

"I am no longer a young man, Dasiyu. I must make the most of what moments I am given."

She pulled a blanket over us. I held her until she was asleep; she nestled against me as she once had, her cheek against my shoulder, a leg looped around mine. I did not know how to keep my promise to stay with her. Yesuntai might want a spy among the Flint People when this campaign was concluded; he might believe I was his man for the task.

I slept uneasily. A war whoop awakened me at dawn. I slipped away from my wife, pulled on my trousers, and went to the door.

A young chief was running through the village. Rattles were bound to his knees with leather bands, and he held a red tomahawk; beads of black wampum dangled from his weapon. He halted in front of the war post, lifted his arm, and embedded the tomahawk in the painted wood. He began to dance, and other men raced toward him, until it seemed most of the village's warriors had enlisted in the war.

They danced, bodies bent from the waist, arms lifting as if to strike enemies, hands out to ward off attack. Their feet beat against the ground as drums throbbed. I saw Yesuntai then; he walked toward them, his head

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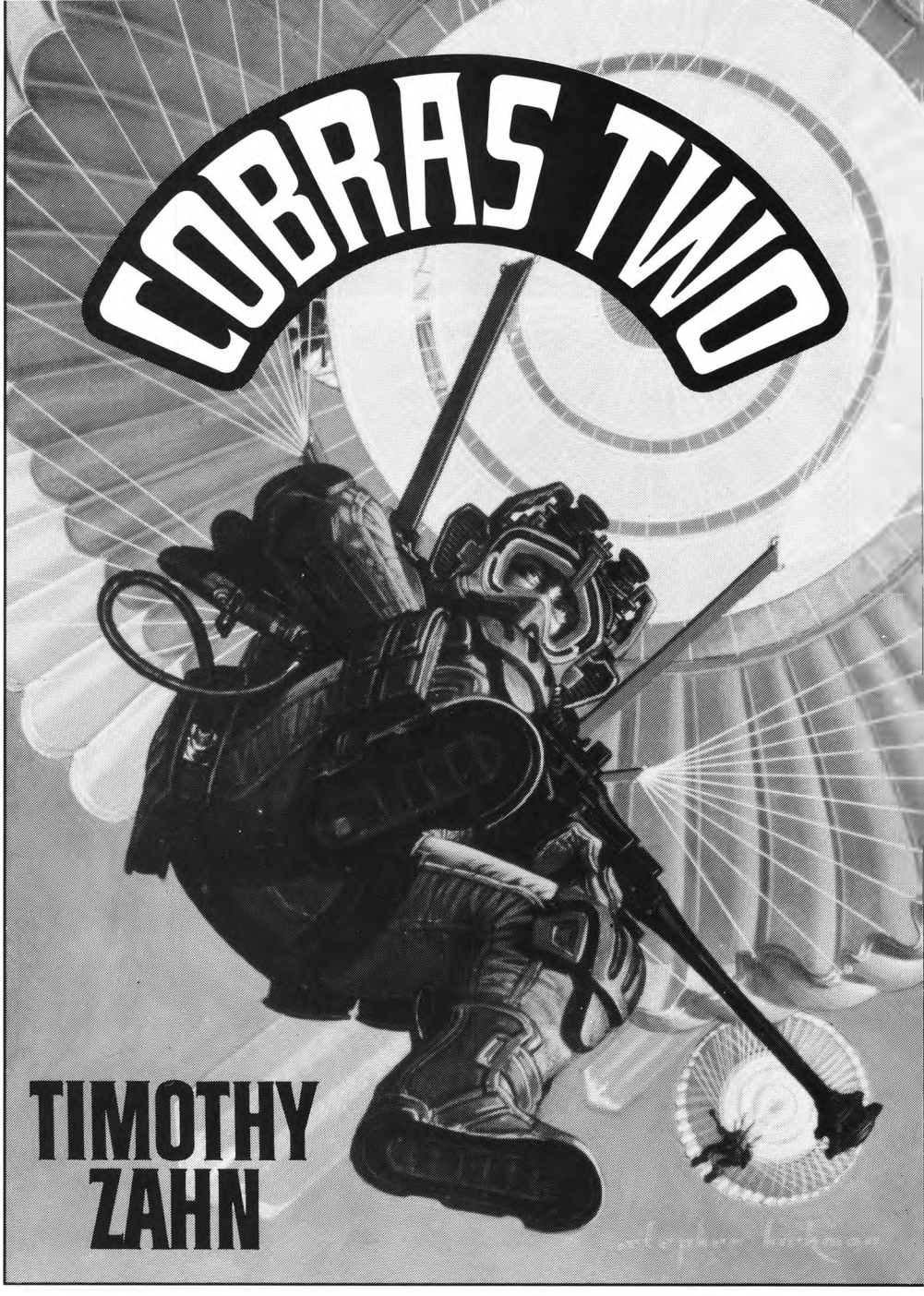

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thrown back, a bow in one hand. I stepped from the doorway, felt my heels drumming against the earth, and joined the dancers.

