Vol. LXVI, No. 1

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ALL NEW FORMAT, FEATURES, AND FICTION!

AMAZING® STORIES

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John Brunner
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and
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AMAZING® Stories
ALL NEW FORMAT, FEATURES, AND FICTION
Vol. LXVI, No. 1

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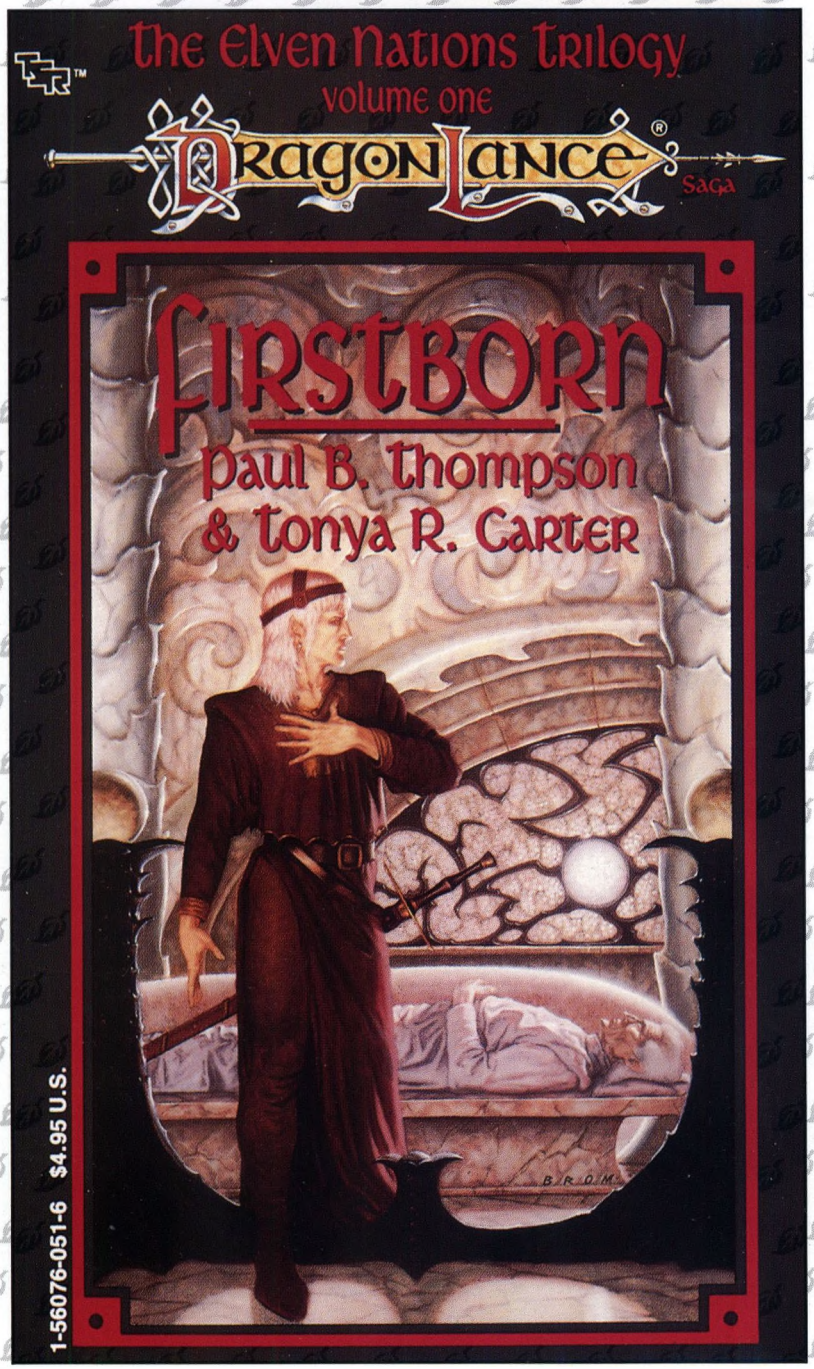

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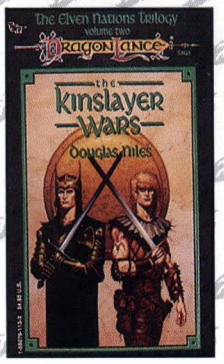

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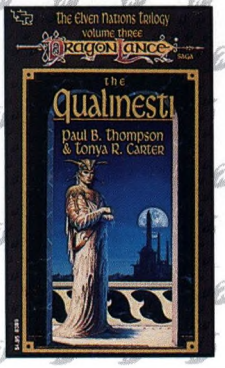

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TSR, Inc.

Dear Readers,

Science fiction is the literature of the future. Science fiction stories are concerned not with what *is*, but with what *could be*. And that's also what the new AMAZING® Stories is all about.

As we move into the last decade of the 20th century, the field of speculative fiction—and especially science fiction—has never been more vibrant, more diverse, and more full of potential. It's only fitting that AMAZING Stories, the world's first and oldest science fiction magazine, should be at the vanguard of the great leap forward that is taking place in the genre. Just as the magazine led the way when it was first published in 1926, so does it take the lead again sixty-five years later.

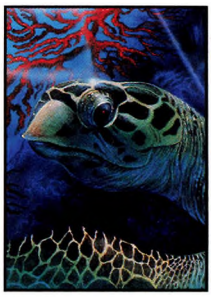
When we started to think about the direction AMAZING Stories would take, we knew that science fiction *could be* presented in a clean, easy-to-read format. The stories *could be* enhanced by pairing them with beautifully rendered full-color artwork. The literature of the future *could be* appreciated and enjoyed by a multitude of new readers if they were to see it presented in a top-quality physical format. We decided that AMAZING Stories *could be* the magazine that accomplished all these goals . . . and then we went ahead and made it exactly that.

What you're holding in your hands is the future of science fiction magazines. When you've admired all the illustrations and enjoyed all the stories, I think you'll agree that the future has never looked brighter. Sit back, turn the page, and let us take you to a place you've never been before.

Lorraine D. Williams
Publisher

AMAZING® STORIES

Contents



7

17

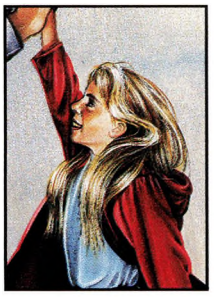
39

69

THANKS FOR THE MEMORIES

REFLECTIONS

FICTION

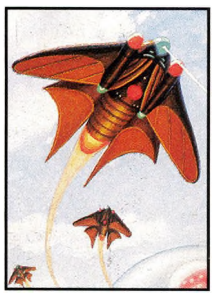


23

53

NONFICTION

LOOKING FORWARD



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Thanks for the Memories

Kim Mohan

They say you always remember your first time. I know I'll never forget mine.

No matter how many issues of this magazine end up having my name on them—and I hope that's a very large number—the May 1991 issue will always be special. For the rest of my life I'll carry around a headful of memories, dating back to the time when this issue was the vaguest of dreams and ranging forward to right now, when the deadline for kicking it out of the nest is just a few hours away.

The most pleasant memories of the whole batch are the ones that have to do with other people—the host of friends, old and new, who have helped to create the magazine you're holding.

No, I'm not talking about the people listed on page 3. Every one of them was a vital part of the effort that resulted in this new version of AMAZING® Stories. But I don't need to sing their praises (although I easily could), because the magazine itself is proof enough of what they can do and how much they care.

I *am* talking about a group of creative and thoughtful folks whose contributions are not obvious—or, at least, might not have been obvious if they weren't being described here. None of them required any credit for what they did, and probably didn't even expect it. But they deserve it, and they're going to get it. To each one of them, I want to take this space to say thanks—thanks for what you did for me and, especially, thanks for the memories.

Months ago, when we decided once and for all what form the new version of AMAZING Stories would take, we knew we needed a piece of cover art that would help us publicize what was going on. We wanted the illustration to be colorful, intriguing, and technically brilliant—and we wanted it *now.*

Enter Tim Hildebrandt, who had the marvelously good timing to call me up on the same day that I was going to call him up. To make a short story even shorter, he not only agreed to create a cover illustration for the first new issue—he agreed to do it immediately. If you know anything about Tim Hildebrandt and his career, you know that he doesn't exactly have to go around knocking on doors to get work. Not incidentally, he has an exceedingly pleasant personality and an ego the size of a 000 brush tip. For every reason that matters, I consider it a high privilege to have a Hildebrandt original on the cover of this issue. And I guarantee this won't be the last cover he does for us.

At about the same time the cover deal was going down, I was casting about (in my head, where there's plenty of room for such activity) for ideas on how to make AMAZING Stories different from other magazines of the same general type. Sure, we would publish fiction and articles and reviews and all the stuff people more or less expect to see, but what *else* could we do?

Enter Bill Fawcett, whose energy level is matched only by his ability to come up with new ideas. Both of those traits have helped him become a successful book packager in science fiction publishing, and he also uses them in his role as the driving force behind "Looking Forward," the new feature that begins on page 61.

"Listen," Bill said. So I did. He went on to say, more or less, this: Many authors who are popular nowadays don't write material specifically for magazines. They do novels—novels that AMAZING Stories could preview for readers by using a brief excerpt and a reproduction of the actual cover of the book.

"Right," I said. "But who will go to all the trouble of lining up these books and choosing the excerpts and writing the introductory stuff?"

"I will," Bill said. And he did. For the first installment of the feature, he arranged for us to print small slices of two June releases, written by C. J. Cherryh and Bob Asprin. In the issues to come, we'll stay one small step ahead of the book industry's publishing schedule and give you a sneak peek at more of the best work from today's top long-story writers.

Thanks, Bill. I owe you.

When I started chipping away at the mountain of manuscript submissions that came along with this job, I was

(Continued on page 75)

Reflections

Robert Silverberg

"So *Amazing* is reborn again. I rejoice at that; for *Amazing* has been important to me for a long time. As a boy more than thirty years ago I read it with intense excitement; as a young writer a quarter of a century ago I contributed dozens of stories to its pages; and in various ways over the past fifteen years I have acted as a behind-the-scenes consultant to its various owners ands editors. Most recently, this column in the magazine has been a vehicle for my thoughts about the world of science fiction. So I'm glad to see yet another rebirth. *Amazing* has more lives than the Phoenix; and it seems to go through a total transformation of its essential nature every few years. Its survival against such severe odds has been important to all of us who have a sense of history and love science fiction."

I've placed that paragraph in quotation marks because a quotation is what it is—from my own column, then called *Opinion*, in the September 1982 issue. AMAZING® Stories had just acquired a new publisher and editor. After struggling along for a few years in what amounted to semi-professional status, published out of Arizona on a shoestring budget and edited by the ingenious and plucky Elinor Mavor, the magazine had been purchased by the powerful adventure-gaming outfit TSR Hobbies and was being launched with a bold and ambitious program of revivification.

The new editor was George Scithers, who had previously helped to get the highly successful *Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine* under way. Scithers, widely known in the science fiction world as a shrewd and capable editor, intended to make ample use of TSR's deep pockets to acquire the best of sf writing and illustration and restore the magazine to the high place it had held—intermittently—over the 56 years of its checkered history.

For a while it seemed as though Scithers was going to bring it off. He increased the number of pages in the magazine and upgraded the format. The early issues under his leadership featured stories by Jack Williamson, Gene Wolfe, Larry Niven, Poul Anderson, Tanith Lee, Gregory Benford, Frederik Pohl, and an assortment of other luminaries. (He even coaxed a couple of stories out of a guy named Silverberg.) The cover paintings of those first few issues were done by the likes of Michael Whelan, Frank Kelly Freas, and Jack Gaughan.

The rebirth of the magazine appeared to be a tremendous success. Only one thing went wrong. Circulation didn't improve. It stayed pretty much on the same low level that it had been on during *Amazing*'s last few troubled years.

Why? I don't know. Possibly nobody does. Perhaps the problem was distribution, always a bugaboo for small-sized magazines: there's room for only so many titles on the racks between the paperback books on one side and the large-sized slick magazines on the other, and new magazines have a tough time muscling their way in. (And AMAZING Stories in its TSR incarnation amounted to a new magazine, the way distributors think.)

Or perhaps the dominance of paperback science fiction had become so complete that the regular sf consumers didn't want to add yet another magazine to their reading routine, preferring to stay with the two or three they were already buying every month.

Whatever the reason, the new AMAZING Stories remained stuck in the same circulation rut as its Arizona predecessor. Scithers struggled heroically with the problem for a couple of years and moved along to other things. With the September 1986 issue his place on the masthead was taken by Patrick Lucien Price, a veteran TSR staffer with a deep love for science fiction. Pat Price set about immediately to invigorate the magazine yet again in the same way Scithers had—by sprucing up the format even more, soliciting new stories by top writers, adding new features departments, etc., etc., etc. But he too was mysteriously unable to jump-start the magazine to the kind of sales level that would make its continued life secure. In the waning months of 1989, word began to circulate in the science fiction community that AMAZING Stories' days were numbered, that the

magazine could not continue as it had been going and would either be transformed into a graphic-novel operation or would be killed entirely.

That was sad and troubling news for those who love and understand science fiction's traditions—because AMAZING® Stories is the oldest science fiction magazine in the world, the pioneer, the granddaddy of the whole field.

Its first issue was dated April, 1926—containing classic stories by Poe, Verne, and H. G. Wells, and a sprinkling of new material by such writers as G. Peyton Wertenbaker and George Allen England. The publisher and editor was the remarkable Hugo Gernsback, a gadgeteer and tinkerer whose prior magazines had included *Modern Electronics, Radio News,* and *The Electrical Experimenter.* Gernsback—for whom science fiction's annual Hugo awards are named—hoped to educate the American public in science by giving them a monthly science fiction magazine.

It was a fine-looking, large-size affair, in the 8½ x 11 format used by modern slicks such as *Omni* and *Scientific American,* and it was immediately successful. But in 1929 Gernsback lost control of the magazine in a complex bankruptcy squabble, and under the new publisher and its 80-year-old editor, T. O'Conor Sloane, most of its early vitality gradually disappeared. The fiction it ran grew slower and wordier until the readers tired of its long-windedness and went away. The old large-size format became too costly and in 1933 the magazine shifted to the cheaper (and cheap-looking) pulp-magazine layout. In 1937 the moribund *Amazing* passed into the hands of the Chicago-based pulp-magazine outfit, Ziff-Davis Publications, and under the editorship of well-known science fiction fan Raymond A. Palmer it began to publish bang-bang adventure stories, the wildest and woolliest that could be found—the crude sort of thing that we'd call "sci-fi" today, as distinguished from the more thoughtful and literate "science fiction."

This new *Amazing* was a magazine for kids, and kids loved it. Circulation soared. Palmer tried all sorts of tricks to bring in new readers, some of them a little on the shady side, as in the years from 1945 to 1948 when he made a frank pitch for credulous nut-cultists with the so-called Shaver Mystery series.

One of the kids who loved the magazine, Shaver Mystery and all, was me. I started buying it regularly when I was fourteen, in 1949, after having found a few issues the year before in second-hand magazine shops. At fourteen I didn't mind how wild and implausible the stories were. The Shaver Mystery didn't bother me either—I didn't look upon it as gospel, as more credulous types did, but the stories were vivid fantasy with a powerful appeal. A year later, I was more sophisticated and started to take a patronizing view of what had been my favorite magazine—but right around then *Amazing* underwent another of its periodic metamorphoses, when Howard Browne replaced Palmer as editor and made a determined effort to reach a more mature audience. Browne abolished the old formula fiction as soon as he had used up Palmer's inventory, and bought stories by such masters as Theodore Sturgeon, Fritz Leiber, L. Sprague de Camp, and Walter M. Miller, Jr., for *Amazing* and its virtually identical companion magazine of the era, *Fantastic Adventures.*

Browne hated the shaggy-edged, pulp-magazine format and was determined to transform *Amazing* into something slicker and finer. He almost succeeded in the summer of 1950, when the magazine came within a month or two of turning into a large-size slick magazine with color illustrations and top-notch fiction. I'm told that an actual dummy issue was prepared and privately circulated, an item highly prized by collectors today. But then the Korean War broke out and paper shortages forced Ziff-Davis Publications to cancel the change of format.