3

Yesuntai, a Khan's son, was used to absolute obedience. The Ganeagaono, following the custom of all the Long House people, would obey any war chiefs in whom they had confidence. I had warned Yesuntai that no chief could command the Flint People to join in this war, and that even the women were free to offer their opinions of the venture.

"So be it," the young Noyan had said to that. "Our own women were fierce and brave before they were softened by other ways, and my ancestor Bortai Khatun often advised her husband Genghis Khan, although even that great lady would not have dared to address a war kuriltai. If these women are as formidable as you say, then they must have bred brave sons." I was grateful for his tolerance.

But the people of Skanechtade had agreed to join us, and soon their messengers returned from other villages with word that chiefs in every Ganeagaono settlement had agreed to go on the warpath. My son had advised us to follow the custom of the Hodenosaunee when all of their nations fought in a common war, and to choose two supreme commanders so that there would be unanimity in all decisions. Yesuntai, it was agreed, would command, since he had proposed this war, and Aroniateka, a cousin of my son's, would be Yesuntai's equal. Aroniateka, happily, was a man avid to learn a new way of warfare.

This was essential to our purpose, since to have any chance against the Inglistanis, the Ganeagaono could not fight in their usual fashion. The Long House people were still new to organized campaigns with many warriors, and most of their battles had been little more than raids by small parties. Their men were used to war, which, along with the hunt, was their favorite pursuit, but this war would be more than a ritual test of valor.

The Flint People had acquired horses from us in trade, but had never used them in warfare. Their warriors moved so rapidly on foot through the forests that mounts would only slow their progress. We would have to travel on foot, and take any horses we might need later from the Inglistanis. The men I had chosen in Yeke Geren had hunted and traded with the Hodenosaunee, and were used to their ways. Those Yesuntai had brought were veterans of European campaigns, but willing to adapt.

The whoops of Skanechtade's warriors echoed through the village as they danced. The women busied themselves making moccasins and preparing provisions for their men. Runners moved between villages with the orders of our two commanders and returned with promises that the other war parties would follow them. Yesuntai would have preferred more time for planning, to send out more scouts before we left Ganeagaono territory, but we had little time. War had been declared, and our allies were impatient to fight. We needed a swift victory over our enemy. If we did not defeat the Inglistanis by late autumn, the Ganeagaono, their honor satisfied by whatever they had won by then, might abandon us.

A chill remained in the early spring air, but most of the Ganeagaono men had shed the cloaks and blankets that covered their upper bodies in winter. Our Mongols followed their example and stripped to the waist, and I advised Yesuntai's men to trade their felt boots for moccasins. Dasiyu gave me a kilt and a pair of deerskin moccasins; I easily gave up my Mongol tunic and trousers for the garb I had once worn.

Eight days after we had come to Skanechtade, the warriors performed their last war dance. Men streamed from the village toward the river; Dasiyu followed me to the high wall that surrounded the long houses and handed me dried meat and a pouch of corn flour mixed with maple sugar.

"I will come back," I said, "when this war is over."

"If you have victory, I shall welcome you." She gripped my arms for a moment, then let go. "If you suffer defeat, if you and your chief lead our men only to ruin, your belongings will be outside my door."

"We will win," I said.

The lines around her lids deepened as she narrowed her eyes. "See that you do, Senadondo."

We crossed to the eastern side of the great river, then moved south. Some of our scouts had explored these oak-covered hills, and Yesuntai had planned his campaign with the aid of Inglistani maps our soldiers had taken during a raid the year before. We would travel south, then move east through the Mahican lands, keeping to the north of the enemy settlements. Our forces would remain divided during the journey, so as not to alert the Inglistanis. Plymouth, the easternmost enemy settlement, overlooked an ocean bay. When Plymouth was taken, we would move south toward another great bay and the town called Newport. This settlement lay on an island at the mouth of the bay, and we would advance on it from the east. Any who escaped us would be forced to flee west toward Charlestown.

A wise commander always allows his enemy a retreat, since desperate defenders can cost a general many men, while a sweep by one wing of his force can pick off retreating soldiers. We would drive the Inglistanis west. When Charlestown fell, the survivors would have to run to the settlement they called New Haven. When New Haven was crushed, only New London, their westernmost town, would remain, and from there the Inglistanis could flee only to territory controlled by us.

At some point, the enemy was likely to sue for peace, but there could be no peace with the Inglistanis. Our allies and we were agreed; this would be a war of extermination.

These were our plans, but obstacles lay ahead. The Mahicans would present no problem; as payers of tribute to the Long House, they would allow us safe pas-

sage through their lands. But the Wampanoag people dwelled in the east, and the Pequots controlled the trails that would lead us south to Newport. Both groups feared the Flint People and had treaties with the Inglistanis. Our men would be more than a match for theirs if the Wampanoags and Pequots fought in defense of their pale-faced friends. But such a battle would cost us warriors, and a prolonged battle for Plymouth would endanger our entire strategy.

Our forces remained divided as we moved. Speed is one of a soldier's greatest allies, so we satisfied our hunger with our meager provisions and did not stop to hunt. At night, when we rested, Ganeagaono warriors marked the trees with a record of our numbers and movements, and we halted along the way to read the markings others had left for us. Yesuntai kept me at his side. I was teaching him the Ganeagaono tongue, but he still needed me to speak his words to his fellow commander Aroniateka.

In three days, we came to a Mahican settlement, and alerted the people there with war cries. Their chiefs welcomed us outside their stockade, met with us, and complained bitterly about the Inglistanis, who they believed had designs on their lands. They had refrained from raids, not wanting to provoke the settlers, but younger Mahicans had chided the chiefs for their caution. After we spoke of our intentions, several of their men offered to join us. We had expected safe passage, but to have warriors from among them lifted our spirits even higher.

We turned east, and markings on tree trunks told us of other Mahicans that had joined our forces. Yesuntai, with his bowcase, quiver, and sword hanging from his belt, and his musket over his shoulder, moved as easily through the woods as my son in his kilt and moccasins. A bond was forming between them, and often they communicated silently with looks and gestures, not needing my words. Wampanoag territory lay ahead, yet Yesuntai's confidence was not dampened, nor was my son's. The Great Spirit that our Ganeagaono brethren called Hawenneyu, and that Yesuntai knew under the name of Tengri, would guide them; I saw their faith in their dark eyes when they lifted their heads to gaze through the arching tree limbs at the sky. God would give them victory.

4

God was with us. Our scouts went out, and returned with a Wampanoag boy, a wretched creature with a pinched face and tattered kilt. A Mahican with us knew the boy's tongue, and we soon heard of the grief that had come to his village. Inglistani soldiers had attacked without warning only a few days ago, striking in the night while his people slept. The boy guessed that nearly two hundred of his Wampanoag people had died, cut down by swords and firesticks. He did not know how many others had managed to escape.

We mourned with him. Inwardly, I rejoiced. Perhaps the Inglistanis would not have raided their allies if they had known we were coming against them, but their rash act served our purpose. The deed was proof of their evil intentions; they would slaughter even their friends to claim what they wanted. Wampanoags who might have fought against us now welcomed us as their deliverers. Yesuntai consulted with Aroniateka, then gave his orders. The left wing of our force would strike at Plymouth, using the Wampanoags as a shield as they advanced.

The Wampanoags had acquired muskets from the Inglistanis, and now turned those weapons against their false friends. By the time my companions and I heard the cries of gulls above Plymouth's rocky shore, the flames of the dying town lighted our way. Charred hulls and blackened masts were sinking beneath the gray waters; warriors had struck at the harbor first, approaching it during the night in canoes to burn the ships and cut off any escape to the sea. Women leaped from rocks and were swallowed by waves; other Inglistanis fled from the town's burning walls, only to be cut down by our forces. There was no need to issue a command to take no prisoners, for the betrayed Wampanoags were in no mood to show mercy. They drove their captives into houses, and set the dwellings ablaze; children became targets for their arrows.

The Flint People do not leave the spirits of their dead to wander. We painted the bodies of our dead comrades, then buried them with their weapons and the food they would need for the long journey ahead. Above the burial mound, the Ganeagaono freed birds they had captured to help bear the spirits of the fallen to Heaven, and set a fire to light their way.

From the ruins of Plymouth, we salvaged provisions, bolts of cloth, and cannons. Much of the booty was given to the Wampanoags, since they had suffered most of the casualties. Having achieved the swift victory we needed, we loaded the cannons onto ox-drawn wagons, then moved south.

5

The center and left wings of our forces came together as we entered Pequot territory. The right wing would move toward Charlestown while we struck at Newport.

Parties of warriors fanned out to strike at the farms that lay in our path. We met little resistance from the Pequots, and they soon understood that our battle was with the Inglistanis, not with them. After hearing of how Inglistani soldiers had massacred helpless Wampanoags, many of their warriors joined us, and led us to the farms of those they had once called friends. The night was brightened by the fires of burning houses and crops, and the silence shattered by the screams of the dying. We took what we needed, and burned the rest.

A few farmers escaped us. The tracks of their horses ran south; Newport would be warned. The enemy was likely to think that only enraged Wampanoags and Pequots were moving against them, but would surely send a force to meet us. We were still four days' distance from the lowlands that surrounded Newport's great bay when we caught sight of Inglistani soldiers.

They were massed together along the trail that led through the forest, marching stiffly in rows, their muskets ready. The Wampanoags fired upon them from the trees, then swept toward them as the air was filled with the sharp cracks of muskets and the whistling of arrows. Volleys of our metal-tipped arrows and the flint-headed arrows of the Ganeagaono flew toward the Inglistanis; enemy soldiers fell, opening up breaks in their line. Men knelt to load their weapons as others fired at us from behind them, and soon the ground was covered with the bodies of Wampanoag and Pequot warriors.

The people of these lands had never faced such carnage in battle, but their courage did not fail them. They climbed over the bodies of dead and wounded comrades to fight the enemy hand-to-hand. The soldiers, unable to fire at such close range, used their muskets as clubs and slashed at our allies with swords; men drenched in blood shrieked as they swung their tomahawks. I expected the Inglistanis to retreat, but they held their ground until the last of their men had fallen.

We mourned our dead. The Wampanoags and the Pequots, who had lost so many men, might have withdrawn and let us fight on alone. Aroniateka consulted with their war chiefs, then gave us their answer. They would march with us against Newport, and share in that victory.