Eventually Browne did manage to escape the pulp stigma: in 1953 *Amazing* was completely redesigned as a handsome magazine, in the new digest-sized format rather than large size, printed on fine paper and paying big prices for fiction by the likes of Ray Bradbury, Robert A. Heinlein, and Arthur C. Clarke. But once more the readers proved fickle: the elegant new *Amazing,* after hitting some startling peaks of circulation, began to lose popularity, and within a few years it had reverted to the old action-adventure sci-fi policy, though remaining, this time, a digest-sized magazine, as it would for the next quarter of a century. (The quality of printing, though, was allowed to drop off after Browne's glory days were past.)

There were many other ups and downs in the years that followed—some glorious moments under the editorship of Cele Goldsmith in the early 1960s, some dismal ones later on when Ziff-Davis sold the magazine and its editorial budget was slashed to next to nothing. Not much in *Amazing*'s long history has been consistent except its name: other than that, the Gernsback, Sloane, Palmer, Browne, and Goldsmith versions might almost have been five radically different magazines.

And now we get a new version again. Once more the Phoenix is reborn.

A new format—back to the large size again, *Amazing*'s classic original dimensions, which Howard Browne almost managed to revive forty years ago. And a new editor, Kim Mohan.

But not really new. He's been with TSR a long time and his involvement with AMAZING Stories goes back to the Scithers years. You'll find his name on the contents page of the July 1983 issue, with a short piece in which he profiled the various TSR staffers who helped then to put the issue together.

And now he's the editor. Of this newest version of AMAZING Stories—the grandest fresh start the magazine has had in many years.

More than four decades ago, when Howard Browne launched another of *Amazing*'s umpty transformations with the redesigned February 1950 issue, the cover bore the triumphant announcement: "A NEW FIELD OF SCIENCE FICTION!" For better or worse, that's what AMAZING Stories has been delivering every few years since its birth in 1926. And now here we go again. It's your turn, Kim. ✦

A TIP ON A TURTLE

ROBERT SILVERBERG

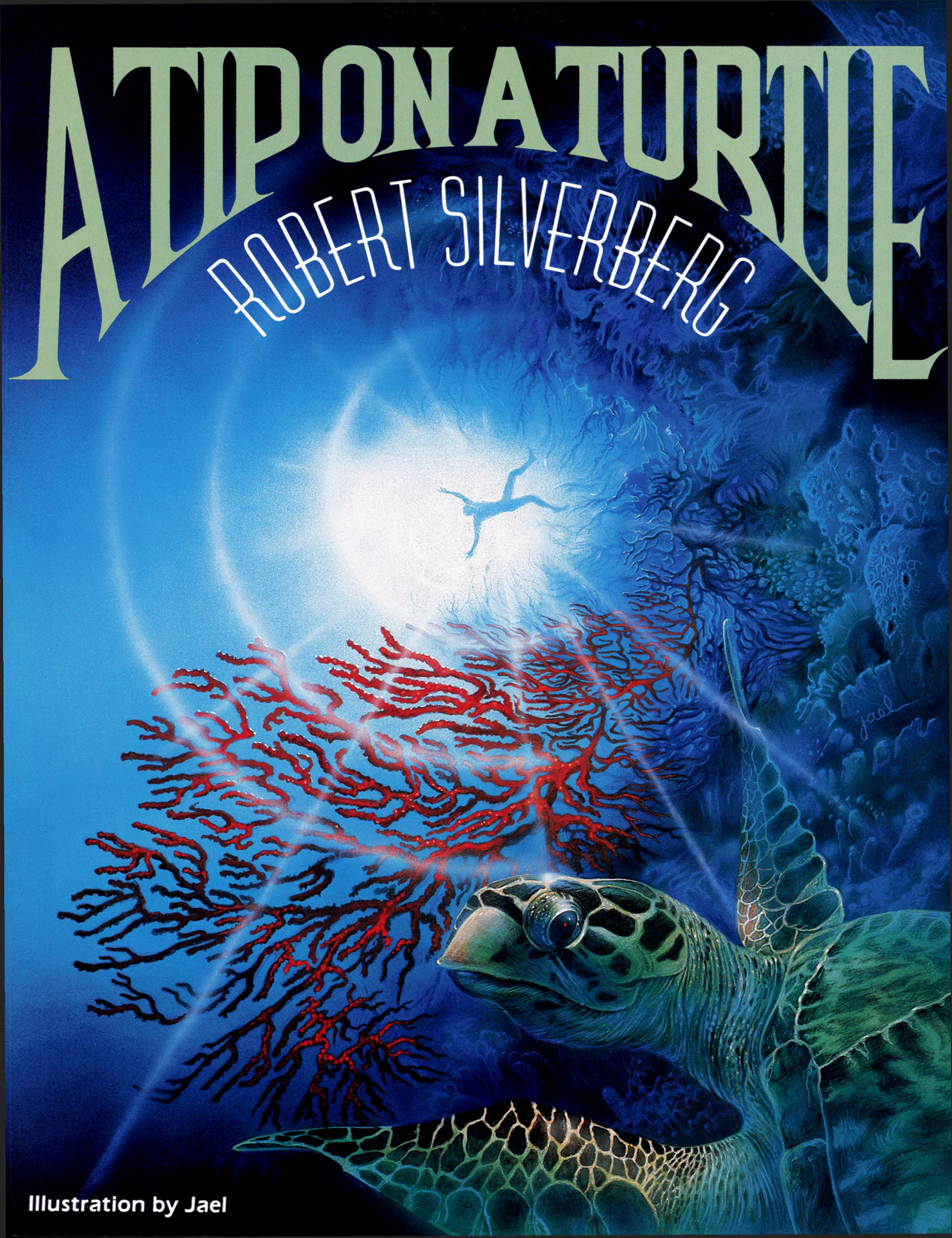

Illustration by Jael

The sun was going down in the usual spectacular Caribbean way, disappearing in a welter of purple and red and yellow streaks that lay across the wide sky beyond the hotel's manicured golf course like a magnificent bruise. It was time to head for the turtle pool for the pre-dinner races. They held the races three times a day now, once after lunch, once before dinner, once after dinner. Originally the races had been nothing more than a casual diversion, but by now they had become a major item of entertainment for the guests and a significant profit center for the hotel.

As Denise took her place along the blazing bougainvillea hedge that flanked the racing pool, a quiet, deep voice just back of her left ear said, "You might try Number Four in the first race."

It was the man she had noticed at the beach that afternoon, the tall tanned one with the powerful shoulders and the tiny bald spot. She had been watching him snorkeling along the reef, nothing visible above the surface of the water but his bald spot and the blue strap of his goggles and the black stalk of the snorkel. When he came to shore he walked right past her, seemingly lost in some deep reverie; but for a moment, just a moment, their eyes had met in a startling way. Then he had gone on, without a word or even a smile. Denise was left with the feeling that there was something tragic about him, something desperate, something haunted. That had caught her attention. Was he down here by himself? So it appeared. She too was vacationing alone. Her marriage had broken up during Christmas, as marriages so often did, and everyone had said she ought to get away for some midwinter sunshine. And, they hadn't needed to add, for some postmarital diversion. She had been here three days so far and there had been plenty of sunshine but none of the other thing, not for lack of interest but simply because after five years of marriage she was out of practice at being seduced, or shy, or simply uneasy. She had been noticed, though. And had done some noticing.

She looked over her shoulder at him and said, "Are you telling me that the race is fixed?"

"Oh, no. Not at all."

"I thought you might have gotten some special word from one of the hotel's boys."

"No," he said. He was very tall, perhaps too tall for her, with thick, glossy black hair and dark, hooded eyes. Despite the little bald spot, he was probably forty at most. He was certainly attractive enough, almost movie-star handsome, and yet she found herself thinking unexpectedly that there was something oddly asexual about him. "I just have a good feeling about Number Four, that's all. When I have a feeling of that sort it often works out very well." A musical voice. Was that a faint accent? Or just an affectation?

He was looking at her in a curiously expectant way.

She knew the scenario. He had made the approach; now she should hand him ten Jamaican dollars and ask him to go over to the tote counter and bet them on Number Four for her; when he returned with her ticket they would introduce themselves; after the race, win or lose, they'd have a daiquiri or two together on the patio overlooking the pool, maybe come back to try their luck on the final race, then dinner on the romantic outdoor terrace and a starlight stroll under the palisade of towering palms that lined the beachfront promenade, and eventually they'd get around to settling the big question: his cottage or hers? But even as she ran through it all in her mind she knew she didn't want any of it to happen. That lost, haunted look of his, which had seemed so wonderfully appealing for that one instant on the beach, now struck her as simply silly, melodramatic, overdone. Most likely it was nothing more than his modus operandi: women had been falling for that look of masterfully contained agony at least since Lord Byron's time, probably longer. But not me, Denise told herself.

She gave him a this-leads-nowhere smile and said, "I dropped a fortune on these damned turtles last night, I'm afraid. I decided I was going to be just a spectator this evening."

"Yes," he said. "Of course."

It wasn't true. She had won twenty Jamaican dollars the night before and had been looking forward to more good luck now. Gambling of any sort had never interested her until this trip, but there had been a peculiar sort of pleasure last night in watching the big turtles gliding toward the finish line, especially when her choices finished first in three of the seven races. Well, she had committed herself to the sidelines for this evening by her little lie, and so be it. Tomorrow was another day.

The tall man smiled and shrugged and bowed and went away. A few moments later Denise saw him talking to the leggy, freckled woman from Connecticut whose husband had died in some kind of boating accident the summer before. Then they were on their way over to the tote counter and he was buying tickets for them. Denise felt sudden sharp annoyance, a stabbing sense of opportunity lost.

"Place your bets, ladies gemmun, place your bets!" the master of ceremonies called.

Mr. Eubanks, the night manager—shining black face, gleaming white teeth, straw hat, red-and-white striped shirt—sat behind the counter, busily ringing up the changing odds on a little laptop computer. A boy with a chalkboard posted them. Number Three was the favorite, three to two; Number Four was a definite long shot at nine to one. But then there was a little flurry of activity at the counter, and the odds on Four dropped abruptly to five to one. Denise heard people murmuring about that. And the the tote was closed and the turtles were brought forth.

Between races the turtles slept in a shallow, circular concrete-walled holding tank that was supplied with sea water by a conduit running up from the beach. They were big green ones, each with a conspicuous number painted on its upper shell in glowing crimson, and they were so hefty that the brawny hotel boys found it hard going to carry them the distance of twenty feet or so that separated the holding tank from the long, narrow pool where the races were held.

Now the boys stood in a row at the starting line, as though they themselves were going to race, while the glossy-eyed turtles they were clutching to their chests made sleepy graceless swimming motions in the air with their rough leathery flippers and rolled their spotted green heads slowly from side to side in a sluggish show of annoyance.

The master of ceremonies fired a starter's pistol and the boys tossed the turtles into the pool. Graceless no longer, the big turtles were swimming the moment they hit the water, making their way into the blue depths of the pool with serene, powerful strokes.

There were six lanes, separated by bright yellow ribbons, but of course the turtles had no special reason for remaining in them. They roamed about randomly, perhaps imagining that they had been returned to the open sea, while the guests of the hotel roared encouragement: "Come on, Five! Go for it, One! Move your green ass, Six!"

The first turtle to touch any part of the pool's far wall was the winner. Ordinarily it took four or five minutes for that to happen; as the turtles wandered, they sometimes approached the finish line but didn't necessarily choose to make contact with it, and wild screams would rise from the backers of this one or that as their turtle neared the wall, sniffed it, perhaps, and turned maddeningly away without making contact.

But this time one of the turtles was swimming steadily, almost purposefully, in a straight line from start to finish. Denise saw it moving along the floor of the pool like an Olympic competitor going for the gold. The brilliant crimson number on its back, though blurred and mottled by the water, was unmistakable.

"Four! Four! Four! Look at that bastard go!"

It was all over in moments. Four completed its traversal of the pool, lightly bumped its hooked snout against the far wall with almost contemptuous satisfaction, and swung around again on a return journey to the starting point, as if it had been ordered to swim laps. The other turtles were still moving about amiably in vague circles at mid-pool.

"Numbah Four," called the master of ceremonies. "Pays off at five to one for de lucky winnahs, yessah yessah!"

The hotel boys had their nets out, scooping up the heavy turtles for the next race. Denise looked across the way. The leggy young widow from Connecticut was jubilantly waving a handful of gaudy Jamaican ten-dollar bills in the face of the tall man with the tiny bald spot. She was flushed and radiant; but he looked down at her solemnly from his great height without much sign of excitement, as though the dramatic victory of Number Four had afforded him neither profit nor joy nor any surprise at all.

The short, stocky, balding Chevrolet dealer from Long Island, whose features and coloration looked to be pure Naples but whose name was like something out of *Brideshead Revisited*—Lionel Gregson? Anthony Jenkins?—something like that—materialized at Denise's side and said, "It doesn't matter which turtle you bet, really. The trick is to bet the boys who throw them."

His voice, too, had a hoarse Mediterranean fullness. Denise loved the idea that he had given himself such a fancy name.

"Do you really think so?"

"I know so. I been watching them three days, now. You see the boy in the middle? Hegbert, he's called. Smart as a whip, and damn strong. He reacts faster when the gun goes off. And he don't just throw his turtle quicker, he throws it harder. Look, can I get you a daiquiri? I don't like being the only one drinking." He grinned. Two gold teeth showed. "Jeffrey Thompkins, Oyster Bay. I had the privilege of talking with you a couple minutes two days ago on the beach."

"Of course. I remember. Denise Carpenter. I'm from Clifton, New Jersey, and yes, I'd love a daiquiri."

He snagged one from a passing tray. Denise thought his Hegbert theory was nonsense—the turtles usually swam in aimless circles for a while after they were thrown in, so why would the thrower's reaction time or strength of toss make any difference?—but Jeffrey Thompkins himself was so agreeably real, so cheerfully blatant, that she found herself liking him tremendously after her brush with the Byronic desperation of the tall man with the little bald spot. The phonied-up name was a nice capping touch, the one grotesque bit of fraudulence that made everything else about him seem more valid. Maybe he needed a name like that where he lived, or where he worked.

Now that she had accepted a drink from him, he moved a half step closer to her, taking on an almost proprietary air. He was about two inches shorter than she was.

"I see that Hegbert's got Number Three in the second race. You want I should buy you a ticket?"

The tall man was covertly watching her, frowning a little. Maybe he was bothered that she had let herself be captured by the burly little car dealer. She hoped so.

But she couldn't let Thompkins get a ticket for her after she had told the tall man she wasn't betting tonight. Not if the other one was watching. She'd have to stick with her original fib.

"Somehow I don't feel like playing the turtles tonight," she said. "But you go ahead, if you want."

"Place your bets, ladies gemmun, place your bets!"

Hegbert did indeed throw Number Three quickly and well, but it was Five that won the race, after some minutes of the customary random noodling around in the pool. Five paid off at three to one. A quick sidewise glance told Denise that the tall man and the leggy Connecticut widow had been winners again.

"Watch what that tall guy does in the next race," she heard someone say nearby. "That's what I'm going to do. He's a pro. He's got a sixth sense about these turtles. He just wins and wins and wins."

But watching what the tall man did in the next race was an option that turned out not to be available. He had disappeared from the pool area somewhere between the second and third races. And so, Denise noted

with unexpectedly sharp displeasure, had the woman from Connecticut.

Thompkins, still following his Hegbert system, bet fifty on Number Six in the third race, cashed in at two to one, then dropped his new winnings and fifty besides backing Number Four in the fourth. Then he invited Denise to have dinner with him on the terrace. What the hell, she thought. Last night she had had dinner alone; very snooty, she must have seemed. It hadn't been fun.

In the uneasy first moments at the table they talked about the tall man. Thompkins had noticed his success with the turtles also. "Strange guy," he said. "Gives me the creeps—something about the look in his eye. But you see how he makes out at the races?"

"He does very well."

"Well? He cleans up! Can't lose for winning."

"Some people have unusual luck, I suppose."

"This ain't luck. My guess is maybe he's got a fix in with the boys—like they tell him what turtle's got the mojo in the upcoming race. Some kind of high sign they give him when they're lining up for the throw-in."

"How can that be? Turtles are turtles. They just swim around in circles until one of them happens to hit the far wall with his nose."

"No," said Thompkins. "I think he knows something. Or maybe not. But the guy's hot for sure. Tomorrow I'm going to bet the way he does, right down the line, race by race. There are other people here doing it already. That's why the odds go down on the turtle he bets, once they see which one he's backing. If the guy's hot, why not get in on his streak?"

He ordered a white Italian wine with the first course, which was grilled flying fish with brittle orange caviar globules on the side. "I got to confess," he said, grinning again, "Jeffrey Thompkins is not really my name. It's Taormina, Joey Taormina. But that's hard to pronounce out where I live, so I changed it."

"I did wonder. You look . . . it is Neapolitan?"

"Worse. Sicilian. Anybody you meet named Taormina, his family's originally from Sicily. Taormina's a city on the east coast of Sicily. Gorgeous place. I'd love to show you around it some day."

He was moving a little too fast, she thought. A lot too fast.

"I have a confession too," she said. "I'm not from Clifton any more. I moved back into the city a month ago after my marriage broke up."

"That's a damn shame." He might almost have meant it. "I'm divorced too. It practically killed my mother when I broke the news. Well, you get married too young, you get surprised later on." A quick grin; he wasn't all that saddened by what he had learned about her. "How about some red wine with the main course? They got a good Brunello here."

A little later he invited her, with surprising subtlety, to spend the night with him. As gently as she could, she declined. "Well, tomorrow's another day," he said cheerfully. Denise found herself wishing he had looked a little wounded, just a little.

* * *

The daytime routine was simple. Sleep late, breakfast on the cottage porch looking out at the sea, then a long ambling walk down the beach, poking in tide pools and watching ghostly gray crabs scutter over the pink sand. Mid-morning, swim out to the reef with snorkel and fins, drift around for half an hour or so staring at the strangely contorted coral heads and the incredibly beautiful reef creatures. It was like another planet, out there on the reef. Gnarled coral rose from the sparkling white sandy ocean floor to form fantastic facades and spires through which a billion brilliant fishes, scarlet and green and turquoise and gold in every imaginable color combination, chased each other around. Every surface was plastered with pastel-hued sponges and algae. Platoons of tiny squids swam in solemn formation. Toothy, malevolent-looking eels peered out of dark caverns. An occasional chasm led through the coral wall to the deep sea beyond, where the water was turbulent instead of calm, a dark blue instead of translucent green, and the ocean floor fell away to invisible depths. But Denise never went to the far side. There was something ominous and threatening about the somber outer face of the reef, whereas here, within, everything was safe, quiet, lovely.

After the snorkeling came a shower, a little time spent reading on the porch, then the outdoor buffet lunch. Afterwards a nap, a stroll in the hotel's flamboyant garden, and by mid-afternoon down to the beach again, not for a swim this time, but just to bake in the blessed tropical sun. She'd worry about the possibility of skin damage some other time; right now what she needed was that warm caress, that torrid all-enfolding embrace. Two hours dozing in the sun, then back to the room, shower again, read, dress for dinner. And off to the turtle races. Denise never bothered with the ones after lunch—they were strictly for the real addicts—but she had gone every evening to the pre-dinner ones.

A calm, mindless schedule. Exactly the ticket, after the grim, exhausting domestic storms of October and November and the sudden final cataclysm of December. Even though in the end she had been the one who had forced the breakup, it had still come as a shock and a jolt: she too was getting divorced, just another pathetic casualty of the marital wars, despite all the high hopes of the beginning, the grand plans she and Michael liked to make, the glowing dream. Everything dissolving now into property squabbles, bitter recriminations, horrifying legal fees. How sad: how boring, really. And how destructive to her peace of mind, her self-esteem, her sense of order, her this, her that, her everything. For which there was no cure, she knew, other than to lie here on this placid Caribbean beach under this perfect winter sky and let the healing slowly happen.

Jeffrey Thompkins had the tact—or the good strategic sense—to leave her alone during the day. She saw him in the water, not snorkeling around peering at the reef but simply chugging back and forth like a blocky little machine, head down, arms windmilling, swimming parallel to the hotel's enormous ocean frontage until he had

reached the cape just to the north, then coming back the other way. He was a formidable swimmer with enough energy for six men. Quite probably he was like that in bed, too, but Denise had decided somewhere between the white wine and the red at dinner last night that she didn't intend to find out. She liked him, yes. And she intended to have an adventure of some sort with *someone* while she was down here. But a Chevrolet dealer from Long Island? Shorter than she was, with thick hairy shoulders? Somehow she couldn't. She just couldn't, not her first fling after the separation. He seemed to sense it too, and didn't bother her at the beach, even had his lunch at the indoor dining room instead of the buffet terrace. But she suspected she'd encounter him again at evening turtle-race time.

Yes: there he was. Grinning hopefully at her from the far side of the turtle pool, but plainly waiting to pick up some sort of affirmative signal from her before coming toward her.

There was the tall dark-haired man with the tiny bald spot, too. Without the lady from Connecticut. Denise had seen him snorkeling on the reef that afternoon, alone, and here he was alone again, which meant, most likely, that last night had been Mme. Connecticut's final night at the hotel. Denise was startled to realize how much relief that conclusion afforded her.

Carefully not looking in Jeffrey Thompkins's direction, she went unhesitatingly toward the tall man.

He was wearing a dark cotton suit and, despite the warmth, a narrow black tie flecked with gold, and he looked very, very attractive. She couldn't understand how she had come to think of him as sexless the night before: some inexplicable flickering of her own troubled moods, no doubt. Certainly he didn't seem that way now. He smiled down at her. He seemed actually pleased to see her, though she sensed behind the smile a puzzling mixture of other emotions—aloofness, sadness, regret? That curious tragic air of his: not a pose, she began to think, but the external manifestation of some deep and genuine wound.

"I wish I had listened to you last night," she said. "You knew what you were talking about when you told me to bet Number Four."

He shrugged almost imperceptibly. "I didn't really think you'd take my advice. But I thought I'd make the gesture all the same."

"That was very kind of you," she said, leaning inward and upward toward him. "I'm sorry I was so skeptical." She flashed her warmest smile. "I'm going to be very shameless. I want a second chance. If you've got any tips to offer on tonight's races, please tell me. I promise not to be such a skeptic this time."

"Number Five in this one," he replied at once. "Nicholas Holt, by the way."

"Denise Carpenter. From Clifton, New Jer—" She cut herself off, reddening. He hadn't told her where he was from. She wasn't from Clifton any longer anyway; and what difference did it make where she might live up north? This island resort was intended as a refuge from all that, a place outside time, outside familiar realities.

"Shall we place our bets?" she said briskly.

Women didn't usually buy tickets themselves here. Men seemed to expect to do that for them. She handed him a fifty, making sure as she did so that her fingers were extended to let him see that she wore no wedding band. But Holt didn't make any attempt to look. His own fingers were just as bare.

She caught sight of Jeffrey Thompkins at a distance, frowning at her but not in any very troubled way; and she realized after a moment that he evidently was undisturbed by her defection to the tall man's side and simply wanted to know which turtle Holt was backing. She held up her hand, five fingers outspread. He nodded and went scurrying up to the tote counter.

Number Five won easily. The payoff was seven to three. Denise looked at Holt with amazement.

"How do you do it?" she asked.

"Concentration," he said. "Some people have the knack."

He seemed very distant, suddenly.

"Are you concentrating on the next race, now?"

"It'll be Number One," he told her, as though telling her that the weather tomorrow would be warm and fair.

Thompkins stared at her out of the crowd. Denise flashed one finger at him.

She felt suddenly ill at ease. Nicholas Holt's knack, or whatever it was, bothered her. He was too confident, too coolly certain of what was going to happen. There was something annoying and almost intimidating about such confidence. Although she had bet fifty Jamaican dollars on Number One, she found herself wishing perversely that the turtle would lose.

Number One it was, though, all the same. The payoff was trifling; it seemed as if almost everyone in the place had followed Holt's lead, and as a result the odds had been short ones. Since the races, as Denise was coming to see, were truly random—the turtles didn't give a damn and were about equal in speed—the only thing governing the patterns of oddsmaking was the way the guests happened to bet, and that depended entirely on whatever irrational set of theories the bettors had fastened on. But the theory Nicholas Holt was working from didn't appear to be irrational.

"And in the third race?" she said.

"I never bet more than the first two. It gets very dull for me after that. Shall we have dinner?"

He said it as if her acceptance were a foregone conclusion, which would have offended her, except that he was right.

The main course that night was island venison. "What would you say to a bottle of Merlot?"

"It's my favorite wine."

How did he do it? Was everything simply an open book to him?

He let her do most of the talking at dinner. She told him about the gallery where she worked, about her new little apartment in the city, about her marriage, about what had happened to her marriage. A couple of times she felt herself beginning to babble—the wine, she thought, it was the wine—and she reined herself in. But

he showed no sign of disapproval, even when she realized she had been going on about Michael much too long. He listened gravely and quietly to everything she said, interjecting a bland comment now and then, essentially just a little prompt to urge her to continue: "Yes, I see," or "Of course," or "I quite understand." He told her practically nothing about himself, only that he lived in New York—where?—and that he did something on Wall Street—unspecified—and that he spent two weeks in the West Indies every February but had never been to Jamaica before. He volunteered no more than that: she had no idea where he had grown up—surely not in New York, from the way he spoke—or whether he had ever been married, or what his interests might be. But she thought it would be gauche to be too inquisitive, and probably unproductive. He was very well defended, polite and calm and remote, the most opaque man she had ever known. He played his part in the dinner conversation with the tranquil, self-possessed air of someone who was following a very familiar script.

After dinner they danced, and it was the same thing there: he anticipated her every move, smoothly sweeping her around the open-air dance floor in a way that soon had everyone watching them. Denise was a good dancer, skilled at the tricky art of leading a man who thought he was leading her; but with Nicholas Holt the feedback was so complex that she had no idea who was leading whom. They danced as though they were one entity, moving with a single accord: the way people dance who have been dancing together for years. She had never known a man who danced like that.

On one swing around the floor she had a quick glimpse of Jeffrey Thompkins, dancing with a robust, red-haired woman half a head taller than he was. Thompkins was pushing her about with skill and determination but no grace at all, somewhat in the style of a rhinoceros who has had a thousand years of instruction at Arthur Murray. As he went thundering past he looked back at Denise and smiled an intricate smile that said a dozen different things. It acknowledged the fact that he was clumsy and his partner was coarse, that Holt was elegant and Denise was beautiful, that men like Holt always were able to take women like Denise away from men like Thompkins. But also the smile seemed to be telling her that Thompkins didn't mind at all, that he accepted what had happened as the natural order of things, had in fact expected it with much the same sort of assurance as Holt had expected Number Five to win tonight's first race. Denise realized that she had felt some guilt about sidestepping Thompkins and offering herself to Holt and that his smile just now had canceled it out; and then she wondered why she had felt the guilt in the first place. She owed nothing to Thompkins, after all. He was simply a stranger who had asked her to dinner last night. They were all strangers down here: nobody owed anything to anyone.

"My cottage is just beyond that little clump of bamboo," Holt said, after they had had the obligatory beachfront stroll on the palm promenade. He said it as if they had already agreed to spend the night there. She offered no objections. This was what she had come here for, wasn't it? Sunlight and warmth and tropical breezes and this.

As he had on the dance floor, so too in bed was he able to anticipate everything she wanted. She had barely thought of something but he was doing it; sometimes he did it even before she knew she wanted him to. It was so long since she had made love with anyone but Michael that Denise wasn't sure who the last one before him had been; but she knew that she had never been to bed with anyone like this. She moved here, he was on his way there already. She did this, he did it too. This and that. Her hand, his hand. Her lips, his lips. It was all extremely weird: very thrilling and yet oddly hollow, like making love to your own reflection.

He must be able to read minds, she thought suddenly, as they lay side by side, resting for a while.

An eerie notion. It made her feel nakeder than naked: bare right down to her soul, utterly vulnerable, defenseless.

But the power to read minds, she realized after a moment, wouldn't allow him to do that trick with the turtle races. That was prediction, not mind-reading. It was second sight.

Can he see into the future? Five minutes, ten minutes, half a day ahead? She thought back. He always seemed so unsurprised at everything. When she had told him she didn't intend to do any betting, that first night, he had simply said, "Of course." When his turtle had won the race he had shown no flicker of excitement or pleasure. When she had apologized tonight for not having acted on his tip, he had told her blandly that he hadn't expected her to. The choice of wine—the dinner conversation—the dancing—the lovemaking—

Could he see everything that was about to happen? *Everything?*

On Wall Street, too? Then he must be worth a fortune.

But why did he always look so sad, then? His eyes so bleak and haunted, those little lines of grimness about his lips?

This is all crazy, Denise told herself. Nobody can see the future. The future isn't a place you can look into, the way you can open a door and look into a room. The future doesn't exist until it's become the present.

She turned to him. But he was already opening his arms to her, bringing his head down to graze his lips across her breasts.

She left his cottage long before dawn, not because she really wanted to but because she was unwilling to have the maids and gardeners see her go traipsing back to her place in the morning still wearing her evening clothes, and hung the DO NOT DISTURB sign on her door.

When she woke, the sun was blazing down through the bamboo slats of the cottage porch. She had slept through breakfast and lunch. Her throat felt raspy and there was the sensation of recent lovemaking between her legs, so that she automatically looked around for

Michael and was surprised to find herself alone in the big bed; and then she remembered, first that she and Michael were all finished, then that she was here by herself, then that she had spent the night with Nicholas Holt.

Who can see the future. She laughed at her own silliness.

She didn't feel ready to face the outside world, and called room service to bring her tea and a tray of fruit. They sent her mango, jackfruit, three tiny reddish bananas, and a slab of papaya. Later she suited up and went down to the beach. She didn't see Holt anywhere around, neither out by the reef as he usually was in the afternoon, nor on the soft pink sand. A familiar stocky form was churning up the water with cannonball force, doing his laps, down to the cape and back, again, again, again. Thompkins. After a time he came stumping ashore. Not at all coy now, playing no strategic games, he went straight over to her.

"I see that your friend Mr. Holt's in trouble with the hotel," he said, sounding happy about it.

"He is? How so?"

"You weren't at the turtle races after lunch, were you?'

"I never go to the afternoon ones."