6

Swift, early successes hearten any warrior for the efforts that lie ahead. We advanced on Newport fueled by the victories we had already won. Summer was upon us as we approached the southeast end of the great bay. The island on which Newport stood lay to the west, across a narrow channel; the enemy had retreated behind the wooden walls of the town's stockade.

By day, we concealed ourselves amid the trees bordering the shore's wetlands. At night, the Ganeagaono cut down trees and collected rope we had gathered from Inglistani farms. Several of Yesuntai's older officers had experience in siege warfare; under their guidance, our allies quickly erected five catapults. In the early days of our greatness, we had possessed as little knowledge of sieges as the Flint People, but they seemed more than willing to master this new art. We did not want a long siege, but would be prepared for one if necessary. If Newport held out, we would leave a force behind and move on to our next objective.

When the moon showed her dark side to the earth, we brought out our catapults under cover of darkness and launched cannonballs at the five ships anchored in Newport's harbor, following them with missiles of rock packed with burning dried grass. The sails of the ships became torches, and more missiles caught enemy sailors as they leaped from the decks. The ships were sinking by the time we turned the catapults against the town's walls. The Inglistanis would have no escape by sea, and had lost the ships they might have used to bombard us.

We assaulted Newport for three days, until the Inglistani cannons fell silent. From the western side of the island, Inglistanis were soon fleeing in longboats toward Charlestown. There were many breaches in the stockade's walls, and few defenders left in the doomed town when we began to cross the channel in our canoes, but those who remained fought to the last man. Even after our men were inside the walls, Inglistanis shot at us from windows and roofs, and for every enemy we took there, two or three of our warriors were lost. We stripped enemy bodies, looted the buildings, then burned the town. Those hiding on the western side of the bay in Charlestown would see the great bonfire that would warn them of their fate.

The Wampanoags returned to their lands in the north. We left the Pequots to guard the bay and to see that no more Inglistani ships landed there. Our right wing would be advancing on Charlestown. We returned to the bay's eastern shore and went north, then turned west. A party of men bearing the weapons of war met us along one woodland trail, and led us to their chiefs. By then, the Narragansett people of the region had decided to throw in their lot with us.

7

Terror has always been a powerful weapon against enemies. Put enough fear into an enemy's heart, and victories can be won even before one meets him in the field. Thus it was during that summer of war. Charlestown fell, ten days after Newport. In spite of the surrender, we expected some of the survivors to hide in their houses and take their revenge when we entered the town. Instead, they gave up their weapons and waited passively for execution. Those I beheaded whispered prayers as they knelt and stretched their necks, unable to rouse themselves even to curse me. A few gathered enough courage to beg for their children's lives.

Yesuntai was merciful. He spared some women and children, those who looked most fearful, led them and a few old men to a longboat, and gave them a message in Frankish to deliver to those in New Haven. The message was much like the traditional one sent by Mongol Khans to their enemies: God has annihilated many of you for daring to stand against us. Submit to us, and serve us. When you see us massed against you, surrender and open your gates to us, for if you do not, God alone knows what will happen to you.

It was easy to imagine the effect this message would have on New Haven's defenders, if the Inglistanis we had spared survived their journey along the coast to deliver it. I did not believe that the Inglistanis would surrender immediately, but some among them would want to submit, and dissension would sap their spirit.

Most of our forces moved west, toward New Haven, followed by Inglistanis we had spared to carry canoes and haul cannons. Yesuntai had mastered enough of the Flint People's language to speak with Aroniateka, and left me with the rear guard. We would travel to the north of the main force, paralleling its path, and take the outlying farms.

* * *

Most of the farms we found were abandoned. We salvaged what we could and burned the rest. Days of searching empty farmhouses gave me time to reflect on how this campaign would affect my Ganeagaono brothers.

Their past battles had been for glory, to show their courage, to bring enemies to submission and to capture prisoners who might, in the end, become brothers of the Long House. They had seen that unity among their Five Nations would make them stronger. Now we were teaching them that a victory over certain enemies was not enough, that sometimes only the extermination of that enemy would end the conflict, that total war might be necessary. Perhaps they would have learned that lesson without us, but their knowledge of this new art would change them, as surely as the serpent who beguiled the first man and woman changed man's nature. They might turn what they had learned against us.

Victories can hearten any soldier, but a respite from battle can also cause him to let down his guard. With a small party led by my son, I followed a rutted road toward one farm. From the trees beyond the field, where the corn was still only tall enough to reach to a man's waist, we spied a log dwelling, with smoke rising from its chimney. A white flag attached to a stick stood outside the door.

"They wish to surrender," I murmured to my son.

He shook his head. "The corn will hide us. We can get close enough to—"

"They are willing to give themselves up. Your men would have captives when they return to their homes. The Inglistanis have lost. Yesuntai will not object if we spare people willing to surrender without a fight."

My son said, "You are only weary of killing. My people say that a man weary of war is also weary of life."

"The people whose seed I carry have the same saying." He had spoken the truth. I was tiring of the war I had helped to bring about, thinking of what might follow it. "I shall speak to them."

"And we will guard your back," my son replied.

I left the trees and circled the field as the others crept through the corn. When I was several paces from the door, I held out my hands, palms up. "Come outside," I shouted in Frankish, hoping my words would be understood. "Show yourselves." I tensed, ready to fling myself to the ground if my son and his men suddenly attacked.

The door opened. A man with a graying beard left the house, followed by a young girl. A white cap hid her hair, but bright golden strands curled over her forehead. She gazed at me steadily with her blue eyes; I saw sorrow in her look, but no fear. A brave spirit, I thought, and felt a heaviness over my heart that might have been pity.

The man's Frankish was broken, but I was able to grasp his words. Whatever his people had done, he had always dealt fairly with the natives. He asked only to be left on his farm, to have his life and his family's spared.

"It cannot be," I told him. "You must leave this place. My brothers will decide your fate. That is all I can offer you, a chance for life away from here."

The man threw up an arm. The girl was darting toward the doorway when I saw a glint of metal beyond a window. A blow knocked the wind from me and threw me onto my back. I clutched at my ribs and felt blood seep from me as the air was filled with the sound of war whoops.

They had been lying in wait for us. Perhaps they would not have fired at me if I had granted the man his request; perhaps they had intended an ambush all along. I cursed myself for my weakness and pity. I would have another scar to remind me of Inglistani treachery and the cost of a moment's lack of vigilance, if I lived.

When I came to myself, the cabin was burning. A man knelt beside me, tending my wounds. Pain stabbed at me along my right side as I struggled to breathe. Two bodies in the gray clothes of Inglistani farmers lay outside the door. The Ganeagaono warriors danced as the flames leaped before them.

My son strode toward me, a scalp of long, golden hair dangling from his belt. "You cost me two men," he said. I moved my head from side to side, unable to speak. "I am sorry, Father. I think this war will be your last."

"I will live," I said.

"Yes, you will live, but I do not think you will fight again." He sighed. "Yet I must forgive you, for leading us to what your people call greatness." He lifted his head and cried out, echoing the war whoops of his men.

8

I was carried west on a wagon, my ribs covered with healing herbs and bound tightly with Inglistani cloth. A few men remained with me while the rest moved on toward New Haven. Every morning, I woke expecting to find that they had abandoned me, only to find them seated around the fire.

A man's pride can be good medicine, and the disdain of others a goad. I was able to walk when Yesuntai sent a Bahadur to me with news of New Haven's surrender. Few soldiers were left in New Haven; most had fled to make a stand in New London. The young Noyan expected a fierce battle there, where the valor of the Inglistanis would be fired by desperation. He wanted me at his side as soon as possible.

The Bahadur had brought a spare horse for me. As we rode, he muttered of the difficulties Yesuntai now faced. Our Narragansett allies had remained behind in their territory, as we had expected, but the Mahicans, sated by glory, were already talking of returning to their lands. They thought they could wait until spring to continue the war; they did not understand. I wondered if the Ganeagaono had the stomach for a siege that might last the winter. They would be thinking of the coming Green Corn festival, of the need to lay in game for the colder weather and of the families that waited for them.

The oaks and maples gave way to more fields the Inglistanis had cleared and then abandoned. I smelled the salt of the ocean when we caught sight of Mongol and Mahican sentries outside a makeshift stockade. Yesuntai

was camped to the east of New London, amid rows of Ganeagaono bark shelters. In the distance, behind a fog rolling in from the sea, I glimpsed the walls of the town.

Yesuntai and Aroniateka were outside one shelter, sitting at a fire with four other men. I heaved myself from my horse and walked toward them.

"Greetings, Jirandai," Yesuntai said in Mongol. "I am pleased to see you have recovered enough to take part in our final triumph."

I squatted by the fire and stretched out my hands. My ribs still pained me; I suspected they always would. "This is likely to be our hardest battle," I said.

"Then our glory will be all the greater when we win it." Yesuntai accepted a pipe from Aroniateka and drew in the smoke. "We will take New London before the leaves begin to turn."

"You plan to take it by storm?" I asked. "That will cost us."

"I must have it, whatever it costs. My fellow commander Aroniateka is equally impatient for this campaign to end, as I suspect you are, Bahadur." His eyes held the same look I had seen in my son's outside the burning farmhouse, that expression of pity mingled with contempt for an old man tired of war.

I slept uneasily that night, plagued by aching muscles strained by my ride and the pain of my wounds. The sound of intermittent thunder over the ocean woke me before dawn. I crept from my shelter to find other men outside, shadows in the mists, and then knew what we were hearing. The sound was that of cannons being fired from ships. The Inglistanis would turn the weapons of their ships against us, whatever the risk to the town. They would drive us back from the shore and force us to withdraw.

Yesuntai had left his shelter. He paced, his arms swinging as if he longed to sweep the fog away. I went to him, knowing how difficult it would be to persuade him to give up now. A man shouted in the distance, and another answered him with a whoop. Yesuntai would have to order a retreat, or see men slaughtered to no purpose. I could still hear the sound of cannons over the water, and wondered why the Inglistanis had sailed no closer to us.