"That's right, you don't. Well, I was there. Holt won the first two races, the way he always does. Everybody bet the way he did. The odds were microscopic, naturally. But everybody won. And then two of the hotel managers—you know, Eubanks, the night man who has that enormous grin all the time, and the other one with the big yellow birthmark on his forehead?—came over to him and said, 'Mr. Holt, sah, we would prefer dat you forego the pleasure of the turtle racing from this point onward.' " The Chevrolet dealer's imitation of the Jamaican accent was surprisingly accurate. " 'We recognize dat you must be an authority on turtle habits, sah,' they said. 'Your insight we find to be exceedingly uncanny. And derefore it strikes us dat it is quite unsporting for you to compete. Quite, sah!' "

"And what did he say?"

"That he doesn't know a goddamned thing about turtles, that he's simply on a roll, that it's not his fault if the other guests are betting the same way he is. They asked him again not to play the turtles—'We implore you, sah, you are causing great losses for dis establishment'—and he kept saying he was a registered guest and entitled to all the privileges of a guest. So they canceled the races."

"Canceled them?"

"They must have been losing a fucking fortune this week on those races, if you'll excuse the French. You can't run pari-mutuels where everybody bets the same nag and that nag always wins, you know? Wipes you out after a while. So they didn't have races this afternoon and there won't be any tonight unless he agrees not to play." Thompkins smirked. "The guests are pretty pissed off, I got to tell you. The management is trying to talk him into changing hotels, that's what someone just said. But he won't do it. So no turtles. You ask me, I still think he's been fixing it somehow with the hotel boys, and the hotel must think so too, but they don't dare say it. Man with a winning streak like that, there's just no accounting for it any other way, is there?"

"No," Denise said. "No accounting for it at all."

It was cocktail time before she found him: the hour when the guests gathered on the garden patio where the turtle races were held to have a daiquiri or two before the tote counter opened for business. Denise drifted down there automatically, despite what Thompkins had told her about the cancellation of the races. Most of the other guests had done the same. She saw Holt's lanky figure looming up out of a group of them. They had surrounded him; they were gesturing and waving their daiquiris around as they talked. It was easy enough to guess that they were trying to talk him into refraining from playing the turtles so that they could have their daily amusement back.

When she came closer she saw the message chalked across the tote board in an ornate Jamaican hand, all curlicues and flourishes:

TECHNICAL PROBLEM
NO RACES TODAY
YOUR KIND INDULGENCE IS ASKED

"Nicholas?" she called, as though they had a prearranged date.

He smiled at her gratefully. "Excuse me," he said in his genteel way to the cluster of people around him, and moved smoothly through them to her side. "How lovely you look tonight, Denise."

"I've heard that the hotel's putting pressure on you about the races."

"Yes. Yes." He seemed to be speaking to her from another galaxy. "So they are. They're quite upset, matter of fact. But if there's going to be racing, I have a right to play. If they choose to cancel, that's their business."

In a low voice she said, "You aren't involved in any sort of collusion with the hotel boys, are you?"

"You asked me that before. You know that isn't possible."

"Then how are you always able to tell which turtle's going to win?"

"I know," he said sadly. "I simply do."

"You always know what's about to happen, don't you? Always."

"Would you like a daiquiri, Denise?"

"Answer me. Please."

"I have a knack, yes."

"It's more than a knack."

"A gift, then. A special . . . something."

"A something, yes." They were walking as they talked; already they were past the bougainvillea hedge, heading down the steps toward the beachfront promenade, leaving the angry guests and the racing pool and the turtle tank behind.

"A very reliable something," she said.

"Yes. I suppose it is."

"You said that you knew, the first night when you of-

fered me that tip, that I wasn't going to take you up on it. Why did you offer it to me, then?"

"I told you. It seemed like a friendly gesture."

"We weren't friends then. We'd hardly spoken. Why'd you bother?"

"Just because."

"Because you wanted to test your special something?" she asked him. "Because you wanted to see whether it was working right?"

He stared at her intently. He looked almost frightened, she thought. She had broken through.

"Perhaps I did," he said.

"Yes. You check up on it now and then, don't you? You try something that you know won't pan out, like tipping a strange woman to the outcome of the turtle race even though your gift tells you that she won't bet your tip. Just to see whether your guess was on the mark. But what would you have done if I had put a bet down that night, Nicholas?"

"You wouldn't have."

"You were certain of that."

"Virtually certain, yes. But you're right: I test it now and then, just to see."

"And it always turns out the way you expect?"

"Essentially, yes."

"You're scary, Nicholas. How long have you been able to do stuff like this?"

"Does that matter?" he asked. "Does it really?"

He asked her to have dinner with him again, but there was something perfunctory about the invitation, as though he were offering it only because the hour was getting toward dinnertime and they happened to be standing next to each other just then.

She accepted quickly, perhaps too quickly. But the dining terrace was practically empty when they reached it—they were very early, on account of the cancellation of the races—and the meal was a stiff, uncomfortable affair. He was so obviously bothered by her persistent inquiries about his baffling skill, his special something, that she soon backed off, but that left little to talk about except the unchanging perfect weather, the beauty of the hotel grounds, and rumors of racial tension elsewhere on the island.

He toyed with his food and ate very little. They ordered no wine. It was like sitting across the table from a stranger who was dining with her purely by chance. And yet less than twenty-four hours before she had spent a night in this man's bed.

She didn't understand him at all. He was alien and mysterious and a little frightening. But somehow, strangely, that made him all the more desirable.

As they were sipping their coffee she looked straight at him and sent him a message with her mind:

Ask me to come dancing with you, next. And then let's go to your cottage again, you bastard.

But instead he said abruptly, "Would you excuse me, Denise?"

She was nonplussed. "Why—yes—if—"

He looked at his watch. "I've rented a glass-bottomed boat for eight o'clock. To have a look at the night life out on the reef."

The night was when the reef came alive. The little coral creatures awoke and unfolded their brilliant little tentacles; phosphorescent organisms began to glow; octopuses and eels came out of their dark crannies to forage for their meals; sharks and rays and other big predators set forth on the hunt. You could take a boat out there that was equipped with bottom-mounted arc lights and watch the show, but very few of the hotel guests actually did. The waters that were so crystalline and inviting by day looked ominous and menacing in the dark, with sinister coral humps rising like black ogres' heads above the lapping wavelets. She had never even thought of going.

But now she heard herself saying, in a desperate attempt at salvaging something out of the evening, "Can I go with you?"

"I'm sorry. No."

"I'm really eager to see what the reef looks like at—"

"No," he said, quietly but with real finality. "It's something I'd rather do by myself, if you don't mind. Or even if you do mind, I have to tell you. Is that all right, Denise?"

"Will I see you afterward?" she asked, wishing instantly that she hadn't. But he had already risen. He gave her a gentlemanly little smile of farewell and strode down the terrace toward the steps that led to the beachfront promenade.

She stared after him, astounded by the swiftness of his disappearance, the unexpectedness of it.

She sat almost without moving, contemplating her bewildering abandonment. Five minutes went by, maybe ten. The waiter unobtrusively brought her another coffee. She held the cup in her hand without drinking from it.

Jeffrey Thompkins materialized from somewhere, hideously cheerful. "If you're free," he said, "how about an after-dinner liqueur?" He was wearing a white dinner jacket, very natty, and sharply pressed black trousers. But his round neckless head and the blaze of sunburn across his bare scalp spoiled the elegant effect. "A Strega, a Galliano, a nice cognac, maybe?" He pronounced it "cone-yac."

"Something weird's going on," she said.

"Oh?"

"He went out on the reef in one of those boats, by himself. Holt. Just got up and walked away from the table, said he'd rented a boat for eight o'clock. Poof. Gone."

"I'm heartbroken to hear it."

"No, be serious. He was acting really strange. I asked to go with him, and he said no, I absolutely couldn't. He sounded almost like some sort of machine. You could hear the gears clicking."

Thompkins said, all flippancy gone from his voice now, "You think he's going to do something to himself out there?"

"No. Not him. That's one thing I'm sure of."

"Then what?"

"I don't know."

"A guy like that, all keyed up all the time and never letting on a thing to anybody—" Thompkins looked at her closely. "You know him better than I do. You don't have any idea what he might be up to?"

"Maybe he just wants to see the reef. I don't know. But he seemed so peculiar when he left—so rigid, so *focused*—"

"Come on," Thompkins said. "Let's get one of those boats and go out there ourselves."

"But he said he wanted to go alone."

"Screw what he said. He don't own the reef. We can go for an expedition too, if we want to."

It took a few minutes to arrange things. "You want a guided tour, sah?" the boy down at the dock asked, but Thompkins said no, and helped Denise into the boat as easily as though she were made of feathers. The boy shook his head. "Nobody want a guide tonight. You be careful out dere, stay dis side of the reef, you hear me, sah?"

Thompkins switched on the lights and took the oars. With quick, powerful strokes he moved away from the dock. Denise looked down. There was nothing visible below but the bright white sand of the shallows, a few long-spined sea urchins, some starfish. As they approached the reef, a hundred yards or so off shore, the density of marine life increased: schools of brilliant fishes whirled and dived, a somber armada of squids came squirting past.

There was no sign of Holt. "We ought to be able to see his lights," Denise said. "Where can he have gone?"

Thompkins had the boat butting up against the flat side of the reef now. He stood up carefully and stared into the night.

"The crazy son of a bitch," he muttered. "He's gone outside the reef! Look, there he is."

He pointed. Denise, half rising, saw nothing at first; and then there was the reflected glow of the other boat's lights, on the far side of the massive stony cluster and intricacy that was the reef. Holt had found one of the passageways through and was coasting along the reef's outer face, where the deep-water hunters came up at night, the marlins and swordfish and sharks.

"What the hell does he think he's doing?" Thompkins asked. "Don't he know it's dangerous out there?"

"I don't think that worries him," said Denise.

"So you do think he's going to do something to himself."

"Just the opposite. He knows that he'll be all right out there, or he wouldn't be there. He wouldn't have gone if he saw any real risk in it."

"Unless risk is what he's looking for."

"He doesn't live in a world of risk," she said. "He's got a kind of sixth sense. He always knows what's going to happen next."

"Huh?"

Words came pouring out of her. "He can see the future," she said fiercely, not caring how wild it sounded. "It's like an open book to him. How do you think he does that trick with the turtles?"

"Huh?" Thompkins said again. "The *future*?" He peered at her, shaking his head slowly.

Then he swung sharply around as if in response to some unexpected sound from the sea. He shaded his forehead with his hand, the way he might have done if he were peering into bright sunlight. After a moment he pointed into the darkness beyond the reef and said in a slow awed tone, "What the fuck! Excuse me. But Jesus, will you look at that?"

She stared past him, toward the suddenly foaming sea.

Something was happening on the reef's outer face. Denise saw it unfolding as if in slow motion. The ocean swelling angrily, rising, climbing high. The single great wave barrelling in as though it had traveled all the way from Alaska for this one purpose. The boat tilting up on end, the man flying upward and outward, soaring gracefully into the air, traveling along a smooth curve like an expert diver and plummeting down into the black depths just beside the reef's outer face. And then the last curling upswing of the wave, the heavy crash as it struck the coral wall.

In here, sheltered by the reef, they felt only a mild swaying, and then everything was still again.

Thompkins clapped his hand over his mouth. His eyes were bulging. "Jesus," he said after a moment. "Jesus! How the fuck am I going to get out there?" He turned toward Denise. "Can you row this thing back to shore by yourself?"

"I suppose so."

"Good. Take it in and tell the boat boy what happened. I'm going after your friend."

He stripped with astonishing speed, the dinner jacket, the sharply creased pants, the shirt and tie, the black patent leather shoes. Denise saw him for a moment outlined against the stars, the fleshy burly body hidden only by absurd bikini pants in flamboyant scarlet silk. Then he was over the side, swimming with all his strength, heading for one of the openings in the reef that gave access to the outer face.

She was waiting among the crowd on the shore when Thompkins brought the body in, carrying it like a broken doll. He had been much too late, of course. One quick glance told her that Holt must have been tossed against the reef again and again, smashed, cut to ribbons by the sharp coral, partly devoured, even, by the creatures of the night. Thompkins laid him down on the beach. One of the hotel boys put a blanket over him; another gave Thompkins a robe. He was scratched and bloody himself, shivering, grim-faced, breathing in windy gusts. Denise went to him. The others backed away, stepping back fifteen or twenty feet, leaving them alone, strangely exposed, beside the blanketed body.

"Looks like you were wrong," Thompkins said. "About that sixth sense of his. Or else it wasn't working so good tonight."

"No," she said. For the past five minutes she had been struggling to put together the pattern of what had happened, and it seemed to her now that it was begin-

ning to come clear. "It was working fine. He knew this would happen."

"What?"

"He knew. Like I said before, he knew everything ahead of time. Everything. Even this. But he went along with it anyway."

"But if he knew everything, then why . . . why . . ." Thompkins shook his head. "I don't get it."

Denise shuddered in the warm night breeze. "No, you don't. You can't. Neither can I."

"Miss Carpentah?" a high, strained voice called. "Mistah Thompkins?"

It was the night manager, Mr. Eubanks of the dazzling grin, belatedly making his way down from the hotel. He wasn't grinning now. He looked stricken, panicky, strangely pasty-faced. He came to a halt next to them, knelt, picked up one corner of the beach blanket, stared at the body beneath it as though it were some bizarre monster that had washed ashore. A guest had died on his watch, and it was going to cost him, he was sure of that, and his fear showed in his eyes.

Thompkins, paying no attention to the Jamaican, said angrily to Denise, "If he knew what was going to happen, if he could see the fucking future, why in the name of Christ didn't he simply not take the boat out, then? Or if he did, why fool around outside the reef where it's so dangerous? For that matter, why didn't he just stay the hell away from Jamaica in the first place?"

"That's what I mean when I tell you that we can't understand," she said. "He didn't think the way we do. He wasn't like us. Not at all. Not in the slightest."

"Mistah Thompkins—Miss Carpentah—if you would do me de courtesy of speaking with me for a time—of letting me have de details of dis awful tragedy—"

Thompkins brushed Eubanks away as if he were a gnat.

"I don't know what the fuck you're saying," he told Denise.

Eubanks said, exasperated, "If de lady and gemmun will give me deir kind attention, *please*—"

He looked imploringly toward Denise. She shook him off. She was still groping, still reaching for the answer.

Then, for an instant, just for an instant, everything that was going on seemed terribly familiar to her. As if it had all happened before. The warm, breezy night air. The blanket on the beach. The round, jowly, baffled face of Jeffrey Thompkins hovering in front of hers. Mr. Eubanks, pale with dismay. An odd little moment of déjà vu. It appeared to go on and on. Now Eubanks will lose his cool and try to grab me by the arm, she thought; now I will pull back and slip on the sand; now Jeffrey will catch me and steady me. Yes. Yes. And here it comes. "Please, you may not ignore me dis way! You must tell me what has befallen dis unfortunate gemmun!" That was Eubanks, eyes popping, forehead shiny with sweat. Making a pouncing movement toward her, grabbing for her wrist. She backed hastily away from him. Her legs felt suddenly wobbly. She started to sway and slip, and looked toward Thompkins. But he was already coming forward, reaching out toward her to take hold of her before she fell. Weird, she thought. Weird.

Then the weirdness passed, and everything was normal again, and she knew the answer.

That was how it had been for him, she thought in wonder. Every hour, every day, his whole goddamned life.

"He came to this place and he did what he did," she said to Thompkins, "because he knew that there wasn't any choice for him. Once he had seen it in his mind it was certain to happen. So he just came down here and played things through to the end."

"Even though he'd *die*?" Thompkins asked. He looked at Denise stolidly, uncomprehendingly.

"If you lived your whole life as if it had already happened, without surprise, without excitement, without the slightest unpredictable event, not once, not ever, would you give a damn whether you lived or died? Would you? He knew he'd die here, yes. So he came here to die, and that's the whole story. And now he has."