A Mongol and a Ganeagaono warrior were pushing their way through knots of men. "Noyan!" the Mongol called out to Yesuntai. "From the shore, I saw three ships —they fly the blue and white banners of your father! They have turned their weapons against the Inglistanis!"

The men near us cheered. Yesuntai's face was taut, his eyes slits. He turned to me; his hands trembled as he clasped my shoulders.

"It seems," he said softly, "that we will have to share our triumph."

The ships had sailed to New London from Yeke Geren. They bombarded the town as we advanced from the north and east, driving our remaining Inglistani captives before us against the outer stockade. The sight of these wretches, crying out in Inglistani to their comrades and dying under the assault of their own people's weapons, soon brought New London's commander to send up white flags.

Michel Bahadur left his ship to accept the surrender. We learned from him that our Khan had at last begun his war against Inglistan that spring; a ship had brought Michel the news only recently. By now, he was certain, the Khanate's armies would be marching on London itself. Michel had quickly seen that his duty lay in aiding us, now that we were openly at war with the Inglistanis.

Michel Bahadur praised Yesuntai lavishly as they embraced in the square of the defeated town. He spoke of our courage, but in words that made it seem that only Michel could have given us this final triumph. I listened in silence, my mind filled with harsh thoughts about men who claimed the victories of others for their own.

We celebrated the fall of New London with a feast in the town hall. Several Inglistani women who had survived the ravages of Michel's men stood behind them to fill their cups. There were few beauties among those wan and narrow-faced creatures, but Michel had claimed a pretty dark-haired girl for himself.

He sat among his men, Yesuntai at his side, drinking to our victory. He offered only a grudging tribute to the Ganeagaono and the Mahicans, and said that they would be given their share of captives with the air of a man granting a great favor. I had chosen to sit with the Ganeagaono chiefs, as did most of the Mongols who had fought with us. Michel's men laughed when three of the Mahican chiefs slid under tables, overcome by the wine and whiskey. My son, watching them, refused to drink from his cup.

"Comrades!" Michel bellowed in Frankish. I brooded over my wine, wondering what sort of speech he would make now. "Our enemies have been crushed! I say now that in this place, where we defeated the last of the Inglistani settlers, we will make a new outpost of our Khanate! New London will become another great camp!"

I stiffened in shock. The men around Michel fell silent as they watched us. Yesuntai glanced in my direction; his fingers tightened around his cup.

"New London was to burn," Yesuntai said at last. "It was to suffer the fate of the other settlements."

"It will stand," Michel said, "to serve your father our Khan. Surely you cannot object to that, Noyan."

Yesuntai seemed about to speak, then sank back in his seat. Our Narragansett and Wampanoag allies would feel betrayed when they learned of Michel's intentions. The Bahadur's round, crafty face reminded me of everything I despised in Europeans, their greed, their treachery, their lies.

My son motioned to me, obviously expecting me to translate Michel's words. I leaned toward him. "Listen to me," I said softly in the tongue of the Flint People, "and do nothing rash when you hear what I must say now. The war chief who sailed here to aid us means to camp in this place. His people will live in this town we have won."

His hand darted toward his tomahawk, then fell. "So this is why we fought. I should have listened to Mother when she first spoke against you."

"I did not know what Michel Bahadur meant to do, but what happens here will not trouble the Long House."

"Until your people choose to forget another promise," my son replied.

"I am one of you," I said.

"You are only an old man who allowed himself to be deceived." He looked away from me. "I know where honor lies, even if your people do not. I will not shame you before your chief by showing what I think of him. I will not break our treaty in this place." He turned to Aroniateka and whispered to him. The chiefs near them were still; only their eyes revealed their rage.

I had fulfilled my duty to my Khan. All that remained was to keep my promise to myself, and to Dasiyu.

9

I walked along New London's main street, searching for Yesuntai. Warriors stumbled along the cobblestones, intoxicated by drink, blind to the contemptuous stares of our Frankish and Dutch sailors. The whiskey Michel's men had given them from the looted stores had made them forget their villages and the tasks that awaited them there.

I found Yesuntai with a party of Ganeagaono warriors and a few Inglistani captives. "These comrades are leaving us," Yesuntai said. "You must say an eloquent farewell for me—I still lack the words to do it properly."

One of the men pulled at his scalplock. "It is time for us to go," he said in his language. Five Mahicans clutching bottles of whiskey staggered past us. "To see brave men in such a state sickens me."

I nodded in agreement. "My chief Yesuntai will forever remember your valor. May Grandfather Heno water your fields, the Three Sisters give you a great harvest, and the winter be filled with tales of your victories."

The warriors led their captives away; two of the smaller children wept as they clung to their mothers' hands. They would forget their tears and learn to love the People of the Long House, as I had.

"The rest should go home as well," I said to Yesuntai. "There is nothing for them here now."

"Perhaps not."

"They will have stories to tell of this war for many generations. Perhaps the tales of their exploits can make them forget how they were treated here. I wish to speak to you, Noyan."

"Good. I have been hoping for a chance to speak to you."

I led him along a side street to the house where Aroniateka and my son were quartered with some of their men. All of them were inside, sitting on blankets near the fireplace. At least these men had resisted the lure of drink, and had refused the bright baubles Michel's men had thrown to our warriors while claiming the greater share of the booty for themselves. They greeted us with restraint, and did not ask us to join them.

We seated ourselves at a table in the back of the room. "I swore an oath to you, Yesuntai Noyan," I said, "and ask you to free me from it now." I rested my elbows on the table. "I wish to return to Skanechtade, to my Ganeagaono brothers."

He leaned forward. "I expected you to ask for that."

"As for my wife Elgigetei and my son Ajiragha, I ask only that you accept them into your household. My wife will not miss me greatly, and perhaps you can see that Ajiragha does not forget his father. You were my comrade in arms, and I will not sneak away from your side in the night. You do not need me now. Even my son will tell you that I am a man who has outlived his taste for battle. You will lose nothing by letting me go."

"And what will you do," he said, "if my people forsake their treaties?"

"I think you know the answer to that."

"You told me of the treaty's words, that we and the Flint People would be at peace for as long as you were both their brother and the Khan's servant. You will no longer be our servant if you go back to Skanechtade."

"So you are ready to seize on that. If the men of Yeke Geren fail to renew their promises, that will show their true intentions. I had hoped that you—"

"Listen to me." Yesuntai's fingers closed around my wrist. "I have found my brothers in your son and Aroniateka, and among the brave men who fought with us. They are my brothers, not the rabble who came here under Michel's command."

"Those men serve your father the Khan."

"They serve themselves," he whispered, "and forget what we once were."

I shook my arm free of his grasp. He was silent for a while, then said, "Koko Mongke Tengri, the Eternal Blue Sky that covers all the world, promised us dominion over Etugen, the Earth. I told you of the wise men in Khitai who believe that the ancestors of the peoples in these lands once roamed our ancient homeland. I know now that what those scholars say is true. The people here are our long-lost brothers—they are more truly Mongol than men whose blood has been thinned by the ways of Europe. For them to rule here is in keeping with our destiny. They could make an ulus here, a nation as great as any we have known, one that might someday be a match for our Khanates."

I said, "You are speaking treason."

"I am speaking the truth. I have had a vision, Jirandai. The spirits have spoken to me and shown me two arcs closing in a great circle, joining those who have been so long separated. When the peoples of this land are one ulus, when they achieve the unity our ancestors found under Genghis Khan, then perhaps they will be the ones to bring the rest of the world under their sway. If the Khans in our domains cannot accept them as brothers, they may be forced to bow to them as conquerors." Yesuntai paused. "Are we to sweep the Inglistanis from these lands only so that more of those we rule can flood these shores? They will forget the Khanate, as our people are forgetting their old homeland. They will use the peoples of this land against one another in their own disputes, when they have forgotten their Khan and fall to fighting among themselves. I see what must be done

to prevent that. You see it, too. We have one more battle to fight before you go back to Skanechtade."

I knew what he wanted. "How do you plan to take Yeke Geren?" I asked.

"We must have Michel's ships. My Mongols can man them. We also need the Ganeagaono." He gazed past me at the men seated by the fire. "You will speak my words to your son and Aroniateka, and then we will act—and soon. Your brothers will be free of all their enemies."

Yesuntai spoke of warring tribes on the other side of the world, tribes that had wasted themselves in battles with one another until the greatest of men had united them under his standard. He talked of a time long before that, when other tribes had left the mountains, forests, and steppes of their ancient homeland to seek new herds and territories, and of the northern land bridge they had followed to a new world. He spoke of a great people's destiny, of how God meant them to rule the world, and of those who, in the aftermath of their glory, were forgetting their purpose. In the lands they had conquered, they would eventually fall out among themselves; the great ulus of the Mongols would fracture into warring states. God would forsake them. Their brothers in this new world could reach for the realm that rightly belonged to them.

Aroniateka was the first to speak after I translated the Noyan's speech. "We have a treaty with your people," he said. "Do you ask us to break it?"

"We ask that you serve the son of our Khan, who is our rightful leader here," I replied. "Those who came here to claim our victory will take the lands we freed for themselves, and their greed will drive them north to yours. Michel Bahadur and the men of Yeke Geren have already broken the treaty in their hearts."

"I am a sachem," my son said, "and will take up my duties again when I am home. I know what is recorded on the belts of wampum our wise men have in their keeping. Our treaty binds us as long as my father Senadondo is our brother and the servant of his former people, as long as he is our voice among them."

"I found that many grew deaf to my voice," I said. "I will not go back to live in Yeke Geren. I have told my chief Yesuntai that I will live among the Owners of the Flint until the end of my days."

My son met Yesuntai's gaze. How alike their eyes were, as cold and dark as those of a serpent. "My dream told me that my father would bring me a brother," my son said. "I see my brother now, sitting before me." I knew then that he would bring the other chiefs to agree to our plans.

We secured the ships easily. Yesuntai's soldiers rowed out to the vessels; the few sailors left on board, suspecting nothing, were quickly overcome. Most of Michel's men were quartered in the Inglistani commander's house and the three nearest it; they were sleepy with drink when we struck. Michel and his officers were given an honorable death by strangulation, and some of the Dutch and Frankish sailors hastily offered their oaths to Yesuntai. The others were given to the Ganeagaono, to be tortured and then burned at the stake as we set New London ablaze.