"Jesus," Thompkins said. "The poor son of a bitch!"

"You understand now? What it must have been like for him?"

"Yeah," he said, his arm still tight around her as though he didn't mean to ever let go. "Yeah. The poor son of a bitch."

"I got to tell you," said Mr. Eubanks, "dis discourtesy is completely improper. A mahn have died here tragically tonight, and you be de only witnesses, and I ask you to tell me what befell, and you—"

Denise closed her eyes a moment. Then she looked at Eubanks.

"What's there to say, Mr. Eubanks? He took his boat into a dangerous place and it was struck by a sudden wave and overturned. An accident. A terrible accident. What else is there to say?" She began to shiver. Thompkins held her. In a low voice she said to him, "I want to go back to my cottage."

"Right," he said. "Sure. You wanted a statement, Mr. Eubanks? There's your statement. Okay? Okay?"

He held her close against him and slowly they started up the ramp toward the hotel together. ✦

Change of Face

Kristine Kathryn Rusch
and
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Illustration by Pat Morrissey

1

I stand on the street below her apartment and watch as she rocks in the chair by the window. During the day, she leaves the shades up and the windows open. Sometimes she sings. Her voice quavers with a sadness I fear will never leave her.

She won't recognize me now, even if she looks out.

Early memories, they say, are the strongest. Ask all darklings, and they will tell you of their first solo change: the way the skin twists; the deep, arching, almost erotic pain; the creaks and groans as the bone structure shifts; and the sudden awkward sensation of wearing a rejuvenated, but different, body.

I too remember my first solo change. But I am only half darkling, and I remember something else:

The morning was cold in the forest. I sat at the edge of the group of darkling children, my feet buried in ferns. The teacher leaned on the burned-out stump of an old redwood, his personal scent evoking sand and old leaves. He was telling us all a story, but he kept glancing at me. He called me "human," although I was not. My father had rescued me from a human mother, bringing me back out into the forests. My father taught me little, except to repeat over and over that I was the child of his blood, the child of his heart.

"Humans are strange creatures," the teacher said. His body that season was angular, with dark hair and long fingers. "They wear the same shape their entire lives and identify each other by sight, not scent. They don't believe in other species like themselves, yet they have more stories of us than we have of them. Humans will imprison you, torture or kill you. Stay away from them."

Most of the children looked at me, and a few moved away. Only a very little girl stayed beside me to prove she had no fear. "But he's human," she said, pointing at me.

"He is half-human, and if he survives his first solo change then perhaps he has earned the right to call himself a darkling. But if he dies, that will be another lesson to you." The teacher's deep voice sent shivers down my back. He continued talking of other things, but I stopped listening. I hugged my knees to my chest, feeling fear settle at the base of my stomach. Around us, the green-scented forest intertwined with life. The human city seemed very far away.

Perhaps I wouldn't survive the first solo change.

When I brought that fear to my father, he leaned against a tree that formed part of our small shelter and smiled. "You've been through three changes with my help," he said. "You're more darkling than they think."

And he was right. The change came three days later as a deep fog settled in the mountains, obscuring the trees and making the river's gurgle echo throughout the forest.

I felt the tingle at the base of my spine and called out for my father, but either he didn't hear me or he refused to come. The first rending ripped through my ribcage, tugged on my arms, and pulled at my legs. Each cell screamed as it renewed itself.

I was going to die. I was human and I would die, half-formed and broken, like newborn babies who went through a change without the help of a parent.

My skin pooled around itself and my hair twisted, blowing into my face. I felt the shift, seized it as my father had taught me, used it to bend myself into another form, a survivable form. The tingle grew into a buzzing around my head and the pain reached through me, grabbing each muscle, each ligament, each bone, pulling, pinching, and reforming until I thought I would explode. The explosion built, built, built—and stopped.

I staggered forward into the cool mist, tripping over a tree limb, wondering at my long legs and my short fingers. How rejuvenated I felt, reborn and made new again. An energy pulsed through me, and for a moment I thought I could survive anything.

"Father!" I shouted. "I'm a darkling now."

His nutmeg scent appeared out of the fog before he did. My father's new body—squat and large—strained at the seams of the coat he had put on that morning. "Not full darkling," he said. "Tomorrow I'll take you for a visit to the human city. When you grow, you'll have to choose between being a darkling and being human."

"I change, like all darklings."

"Yes, and you ask too many questions, and you cling like no darkling ever does." He had smiled, a secret smile that was his alone. "And you are strong."

But I am not strong at all. I still stand below my lover's window in the human city, gazing up at her in the rocking chair, torturing myself. I want just one glimpse of her face.

I hear my father's voice mixing with the teacher's of that cold childhood morning: *You are strong, human, more darkling than they think. Stay away from humans. They will imprison you, torture or kill you.* They will make you stand beneath open windows, because to go up the stairs is to confess that you made the wrong choice on the day you met Shelli, over one long year ago.

2

When I was sixteen, my first darkling lover left me for a boy who smelled of earthworms and tree rot. My father had his own concerns, and the rest of the darklings avoided me. I learned tree craft, oral history, and river fishing. I took other lovers and discarded them, according to the darkling way. I fathered two children in the forest, both of whom were raised by their mothers. Still I wasn't satisfied. Half human, half darkling, with urges that belonged to both or neither. I was never sure how to behave, or even what I wanted for myself. I had to choose.

I awakened one morning on a bed of leaves and dried redwood fronds, and I decided I would go to see the hustle and thrum of human contact. I had been to the city before, on several prolonged trips with my father, and he had showed me many of the things that are held important in human society. He taught me how to make a home, find a job, flit from class to class at night school, learning in snatches.

In the darkling community cache, I found old clothing that suited the tall, slender body I wore and took some of the money we stashed away for the times when we went to the city. Then I followed the river through the woods, veering off as the smells of the city became stronger: car exhaust mingling with wood smoke, human sweat and perfume, discarded garbage.

I wandered past the permanent-looking houses, the old Mission, and the clock tower, down to the Pacific Garden Mall. The strangeness swallowed me, and that day I became human, or pretended to be.

I sat on a bench and just watched for a while. People thronged among the caged trees and manicured bushes

in the bright sun. Two cellists sat in front of the spaghetti restaurant and played. A woman walked by in heels and a navy skirt, intent, it seemed, on something far away. A flowery, alcohol-based perfume covered her real scent. A boy whose long hair smelled of sunshine rode a skateboard along the blocked-off streets. I had learned, in my previous visits, that every human, when asked, expressed a purpose, a reason for being. Darklings had no such purpose. Darklings simply were.

The cellists took a break, and I had a sudden craving for coffee that smelled thick and black and strong. I wanted someplace simple, someplace quiet. Few people sat in the coffee shop across the street. And even before I realized I had made a decision, I reached for the polished metal handle that smelled of the oil from a thousand hands.

I pulled open the door and felt the air conditioning kiss the sweat on my arms. The air tasted of metal, dish soap, and cinnamon. I crossed the worn linoleum floor and took a booth by the window, where I could see if the cellists returned. The seat was old and soft, the plastic scent buried beneath years of sweat, grease, and ammonia.

"Can I help you?" Her voice was quiet.

I looked up.

She smelled of peppermint and moonlight. Her eyes had a downward cast, and I knew her skin would be like velvet to my touch. I felt a quick moment of desire, a darkling thought (*Take her now, or that body will escape you and become something else*), before I remembered that she was human. I smiled. "A cup of coffee. Black."

She tucked her notepad into her pocket and put her pen behind her ear. "That all? Coming right up."

She headed back to the counter with a light step. She poured coffee into a large mug and made a comment to one of the cooks. The sound of her laughter washed through me like the whisper of redwoods.

I gazed out the window. Three more boys on skateboards went past, followed by college students on bicycles. The cellists' chairs and music stands were gone. Perhaps I should have come earlier, given myself a chance to listen longer.

The rich aroma of coffee mixed with her peppermint and moonlight reached me. I turned as she set the mug down. "Do the musicians play here every day?" I asked.

She put a knee on the booth's other seat and gazed out. "I never notice any more. They used to come in here."

"To play?"

"Oh, no." She smiled. "They would sit in this booth, drink coffee, and talk about music."

I recognized something in how her personal scent changed, something I had been feeling all day. A wistfulness, a desire to be someone else. "Are you a musician?"

Her laugh had a derisive edge. She took her knee off the seat and stood up, as if she were going to leave. "I'm just a waitress."

"No one is 'just a' anything," I said. "What do you do on the days you don't come here?"

"Put my feet up." She wiped a strand of hair from her face and frowned, as if she thought the remark had been too curt. "Or go to Woody Allen movies."

"Woody Allen movies?" We had reached the end of my cultural sophistication. I had watched some television, but I had never been to a movie. I couldn't understand why anyone would sit in a large room, watching images flicker on a screen for two long hours, smelling the popcorn, the candy, the soft drinks, and the gathered people together in the darkness, crammed close to each other.

"You've never seen a Woody Allen movie?"

A flush crept up my cheeks. "I haven't seen many movies at all."

She stared at me as if she couldn't believe what she had heard. Behind her, a bell rang. She waved without turning, then looked back at me. "Is it something political, religious, or what?"

"I just never had the opportunity." I wrapped my hands around the coffee mug. Its ceramic sides warmed my palms.

"You haven't been in California long, have you?"

I smiled. I hadn't been in her California long at all.

The bell rang again. "Gotta get an order," she said and hurried away from me.

I sipped the coffee. The rich aroma lingered in my nose. I hadn't smelled anything so good in a long time.

A flautist and a violinist replaced the cellists in front of the spaghetti restaurant. I could barely hear the strains of music rising above the background street sounds. I would get a hotel room for the night, then search for a job and an apartment. This was an interesting diversion, to play human for a while.

"Listen, I'm going to a movie tomorrow."

I looked up, startled. The coffee's rich taste had dampened my sense of smell. She stood next to me and I hadn't even noticed.

"Maybe you could meet me there. It's *Annie Hall.* If you're going to start seeing movies, you may as well start with the best."

I savored the moment, as I had that first sip of coffee. No human woman had ever asked me to go anywhere with her before. "I'd like that," I said. "Where do I meet you?"

"You got a car?"

I shook my head.

"Then why don't you meet me here at noon? The movie's on campus. I'll drive you."

"All right."

She grinned and sprinted away. We didn't talk again that day, except to murmur a good-bye as I walked out the door. I didn't even learn that her name was Shelli until the next day.

3

We made love for the first time a week later. Her apartment was a small one-bedroom on the second floor of an old Victorian house not far from the Pacific Garden

Mall. The place smelled of peppermint, cat fur, ammonia, and musty paper. Shelli had more books than I had seen outside of the library.

She took me into her bedroom. I had no plans to seduce her, afraid, I think, that our bodies weren't compatible even though I knew they would be. My half-darkling existence had proven that humans could be darkling mates.

Shelli undressed me slowly, with a sort of reverence for the body I wore, exclaiming about its thinness and the softness of its hair. She felt heavier, more solid than any darkling lover, more permanent, as if her skin were welded to her bones and her entire body were attached to the earth. When I sank into her, it felt like plunging into the warmth of the river.

Later, I found a job at a garden store—the people there loved my affinity for plants, though I rarely knew the human names for them all. The store seemed like the forest to me, smelling of flowers and earth, of fresh air and growth. I belonged there more than I had belonged anywhere, except with Shelli.

She and I passed through each day, eager to be with each other, and soon after that I moved in with her.

For the first time, I felt safe inside a permanent structure. For the first time, I lost my urge to roam. Life became like a series of Woody Allen movies: Each small event seemed to have an overlying meaning that I couldn't quite grasp, but which seemed very clear to Shelli and the others around me.

She told me once that she loved my spontaneity.

I loved her certainty.

Every morning, I promised myself that I would tell her about me and who I was. And every night I clutched her tightly, bracing myself for the change that had to come.

4

That afternoon in the garden store I found a pink African violet that reminded me of Shelli. I set it aside and smiled each time I thought of it. A tiny thing to celebrate our third month together. Marking anniversaries was a human practice I was beginning to enjoy. When I walked down the street, I finally felt I had a sense of purpose.

I clocked out at five, tied a pink bow around the pot, and went out the back of the store. The alley was empty, dark with early evening, and smelled of dying plants. Through the rows of buildings, I could hear my cellists playing something modern and atonal.

The tingle at the base of my spine didn't alert me. I was so intent on crossing through the darkness to Shelli that I ignored the sensation altogether.

I had made it three steps across the alley when the pain ripped through me, long and hard and full. I stopped walking, preferring to concentrate on molding myself. I felt as if I were being torn from the inside out, broken and reformed. My father used to love the change, love its randomness and unpredictability, but it brought up the fear in me, the fear of death.

The flower pot slipped out of what had been my hand and shattered against the concrete. My skin jelled, liquefied, and ran like chocolate in the sunshine. I screamed—once—then felt the transformation run through me, coursing inside my skin like blood. The lengthening stopped, my body shrank into itself. And when the pain ended, I was short and fat, lost in the clothes that Shelli had bought for my old body.

The back door of the garden store opened, and Tom, one of my coworkers, peered outside. He glanced at me and looked away, a habit he used when approached by panhandlers on the street. He closed the door again.

I got up. With shaking hands, I brushed the dirt from my clothes, then rolled up my long pant legs. I had to get to Shelli. I had to tell her. I hurried down the Mall, pulled open the coffee shop door, and stopped as Shelli smiled at me. She grabbed a single menu and asked, "How many?" in her most polite, and distant, tone.

I backed out, and continued backing away until I could no longer see the shop. Then I ran, tripping as my pant legs fell and my shortened steps missed their marks.

5

I went back to the woods and found no solace. I dreamed of cello music and peppermint perfume and Woody Allen's nasal voice. I even told my father about Shelli. He smiled at me. "You remember your first human like you remember your first lover. The experience is so different, so exciting. But she never would have believed your story of change, and she wouldn't have believed who you were, no matter what you said."

Shelli's eyes came back to me, the blank stare of nonrecognition, the flat, polite tone in her voice as she looked at me in the doorway of the coffee shop. Humans didn't understand change. I would have had to leave regardless of what I told her. I stayed in the woods and tried not to think of her, declaring my experimentation with being human a complete and total failure.

I became a darkling again. I helped my father gather roots, herbs, and berries. We made poultices, ground spices, and stored food for the lean months. I took darkling lovers, seeking something solid, a woman who felt as if she were made of earth and water instead of air and flame. . . .

Almost a year later, I found myself sitting on the same brick planter in the Mall again, watching Shelli's coffee shop.

At first, I told myself that I only wanted to see if she was all right. But it was more than that. The darkling teacher, in one of his many lectures about humans, had said they mated for life. The children had laughed. Darklings were like cats, sharing a casual affection, but moving from lover to lover, sometimes within the same evening. Change versus consistency; certainty versus spontaneity.

I pulled open the door of the coffee shop and felt the kiss of air conditioning again. The air still smelled of metal, dish soap, and cinnamon. A strange woman

stood behind the counter. She brushed a strand of dark hair from her face and asked, "Just yourself?" as she grabbed a single menu.

I couldn't smell peppermint or moonlight. "Is Shelli here?"

"Shelli?" The waitress squinted and clutched the menu to her chest. "Oh, *Shelli.* She quit months ago."

My stomach lurched. I knotted my fingers together. "Do you know where she is now?"

"No. I'd only been here a few weeks when she left."

I nodded and pushed my way out the door. She was gone. Maybe the job had gotten bad for her. Maybe she had decided to go back to school, study acting or something.