I sailed with Yesuntai and his men. The Ganeagaono and the Mahicans who had remained with us went west on foot with their Inglistani captives. When we reached the narrow strait that separated Yeke Geren from the long island of Gawanasegeh, people gathered along the cliffs and the shore to watch us sail south toward the harbor. The ships anchored there had no chance to mount a resistance, and we lost only one of our vessels in the battle. By then, the Ganeagaono and Mahicans had crossed to the northern end of Yeke Geren in canoes, under cover of night, and secured the pastures there.

They might have withstood our assault. They might have waited us out, until our allies tired of the siege and the icy winds of winter forced us to withdraw to provision our ships. But too many in Yeke Geren had lost their fighting spirit, and others thought it better to throw in their lot with Yesuntai. They surrendered fourteen days later.

About half of the Mongol officers offered their oaths to Yesuntai; the rest were beheaded. Some of the Mahicans would remain in what was left of Yeke Geren, secure treaties with the tribes of Gawanasegeh and the smaller island to our southwest, and see that no more ships landed there. The people of the settlement were herded into roped enclosures. They would be distributed among the Ganeagaono and taken north, where the Flint People would decide which of them were worthy of adoption.

I searched among the captives for Elgigetei and Ajiragha. At last an old man told me that they had been taken by a fever only a few days before we attacked the harbor. I mourned for them, but perhaps it was just as well. My son might not have survived the journey north, and Dasiyu would never have accepted a second wife. I had the consolation of knowing that my deeds had not carried their deaths to them.

Clouds of migrating birds were darkening the skies when I went with Yesuntai to our two remaining ships. A mound of heads, those of the officers we had executed, sat on the slope leading down to the harbor, a monument to our victory and a warning to any who tried to land there.

The Noyan's men were waiting by the shore with the surviving Frankish and Dutch sailors. The ships were provisioned with what we could spare, the sailors ready to board. Men of the sea would be useless in the northern forests, and men of uncertain loyalties who scorned the ways of the Flint People would not be welcome there.

Yesuntai beckoned to a gray-haired captain. "This is my decree," he said. "You will sail east, and carry this message to my father." He gestured with a scroll. "I shall recite the message for you now. I will make a Khanate of this land, but it will not be sullied by those who would bring the sins of Europe to its shores. When an ulus has risen here, it will be the mighty nation of our long-lost

brothers. Only then will the circle close, and all our brothers be joined, and only if all the Khans accept the men of this land as their equals. It is then that we will truly rule the world, and if my brother Khans do not join this ulus of the world to come willingly, only God knows what will befall them."

"We cannot go back with such a message," the captain said. "Those words will cost us our heads."

"You dishonor my father by saying that. You are my emissaries, and no Khan would stain his hands with the blood of ambassadors." Yesuntai handed the scroll to the old man. "These are my words, marked with my seal. My father the Khan will know that I have carried out his orders, that the people of Inglistan will not set foot here again. He will also know that there is no need for his men to come here, since it is I who will secure this new Khanate." He narrowed his eyes. "If you do not wish to claim the Khan's reward for this message, then sail where you will and find what refuge you can. The Khan my father, and those who follow him to his throne, will learn of my destiny in time."

We watched as the sailors boarded the longboats and rowed toward the ships. Yesuntai threw an arm over my shoulders as we turned away from the sea and climbed toward Yeke Geren. "Jirandai," he murmured, "or perhaps I should call you Senadondo now, as your Long House brothers do. You must guide me in my new life. You will show me what I must do to become a Khan among these people."

He would not be my Khan. I had served him for the sake of the Flint People, not to make him a Khan, but would allow him his dream for a little while. Part of his vision would come to pass; the Long House People would have a great realm, and Yesuntai might inspire them to even greater valor. But I did not believe that the Hodenosaunee, a people who allowed all to raise their voices in their councils, would ever bow to a Khan and offer him total obedience. My son would honor Yesuntai as a brother, but would never kneel to him. Yesuntai's sons would be Ganeagaono warriors, bound to their mother's clan, not a Mongol prince's heirs.

I did not say this to Yesuntai. He would learn it in time, or be forced to surrender his dream to other leaders who would make it their own. The serpent that had wakened to disturb the lands of the Long House would grow, and slip westward to meet his tail. ✦

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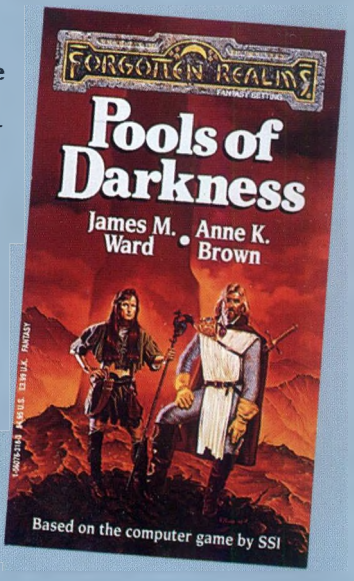

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