I hurried through the crowded streets, ignoring the human scents of sweat and suntan lotion. Other bodies pushed against mine, but the jostling didn't disturb me. I finally turned on a residential street and saw the familiar tall Victorian home where Shelli and I had lived for such a short time.

Her name was still on the mailbox. I felt a thread of relief run through me.

"Help you?" A man stopped in front of me, smelling of oil and gasoline. His large hands looked as if they had always been stained black.

"I was looking for Shelli," I said.

"She's at work. I'm her downstairs neighbor."

I didn't know what to say. "I checked at the coffee shop," I said. "She wasn't there."

His half-smile now seemed a bit suspicious. "You haven't seen her for a while."

"No," I said. "I was going to surprise her. She took me to my first Woody Allen movie."

"She does love Woody Allen." He studied me for a moment. "She works at the spaghetti place across the street from the coffee shop. Changed jobs half a year back. Needed the extra money, you know, with Danny and all. She should be there now."

I thanked him and was about to leave when I stopped myself. "Do you mind answering a nosy question? Who's Danny?"

To my surprise, the man only smiled. "Her baby. I took her to the hospital for the delivery."

A shiver ran down my back. "A child? When was he born?"

The neighbor put his big hands on the mailbox, his fingers leaving marks in the dirt. "Must be about a month ago now. That was some night, let me tell you."

"I bet it was," I said and moved back along the sidewalk. I had left her alone with a child. Our child. I hadn't even thought it a possibility.

Fortunately, we hadn't had a change since the baby left the safety of her womb. I could help her and little Danny. I would have to.

6

I walked through the city that night, trying to decide how to tell her, how to warn her about the change that was bound to come.

The child was only one-quarter darkling, and perhaps he wouldn't change at all. I knew nothing of genetics—how thin can darkling blood become before the change refuses to come? But if little Danny would indeed change with all the other darklings, then he needed to be guided through the process until his mind developed enough to control a change alone.

I had to talk to Shelli. She wouldn't know what to do, how to hold Danny's body in her hands and mold him, even as she was molding herself.

I slept for a few hours on the bench at the bus stop across from her house. When her bedroom curtains opened—a sure sign she was awake—I straightened my clothes, combed my hair with my fingers, and let myself into the foyer of her big house.

The hallway was dark and smelled of fresh-brewed coffee. I took the stairs slowly, my heart pounding in my chest. My father had said she wouldn't believe me. The thought gave me pause. My mother had been human, and he said she still lived. Perhaps he had tried to convince her of what he was, and she hadn't believed him. No wonder he didn't say much when I ran back to the woods. He thought that I was saving myself some pain.

But I couldn't run away any longer.

I took a deep breath and pounded on Shelli's door. I heard footsteps; then the door eased open as far as the protective chain would reach. I smiled at the familiar scent of peppermint and moonlight, mixed with something else, something milky.

"Yes?" Shelli asked.

Words left me, the prepared speech, the carefully reasoned arguments that I had worked on all night. Shelli's face peered into mine, her downturned eyes and strong lips. I wanted to touch her skin. I wanted to hold her. "I'd like to talk to you," I said.

"Who are you?" She hadn't moved, but her tone had changed. Now she smelled of fear.

"I . . ." I couldn't blurt out the words. I felt the ridiculous phrase hang between us. "I know Daniel."

She laughed once. The sound was short and bitter. "Then you know that he left me."

"There's something you need to know about Daniel. It'll affect the baby."

The fear scent grew stronger. She braced herself between the door and the frame. "Does he know about Danny?"

My heart pounded. The lies made this even more complex. "He didn't know about Danny until a very short time ago."

"And you're here to tell me that he wants the baby, right? Well, Danny is mine. All mine. I had him alone and I will take care of him alone, do you understand?" She slammed the door. The sound echoed in the small hallway. I grabbed the knob, but it was locked.

"No! You need to listen to me! Daniel had some health—problems—that he might have passed on to the baby. Please—"

"Danny is perfectly healthy. The doctor says so." Her voice sounded muffled through the door.

"It's not something that will show up in tests. It's hereditary—"

"Get out of here or I'll call the cops! Get out."

A door downstairs opened. In the dark light, I could see her neighbor's silhouette. "Need help, Shelli?"

She wouldn't listen to me, yet, anyway. "I was just leaving," I said and hurried down the stairs. I had to figure out another way.

7

I tried to talk to Shelli several more times. I left her notes, talked to her neighbors, and the police threatened me. I waited near the apartment, hoping to be close if something should happen. I took sponge baths in public restrooms, ate cheap sandwiches to stay alive, slept on the bus bench across the street from Shelli's apartment. I had to do something. My own search—to be human or darkling—had caused this. If I hadn't run away, perhaps I would have stayed with Shelli when it counted, helped her raise my son.

My father must have gone through this. He finally decided to take me. If I took my son away, I would break Shelli's heart a second time. If the child died . . .

A tingle at the base of my spine woke me from my sleep on the bus bench. I saw that it was early morning, just before all the commuters went to work. The tingle persisted, and I suddenly knew that I had to move.

I got up, but my legs had fallen numb from the position I had slept in. I stumbled against the bus stop. The tingle expanded into a ripping pain, and I heard a shriek from Shelli's house. I was too late. I lurched forward. Shelli was crying for help.

My legs wouldn't carry me across the street. I collapsed in front of a parked car, my skin melting and reshaping as I subconsciously guided my body through the process. I wasn't thinking about my own change; I wanted to get up the stairs to help Shelli. I barely made it onto the curb when the transformation finished, leaving me taller and gaunt. An energy coursed through me, and now I bounded up the stairs to find Shelli's door open. Her downstairs neighbor shouted into the phone, demanding an ambulance. Shelli screamed in the bedroom, one long continuous wail.

I saw the thing in her arms: the mass of gelatinous skin, the arm sticking into what had been the baby's stomach, the nose bulging prominently out of what remained of his head.

I took him, thinking perhaps some remnants of the change would allow me to mold his skin. I cradled my son for the first time, tugging at his malformed limbs, trying to shape him into a child again. Please, I prayed to unseen gods, one more change. One more change. But it wouldn't help him. My son.

He was dead.

Shelli had stopped screaming. She took Danny from me and cradled him against her chest. Her eyes were empty.

"He's mine," she said. "He's all I have left."

I touched him, my hand trembling. He had died the way I had always feared, but not because of his human side. He had died because his darkling father lacked courage.

"Shelli—"

A siren echoed nearby, growing closer.

"They can't save him, can they?" Her fingers stroked his misshapen skull, the fringe of his fine hair.

"No," I said.

The siren stopped. Voices rose amid some clanking outside. Shelli pushed past me and carried Danny down the steps to meet the attendants.

I remained behind.

8

And so here I stand, beneath her window, watching, as I have done every night since Danny's death. *Child of my heart,* my father used to call me, and I finally understood what he meant. I am waiting, waiting for the tingle at the base of my spine again.

Sometimes I think I will run up the stairs, command her to watch me change. And when it is over, I will explain everything, who I am and how I have never really left her. Then I wonder how much more pain that will cause her.

Sometimes I think I will just sit here, for change after change, until she heals enough to come out on her own, begin her life again. For Shelli is constant, and she is certain. She will heal. That much I know.

The darkling teacher was not so far wrong when he called me human. A darkling would have left long ago. Even my father left the child of his heart. Love has no place in a changing universe. And darklings suffer enough pain without adding the constant ache of a breaking heart.

All my life I have tried to be either darkling or human, being instead a strange hybrid of both. I want to be human, to be with Shelli, but my darkling side interferes. I have lied to her, tried to be one or the other. Perhaps if I had told her so long ago, we would have had a chance. Danny would have had a chance.

Shelli sits in the window and rocks, looking out at the people below. Her voice, plaintive and low, slides over the words to Brahms' *Lullaby.* I listen to her. I ache to comfort her grief, ache to share it—to feel her blame, her anger, and maybe, just maybe, her forgiveness.

A shiver runs down my back. I pause. Not a shiver, but a tingle. A tingle at the base of my spine.

I have only a moment to choose: change versus consistency, certainty versus spontaneity, human versus darkling. My body begins to shift.

Before I even realize it, I am bounding up the stairs. I want to tell Shelli I choose both.

I choose both. ✦

Dark Chocolate and Green Tights

W. E. Scherz

Illustration by Carol Heyer

Soaring.

High over winding streets, cobblestone streets, wishing for the sound of milkmen in their horsedrawn carts; happy enough to have only the wind as a companion. Dipping down, buzzing the great tower, the esteemed halls, the tawny river—then darting out and up, over the ocean.

How did that go? North, south, straight on 'til . . . something?

Not important.

Not now.

It's nothing but blue sky up here; even gravity has no say.

Is that a whale? It is. It is a whale. Skimming across the smooth ocean, the two of them, each in their element. One goes down, the other up.

Hovering, above the clouds, relishing movement in three dimensions.

How did that go? East, west, straight on 'til . . .

He awoke, floating several

inches off the bed, not knowing or, more accurately, desperately trying not to remember where he was. The cheap alarm clock and its grating bray elbowed its way into his dreamtime and dragged him back to the here and now. Back to the cheesy three-room flat and the cold floors and the empty box of chocolates, half on, half off the bedside table. It was the memory of those sweets that brought his weight back. He fell to the thin mattress with a dull thud.

"Damn," he said, rubbing the eyes that no longer sparkled, reaching, unconsciously, into the box, ferreting through the crumpled papers that held the confections, hoping for one he'd missed.

He'd gotten them all.

Peter hoisted his pudgy body upright, trying to focus on his feet as they dangled off the edge of the bed. The clock played its jarring song.

How did it make such an annoying sound? Peter wondered. Was it tuned differently from other clocks? Was it based on an Eastern tonal scale? Did it change when you got used to it?

He turned to the clock and eyed the small button on its top. He could end this racket, end it now. He could reach out his chubby hand and with one, just one, of his fat little fingers, he could stop it.

"Why bother?" he sighed. "It'll only go off again tomorrow."

With that he inserted his feet into an ice-cold pair of slippers, hauled himself out of bed, and lumbered off toward the bathroom.

As the basin filled and the clock screeched, he absently joined them with a chorus of his own:

"Oh, we are the men of the Crimson, we're men as men should be. We write on time, we're always kind, and we behave actuaryily."

The steam rising from the sink fogged the mirror. Peter deemed this a good thing, since he didn't have to look at himself. Looking at himself was near the top of the list of things he disliked. Growing up was the first. Its attendant responsibilities came next: buying proper clothes, paying rent, shaving.

Shaving.

He hated shaving. Not only did he have to look at himself, but it brought back memories of the incident on the ship, and from that day to this he had never been comfortable with the thought of cold steel near his throat. But employees of the Crimson had an image to uphold, and he was a "man of the Crimson."

Oh, bloody hell. He wiped the mirror clean and stared at the image. There were those darkly circled eyes; surely they weren't his. There was that bald spot near the front. Was today the day to start combing his hair forward?

I'm too young to be going bald, he thought, tugging a tuft of hair as far down his forehead as it would go. *But I'm going bald, so I must not be too young . . . anymore.*

The mirror showed enough of his chest to remind him, as if he needed it, of how fat he'd become. He turned sideways and looked hard at his sagging pecs and bulging stomach. The price of chocolate. Last night there were two pounds of chocolate in that box next to the bed. This morning he'd have to lick the wrappers if he wanted a taste.

He would have laughed at himself, would have if he remembered how. He ate sweets instead.

A chap's entitled, he thought, wondering if perhaps one of those dark chocolate-covered caramels had rolled under the bed. He tentatively sniffed his armpits. He could go another day. It was too damned cold to bathe anyway.

Peter dressed in a dark grey suit, white shirt and faux college tie, then made himself a pot of tea and sipped it while browsing *The Times.*

He collected his umbrella and left, the clock still trumpeting as he closed the door and locked it.

But he couldn't move from outside his door. He couldn't pull the key from the lock and drop it into his pocket and walk off down the hallway. Angrily he opened the door, charged through the room, and grabbed the clock, ready to smash it against the wall. He cocked his hand over his head, picked the exact spot on the far wall where he would plant the screaming alarm, reared back, clenched his teeth . . . and with his fat little finger depressed the button.

The room was silent save for Peter's labored breath. He held the clock at arm's length in front of him, stared at it, then placed it on the bedside table next to the empty chocolate box and walked out, slamming the door behind him.

"Peter!" Mrs. Smee called to him as he started down the steps in front of the building.

He turned and there she was, standing on the top step, a kerchief wrapped around her head at a jaunty angle, a broom in her hand, a ridiculous smile on her lips. That was the way she faced the world; there was nothing that couldn't be handled with a broom and a smile.

Peter looked at his watch; going back for the clock had put him behind schedule. Any further delays and he'd miss the bus.

"Just wanted to remind you the Council Ratcatcher will be by today."

"Ratcatcher?" Peter asked.

"Yes, there was a notice in your box."

"Oh." Peter nodded.

That explained it. He rarely checked his box, and when he did it was full of the kind of news Mrs. Smee had just given him.

"I trust you didn't leave any perishables layin' about. Don't want 'em to be poisoned."

A rat'd starve to death if it depended on Peter. There was nothing in the flat, perishable or not, that Peter hadn't already eaten.

Peter stepped onto the sidewalk, trying to get away.

"Oh, and Peter . . ." She caught him. "Do stop by when you come in this evening. My husband sent me some wonderful pictures of Mauritius."

"Yes, ma'am," he said, hurrying down the street and thinking, *I used to live in a place that made Mauritius look like Ulster.*

He turned the corner on Cromwell just in time to see his bus pull into traffic.

"Damn her," he muttered. "Taking up my time with ratcatchers."

But he knew if he'd left the clock alone he'd be on that bus. Now he had to take the tube. He had to go underground.

It was different before. He didn't mind living in a cave, because the sky was there for him. It summoned him. Perhaps it still did and he no longer heard it.

He paid for his ticket, fell in line with hundreds of others, and waited his turn for the endless, wooden escalator that descended to the platform.

Halfway down, he looked over his shoulder and watched a blimp sail across the sky through the station opening.

He considered what it would be like to fly to work; to cruise over the traffic and the noise; to never have to smell the fouled air of the underground; to never worry about being late.

But if I could still fly, he thought, *why, of all the places in the world I could fly to, would I think of flying to work?*

And that thought made him even heavier.

He kept his head buried in *The Times* for the entire trip and arrived at his desk moments before Mr. Darling made his morning rounds.

"Morning, Pan," Darling said, looking over Peter's less than organized desk, fixing on a half-eaten Cadbury's. "I expect the projections for the Lily account on my desk by, shall we say, noon."

Peter grabbed the candy bar and tossed it into the wastecan. "Noon? Noon it is, Mr. Darling."

Peter watched his boss walk down the long corridor of desks and vanish into his own offices. "Yuppie twit," Peter snarled, and dug around the wastebin for the candy bar. "Bloody crocodile should have eaten you."

He found the Cadbury's and finished it in a single bite.

The room from which Michael Darling ran the Dividend and Investment Department of the Crimson Perpetual Assurance was purposely spartan. It held a single, unadorned desk and a straight-back chair. There was no place for anyone else to sit. When Darling's secretary came in, he had to bring his own seat. It was an unusual space for a wunderkind and heir apparent. And it was precisely this no-nonsense approach to business that made him, as was stated in the Crimson's annual report, "a bright star in the assurance firmament."

Crocodile'd probably spit him out—or ask to be a partner, Peter thought, running his tongue over his teeth in search of cocoa trapped along the gum line.

Michael began his career at the Crimson as a mailboy, fresh out of tenth form, working for his father. Mr. Darling, senior, never believed that anybody could or, being able to, should, fly, and over the years he managed to pass that sentiment along to his youngest son (who at one time took great delight in zipping around the office ceilings during the lunch break). Michael graduated with honors from the London School of Economics and came back to the company as a consumer policy writer. Five years later he led a team of Young Turks in a successful coup of senior management, including his father, whose office, but not furniture, he now occupied.

(Mr. Darling, senior, retired with his wife to Brighton, and now spends most of his time ship-spotting and not speaking to Michael.)

It was Michael who'd given Peter a job with the company. It was a grudgingly given wedding present.

Peter, after several more years of carefree life, rescuing Indian princesses and playing cards with fairies, returned to London to ask for Wendy's hand. He missed her, more than he ever thought he could. Over the objections of all his friends, he left with nothing more than the clothes on his back and the happy thoughts in his head.

He sailed into Wendy's window. She took one look at him, lean and fit—a vision in green—and that was it.

She told no one he was in town for the first few months. She'd hurry to work in the morning, come straight home at night. He'd float around the flat all day, thinking how great everything was—and those thoughts made him fly higher than he ever had. They lived on love and her salary from the pet shop. At night they'd fly over the city, look down at the lights and up at the stars, and talk of never growing up.

But they already had.

Peter knew Wendy wanted a nicer place to live and nicer things to wear; she wanted to go out, with him, on the weekends. But it was summer, "and one just doesn't wear forest green in the summer."

Peter wanted the relationship to work. He was willing to make sacrifices; he wasn't willing to mature completely, but he would make an honest attempt at a normal life, and part of that was a normal marriage and a normal job.

The normal-marriage part was relatively easy: "No, you can't wear your tights." "Yes, Daddy, there are all kinds of things Peter can do." Then she had to beg Michael to give Peter the job that became the wedding present.

"Living in a cave with a group of young boys and fencing with pirates hardly qualifies him for a position at the Crimson," Michael scolded when Wendy first brought up the idea. Then Wendy mentioned the incident with the upstairs maid, the teddy bear, and the orange marmalade, and Michael suddenly saw that Peter had potential.

Peter knew to the day how long Wendy had been gone. She lived in New York now, with her second husband, and he heard they'd recently had a baby girl. *She'll have blonde hair and blue eyes, just like her mother,* Peter thought. *I wonder if she'll tell her about flying.*

If Wendy thought of Peter at all, it was fleeting; the unconscious residue of a long-ago time, it whispered and then vanished, and left her unaware of its presence only after it'd gone.

He seriously considered going home after the divorce, but he'd already put on a good deal of weight—just half of what he carried now—and traveling so heavy over so much water frightened him. Still, it was always

in the back of his mind, and he started munching on carrot sticks as a first step.

He suffered a setback when John came to visit. John had returned from Swaziland for a meeting with the Anglican Bishop. He dropped by to comfort Peter. John was in the comfort business. (At the time he was a missionary to Africa; currently he was missing in Peru. His call to God came in a truly biblical moment when Nanny, who suffered from severe dysplasia, loped across the street and pushed him out of the path of a runaway vegetable lorry, only to be crushed herself by several tons of green bell peppers.)

Somehow the conversation got around to flight, and John said, "Only angels can fly, Peter. Only angels *should* fly."

Those gentle words delivered Peter to the kiosk around the corner and half a dozen TwizzleTwazzles with the creamy nougat centers. They were gone before he reached his front door.

Even in the midst of the family-size box of Goobers, he could still summon the lighter-than-air feeling, and if he could find his green tights, he might yet be free.

But he couldn't find them anywhere and had no idea where they might be.

Then came the final blow, the news that rendered him as flightless as the dodo: Tink had run off with another man. It came in the way of a terse telegram which read:

THIS IS ONE FAIRY THAT'S TIRED OF WAITING FOR YOU TO WAKE UP STOP THE CAPTAIN IS MORE OF A MAN WITH FIVE FINGERS THAN YOU'LL EVER BE WITH TEN STOP DON'T BOTHER CLAPPING YOUR HANDS STOP

"He's got a hook, for Chrissake," Peter moaned aloud, downing Caramellos like cheap whiskey.

It was then, when he could no longer support the weight of change, when he couldn't summon a single happy thought, not even at the bottom of a box of imported German Mozart Balls with the dark chocolate coating, that Peter Pan lost the ability to fly.

The Lily projections were completed by noon. There was no "Thank you" or "Job well done," just another thick file with more of the same, expected by quitting time.

Peter ate a ham and tomato sandwich at his desk, fitting in bites between calculations. At 4:48 P.M., Darling came out of his office with a file at least as thick as the greater London phone directory tucked under his arm.

Peter had just finished his afternoon's work and was collecting it to bring to Darling when he looked up and saw his boss coming his way. Peter's eyes darted back and forth; the desks on either side of him were empty, so he grabbed the closest papers, which included his sandwich, and made a dash for the Xerox room.

He just wasn't as fast as he used to be.

"Pan!" Darling called from in front of Peter's desk.

Peter turned but didn't move from the doorway of the copy room.

"Pan." He dropped the file on the desk. "We need this by first light. It's big, Pan. Big. I know you won't let us down." He turned and marched back toward his office, stopping halfway and once again looking at Peter, who was still frozen in the doorway, "I don't think the Xerox will do ham and tomato," he chuckled, and disappeared into his sanctum.

Peter looked up at the ceiling—even that was a task—and sighed. "Oh, we are the men of the Crimson. We're men as men should be. We write on . . ."

It began to rain just before the bus pulled to the stop. It was then he realized he'd left his umbrella back at the office.

"Actually, it's fine," Peter thought, grinding his teeth. "I couldn't carry my brolly and half a ton of paperwork anyway."

He stuffed the file under his coat as best he could, lowered his head, and waited in the English rain to board the bus.

The tram was crowded, and Peter scanned the seats, praying he wouldn't have to stand during the long ride home. He spotted a seat next to an old man in a Greek sailor's cap, hoisted the file, and plopped down on the bench.

The moment Peter sat down, the old man pulled a weathered pipe from his pocket and lit it. It burned tobacco as foul as anything Peter had ever smelled. He glared at the old man, but was unseen through the haze. He wanted to ask—no, demand—the pipe be extinguished immediately.

He wanted to.

Another man, twice Peter's age and half his size, stood up and poked the pipe-smoker in the ribs with his umbrella.

"Sorry," the old man said. He tamped out the briar and slid it back into his pocket.

And he has an umbrella, Peter thought as gravity grabbed a tighter hold.

An accident ahead made the trip even longer than usual. Someone had clipped a fire hydrant, flooding the street. The extra travel time gave Peter extra sulking time to consider all the things he might have, should have, said to the old man—but no time to consider why he hadn't said them.

The bus stopped in the middle of the block rather than at Peter's corner. The corner was where the accident had happened, and the fire department was just now turning off the hydrant.

The moment Peter stood up and hoisted the file (which he swore was twice as heavy as when he started), a full-fledged thunderstorm broke outside. The raindrops sounded like marbles as they hit the roof of the bus. Peter didn't bother reacting; from the pipe incident on, he had been waiting for the other shoe to drop.

It did.

It was his shoe.

The bus was two feet from the curb. Peter stepped into the street, the flooded street. He tried to recall another time when his shoes had actually filled with water, from the top. While he considered that, the bus pulled away and soaked him to just below his bum. He didn't

move. He just stood there, thinking about that shop across from the chemist and the mountain of those chocolate cubes—half dark, half milk—in the display case next to the door.

That gave him the incentive to step to the sidewalk.

He was suddenly blind. A whiteout on Cromwell Road.

His hands shot to his face and he peeled several sheets of paper, school paper, from his face. He could no longer make out the writing, but he could taste the ink as it dripped into the corners of his mouth.

"Excuse me, sir. Those are mine."

Standing before him in the deluge was a little girl of eight, perhaps nine years old. She wore a red slicker with the hood pulled tightly over her head. A curl of blonde hair escaped the hood and was plastered to her forehead by the rain. She reached for the ruined pages in Peter's hand, smiling broadly.

"Thank you, sir."

Peter harrumphed, turned the other way, and marched off down the street, his shoes making a squishing sound with each step.

The rain whipped against him and he reached up to turn his collar to the wind. He used both hands to do it—including the one that was on the file, which dropped from his grasp and was snatched by the weather before it reached his knees.

Half the papers blew between his legs, the rest either hit the ground or attached themselves to his body in a non-fashion conscious way.

He snapped around and took off after the papers sailing down the street, grabbing some, stepping on others. Every fifth step he'd hop on one leg trying to pull sheets of data off the other leg. But for every page he caught, two flew away and a third landed in the gutter and sailed off on the current toward the Thames and the great oceans beyond.

But he didn't give up. He spotted a good fifty pages in a clump just ahead. He picked up speed, hit a crack in the sidewalk, fell belly first and hydroplaned across a long puddle, gaining even more speed. He zipped past the pages he was after, tried to hook them with his free arm, which started a pitch and yaw problem, so now he was moving forward and spinning at the same time.

The little girl with the wet homework was just ahead, walking blissfully into the deepest puddles she could find.

"Liggrigl omuph waerll," Peter shouted as best he could with his mouth full of water.

It was enough. The little girl turned and deftly sidestepped just as Peter surfed by, then watched as he piled into a letterbox.

The file was everywhere. Several pages hitched a ride on the wheel of a taxi and headed for Piccadilly. There was a sheet of five-year amortizations on the little girl's galosh, and he pulled a knot of pages from around his throat where they had formed an ascot.

The little girl ran to him, throwing back her hood to get a good look. He was a sight; dripping wet, his coat askew, half his collar up around his neck, the other half hanging off his shoulder. Water poured off him, down his sleeves, over his enormous white belly, which stuck out over his pants, which were pulled down around his hips. Somewhere during the journey he'd lost a shoe, and his exposed sock was wrapped around his great toe.

She couldn't help laughing. An honest, innocent laugh. A big, fat man with one shoe, sitting in a puddle as his job blew away—and she laughed.

And so did Peter.

He bellowed. He guffawed. His great belly shook. His laughter joined hers, and it pealed through the rain-soaked streets and down the alleyways and high into the sky, far above the clouds, piercing the blue and beyond, past the places that are, all the way to the land that never was.

That was what was missing, and when it returned . . . gravity was gone.

He floated to his feet. The little girl's mouth went wide; then she squealed with joy when he did an airborne pirouette, dousing her with water shed from his clothing. He flew slowly down the street, then back. He looked like the whale from his dream; big, powerful, graceful, in his element.

Hovering over the child, he reached down and clasped her hand and took her up, above the street, above the rooftops, above the rain. Then he brought her home, placing her gently in her own back yard.

Still floating, he waved goodbye and watched her walk toward the door.

"Oh!" He remembered, and flew back next to her. "By the way, would you happen to know where I might find a pair of green tights . . . rather large green tights?" ✦

My school?

Why, Io U.!

Earth isn't a terrible place to be stuck, but it sure leaves a lot to be desired. Especially for someone like yourself -- someone who has studied at one of the finest schools in the universe, like Andromeda University or Quasar College. But it's tough to show your school spirit when your college bookstore isn't exactly around the corner.

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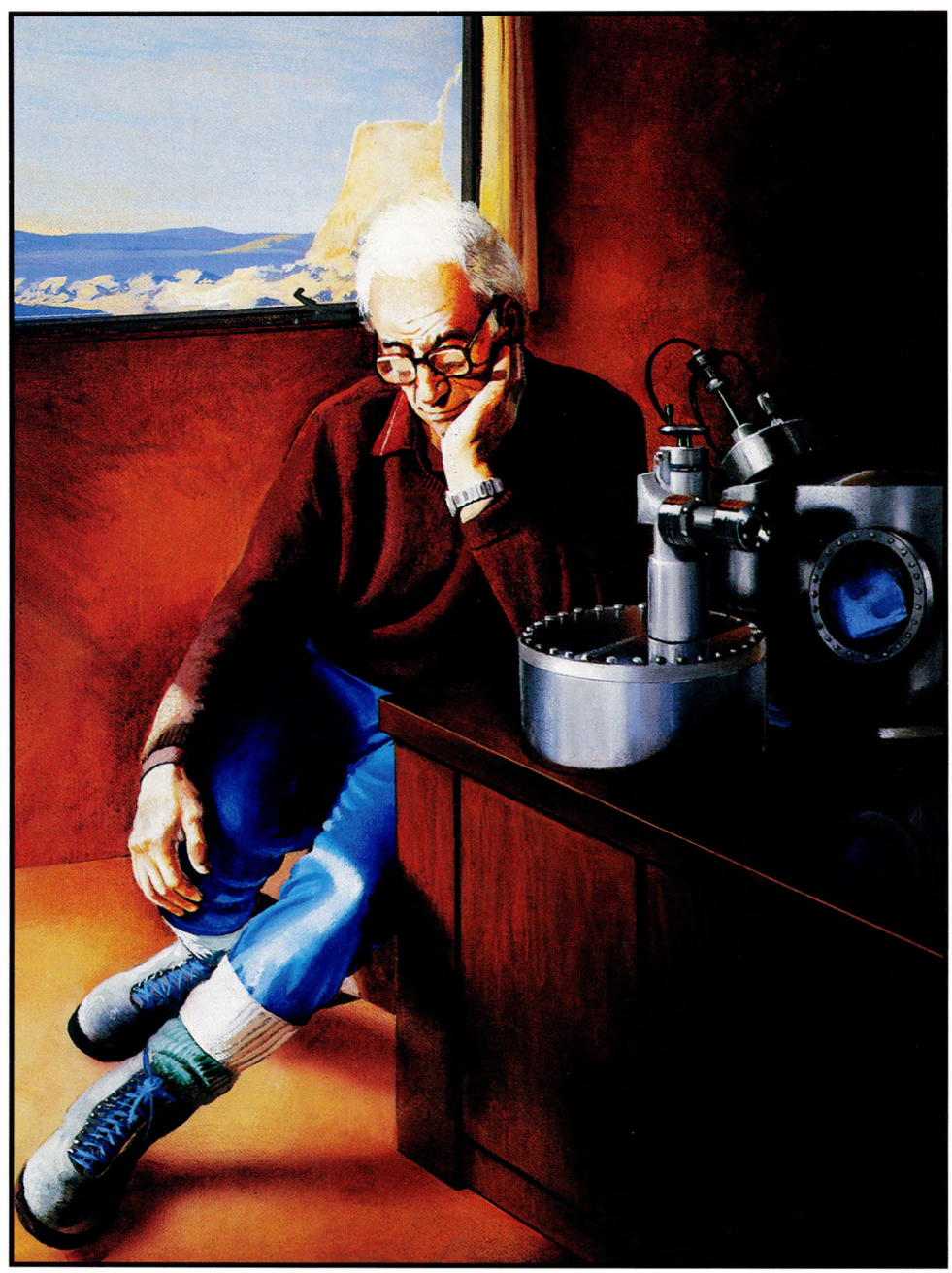

Illustration by Nicholas Jainschigg

1

Aaron's nervousness made his students jittery too. Occasionally they all looked up, the drone of the circling aircraft rumbling through the schoolroom walls. Finally, thought Aaron, supplies from Frobisher Bay! Milk, fresh vegetables, medicine. . . . Almost two weeks late—the latest they'd ever been—and now the bastards might not even *land* because of the mist! Supply drops were out. They were businessmen, good old couldn't-care-less gougers from Alaska. *Obuzok* they'd come for. Seal oil. And skins, and frozen meat, *kwak.*

No drops without pickups. If they couldn't land they'd go off to some other out-of-the-way Inuit settlement where they could. Never mind that the health and life of the villagers depended on these brutally irregular deliveries. They did always radio a day or two ahead of their

arrival, at least. So there was always time to spirit the children away. If those traders were ever to discover that there were all these *children*—it wouldn't be out of humane considerations that they'd try to make a landing. *Oh* no! . . .

Aaron peered through thick lenses into the quizzical eyes—blue, hazel, light brown, jet-black—of the twenty-six children ranged in a semicircle before him, the morning group of eleven- to fourteen-year-olds. Today's lesson in Comparative Religion was on Exodus. *Manna*, at least, had been delivered to the children of Israel on a regular schedule, thought Aaron. He and he alone was responsible for them all, for the life of every child in the village. How get these kids even to *imagine* a climate like that of the biblical desert? he wondered, peering down at his text. *Now there arose up a new king over Egypt, which knew not Joseph. And he said unto his people, "Behold, the people of the children of Israel are more and mightier than we."*

Ready to begin, Aaron looked out at the class, shuddering at the thought of their vulnerability. During the previous hour, the biology lesson, he'd engaged them in discussion of the social habits of seals. The children had often hunted seal with their fathers and had derailed his lesson plan with stories of their personal adventures. The whole of tiny, isolated Eos, Aaron reflected, was as vulnerable, as exposed to marauders, as a colony of seals caught lolling on an ice floe.

"Today," he began, "I'll tell you the story of Exodus, how the Pharaoh made slaves of all the Hebrew people, and how the Hebrews finally fled out of Egypt."

A thin brown hand shot up. "But they were doing so great last lesson, under Joseph," said a disappointed Michael.

"True," nodded Aaron. "It doesn't show much gratitude toward Joseph, does it? Do you remember how Joseph became a hero among the Egyptians?"

Michael scratched his fuzzy black hair. "Let's see. He told Pharaoh what his dream meant—about seven good years followed by seven bad years. And then he advised him to save grain during the good years to tide them over the bad times, right?"

"Right. You might say," Aaron answered with a smile, "that Joseph was the first in a long line of Jewish bankers that kings used to rely on to get them out of a jam." The *first* Rothschild, he thought. Wasn't he himself the *last*—a "banker" too? These children were his capital. He studied all these eyes that gleamed before him like varicolored gems; his glance darted among sweet young faces that ranged in shade from very light to very dark. All *his* children, and they knew each other only as brothers, sisters, cousins. . . . The buzz in the sky had vanished. Did they *land*? he wondered. Or did they . . . ?

Black eyes dancing in his round, yellow face, Charles flapped his hand around and was recognized. "Didn't Jehovah get even with the Pharaoh and put his people through hell—like with pus-sores all over them and everything dying that was born, sort of like what happened in the war of 2010?"

"That's *not* like the war of 2010, Dad—Doctor Berg," Sarah leaped in. "Jehovah punished the bad guys, not the good guys. But the war of 2010 destroyed everyone and anyone, good, bad, or just blah. If you survived, you were just lucky—or unlucky, if all your friends and family were killed."

"Good point, Sarah, but please wait to be called on." If all your friends and family were killed! Yes, indeed! "To get back to the story, let me tell you how a great leader arose, a man named Moses—probably an Egyptian himself, but no one knows for sure—who led the Hebrews out of slavery in Egypt."

Another whirring hand. "This story reminds me of our own Inuit legend," piped Nika of the sea-green eyes and sun-blond hair (hunters said her hair drew dazzled seal up onto the ice). "Our people, long before our village was called Eos, were being attacked by a bunch of bandits from the East, when the goddess Sedna arose from the sea and swept them away in a whirlwind."

The classroom door to Aaron's left suddenly burst open. Old John, the maintenance man for the common building, stumbled in on a limp leg—legacy of a fifty-year-old shark nibble—and gazed wildly around the room out of eyes sunk deep in a face of creased leather. "Doctor Berg," he stammered, "strangers have come from out of the fog, from a plane."

"The supply plane, of course. Why are you—"

"No. With guns. About a dozen men. They're running through the whole compound already!"

"Quiet, everyone! Stay where you are!" Aaron cautioned. He was stunned. He began to tremble. "If we try hiding now," he said softly, "they might follow us and discover the underground installations." The children gasped. For them it would be unthinkable—as unthinkable as would have been, for him, the profaning of the Tabernacle, the Holy of Holies, back in the days of synagogues and religions.

But what if the invaders already *knew* about the underground complex? Could word have leaked out? How? No pilots from Frobisher knew about it, nor had they ever seen the *children* of Eos during all the years they'd been making their jaunts to the village.

They might just be simple thieves, thought Aaron. They'd have heard of our oil pump and come to steal some crude. But we'd give them all they want *gratis*, whatever they could carry away—as anyone at Frobisher Bay would have told them. No. These were not ordinary thieves.

"Don't be afraid, boys and girls." He addressed them with manufactured calm. "No one has come to harm you. Just remember your alarm drills. Above all, volunteer nothing beyond your name and Canadian nationality."

A chill draft blew in from the hall behind the door. Then came the tramping of boots. We've been trapped, thought Aaron, like seals caught napping on ice.

Three men barged in wearing thick white parkas, short-barreled automatics gripped across their chests. Their shoulders sported U. S. Army insignia and the American flag. His fellow countrymen! He hadn't seen any Americans in seventeen years. The sight of them roused his worst fears. A few of the children uttered

muffled cries. The men lowered their fur-lined hoods, lifted their infrared goggles.

"*Doctor* Berg?" said one with icy formality. The leader, evidently. Three gold stars on his sleeve. A mission of some importance? As the only grown man in the village with a white skin, Aaron did not suppose he was being *asked* who he was. "I'm General Winston Murdock, U. S. Army Counterintelligence. My fellow officers, Colonels Stanford and Beams. No need to be frightened!" he trumpeted at the class. "We're not here to hurt anyone."

"Just look at 'em all, Winnie! These kids look perfectly *normal.* Dozens of 'em!" The stocky Beams let out a whistle.

Murdock fixed Aaron with cool gray eyes. "There are *white* kids here, Doctor Berg. Perhaps you'll explain. Where'd they all come from?"

"Come from?" Aaron mumbled. *They didn't know!* Then they'd come all this way only for *him?* Just Jew-hunting? An expensive sport, even for the fanatics of New Washington, considering how few Jews were left (how few of anybody!) after 2010. Word must have leaked out from Frobisher Bay about the white man out in Eos. . . .

"All goddam normal!" exclaimed the flabbergasted Beams.

"Where are they *from?*" Murdock repeated. "I haven't seen a normal-looking full-grown kid since the war."

"These are the children of the village," Aaron pronounced matter-of-factly.

"You're lying, Berg. . . . Okay, you kids, I want someone, any of you, just to tell me where your father or mother live or where you used to live before you came here. What city, what country?"

The general was greeted with silence—except for some titters. The kids think he's crazy, thought Aaron. They had, thank God, no idea what the general was driving at.

"Speak up! All the grown-ups in this village are *Eskimos.* There aren't more than a few of you in this room that look anything like an Eskimo."

"Inuit," Aaron corrected. "The proper term is Inuit. Eskimo is an Algonquian insult."

"Don't lecture me, Berg."

"They don't know what you mean by 'Eskimo.' Children, tell this gentleman the name of your people and where you were born and raised."

"We are Inuit," an eleven-year-old boy spoke proudly, "born and raised right here. Every one of us."

"You're a *white* kid. You look and talk like an American," the general challenged.

"He's got them goddam brainwashed," drawled the short, chunky Beams.

"Do you know why we're here?" Murdock addressed Aaron.

"Still rounding up Jews?" Aaron tried to conceal his agitation. They had stumbled into a much more valuable catch than they had bargained for. Their military minds were confused. Perhaps, Aaron hoped, like the good soldiers they seemed to be, they would wind up ignoring phenomena beyond the scope of their orders.

"You," declared the general, "are not just a run-of-the-mill, garden-variety renegade Jew. You are a very *special* Jew, Doctor. Look at all the trouble we've gone to to track you down."

What did they know? Aaron wondered. Aside from his being a "runaway" American Jew, what more could they pin on him? He would bluff it out. After all, they had clearly not *expected* to find these children—or any children.

"You're coming back with us for a chat with the President of the United States," said the general, pushing him toward the door.

"My wife!" Aaron said. "Give me time to let Qayaq know where—"

"Dad! Don't you push my Dad!"

Aaron's heart sank.

"Take the kid along, too," ordered the general. "She'll be proof enough of what we found here. And insurance that the rest'll be here when we get back."

"Can't see where you can *hide* around here," offered Beams, taking Sarah by the arm. "Whole damn village is like a drop of frozen bear-piss on an iceberg."

"Mind your vocabulary, Colonel!" barked Murdock. "There's a child present."

"Leave her alone!" shouted Aaron. "She's totally innocent."

A blow between the shoulder blades sent him reeling into the wall. They were given only seconds to bundle into their sealskin kamiks. Then they were hustled through corridors and out the main entrance into a courtyard mobbed with Aaron's fellow villagers. The people of Eos, his whole extended family, stood restive and muttering in front of the barrels of automatics trained on them by other white-parkaed cohorts of the general.

"Aaron!" It was Qayaq. He saw her pushing through the crowd.

"Just say the word, Doctor, and we'll take them," old John shouted out in Inuktitut. "They won't get more than a few of us."

"No! I want no one hurt. They only want me. . . . We'll be back," he added in English, forcing a smile.

Qayaq took swings at one of the immovable invaders. "Aaron, what do they want?" she shrieked, her dark eyes smarting beneath a broad yellow forehead, her hood fallen back from her straight black hair. "Saarak, come here!" she ordered. "Get your hand off my daughter! . . . Where are you going? Where are they taking you?"

"Qayaq," Aaron hurled back over his shoulder, "keep the children safe till I get back. *Safe,* understand?" She would understand. The children were to be guarded in the shelter deep within the ice, in the library-laboratory complex. They would be rotated in daily shifts, half above, half below. And now that the mist spelled danger rather than safety, they would all be kept below in time of mist. All fifty-two. The invaders would come back to try to "confiscate" them. No commodity in the world was more literally precious than these children!

But they would not find them. Nor would they find the laboratory. Nor the Bank of Eos, the Bank of the Dawn. The villagers who remained aboveground would tell them, "They are gone. Their parents have come back for them. They are scattered now like seed over the four corners of the Earth."

2

They were marched about a quarter of a mile over soft snow through blinding fog and through the deep dusk of the Arctic morning. Red lights now pierced the purple haze, and a roar of motors. They were prodded aboard a vertical-takeoff-and-landing craft and seated forward on one of two facing benches that ran the length of the bare fuselage. When the last of the unit had mounted, the craft lurched skyward like a wounded caribou. Sarah huddled against the bulwark, Aaron's arm circling her. The general, his colonels flanking him like bookends, sat directly opposite them.

"She's a pretty young thing, your 'daughter,'" said Murdock, a smile twisting his craggy features. The right side of his face was severely scarred from radiation burns. The ear was missing. "Very white skin. Freckles. Blue eyes. Caucasian. Very Caucasian. Sarah, is it? Sarah, who is your *real* mother?. . . Cat got your tongue? Who are her biological parents, Doctor Berg? Or did the war wipe out the laws of heredity as well as just about everything else?"

"The war did nearly wipe out heredity," Aaron murmured, shaking his head.

"Don't pretend to look sad about it," said Murdock. "You've gloated for seventeen years over your destruction of the American people."

Aaron stared at the general, wondering if he were insane.

"I should let the President tell you this," sighed Murdock, "but it's certainly no secret. You are being charged with high treason and assorted crimes against humanity—such as genocide."

"Genocide? *Me* you charge with—"

"What does that *mean*, Daddy?" Sarah's hand tightened around his wrist.

"High treason too? One little Jew like me . . . guilty of such fabulous crimes?" He tried to laugh. His heart was pounding. They were crazy, these neo-Nazi survivalists! The only organized groups left functioning during the power vacuum following the holocaust, they had banded together and founded their government of "New Washington." But as crazy as they were, even *they* built their paranoid fantasies around some recognizable shred of reality—some trumped-up bit of "evidence." He could not imagine what evidence they had cooked up to turn someone as inconsiderable as himself into the Beast of the Apocalypse.

"I never thought I'd be lucky enough," Murdock said dreamily, as if to himself, "to go down in history as the man who apprehended the greatest monster of all time."

Suddenly Aaron thought he had caught a glimmer of what was happening. The occasional Canadian newspaper reaching Eos from Frobisher Bay made it clear that New Washington was near bankrupt, that the American public—what was left of it—was no longer so willing to feed off the diet of Jew-bait they'd been fed since the victorless war, that they were actively demanding something more nourishing than a menu of empty promises. Somehow, thought Aaron, his completely anonymous self had been sucked into the vortex of a desperate political struggle.

"It sounds to me," said Aaron, striving to keep the conversation off the topic of the children, "like someone in New Washington needs new scapegoat meat."

General Murdock directed a glare at him.

"Sounds to me," Aaron continued, "like you've run out of Jews and that I must be the last one left alive."

"Satan's lieutenant is far too modest," replied Murdock. "The people know that the international conspiracy of the Jew devil is responsible for the world holocaust. And they will soon learn that you are their leader."

"General . . ." cautioned Beams, whispering something in Murdock's ear.

"The hell with President Dillidge!" snapped Murdock. "I have the right to a preliminary interrogation."

The stocky Beams shrugged his shoulders and exchanged glances with Colonel Stanford.

"I have nothing to do with your imaginary conspiracy," Aaron protested, pressing Sarah close. "I am a reproductive biologist, a biochemist, and a physician. My aim has always been to foster life rather than—"

"Your *own* life, 'Doctor' Berg," sneered the general, "and that of your tribe. You knew the exact moment that war would erupt. You escaped its direct impact by fleeing to your snug little Arctic hideaway a week before hostilities broke out."

My God! thought Aaron. Is *that* the evidence against me? "Did I deliberately leave my first wife and two small children behind, then? Did I plan for *them* to perish along with everybody else?"

"Satan cares for no one but himself," said the steely-eyed general.

"From what I hear," said Aaron, "the American people have been accusing President Dillidge of exactly the same thing."

"New Washington pays no attention to the neocommunist press."

"I've seen pictures of crowds slinging rocks at the President's motorcades, General. Pictures of ordinary people rioting and beating up politicos in the streets—with their *crutches*."

"Times like these bring out lunatics. Like rats during a plague. Am I right, Beams?"

"Right, General."

"The new government promised a cure for infertility," Aaron persisted, "and at the same time massacred most remaining Jews—including doctors and scientists who would have been vital to any program of genetic revival. It didn't take more than a decade for the people to note the self-contradiction in these two—"

"That's a lie," snapped Murdock. "Prominent Jews have lately been kept in protective custody."

"You mean, " said Aaron, seeing a whole new vista emerging, "it's now politically unwise to kill any more Jews? The people won't have it anymore, General?"

"*Your* hide they *will* want, Doctor. Yours in particular."

"Why are they angry at *you*, Dad?" demanded Sarah, clutching his arm.

For answer he gave her a hug. What becomes of me is unimportant, he wanted to tell her. What mattered was the perpetuation of his life's work. The children. And the new generations that would spring from healthy seed. Qayaq, perfectly trained in the procedures, would carry on the work. Murdock would return in vain to try to snare the other children; of that Aaron was certain. But what would become of Sarah? he agonized. Why would they *ever* send her back to Eos—lacking proof that she was born there—and how could he offer such proof without risking all he had lived for?

"Your so-called daughter won't cling to you so closely," sniggered the general, "when she learns what a selfish coward you are. Not only did you desert your family, but years before that you were feathering your Arctic nest, getting 'in' with a bunch of innocent and easily deceived Eskimos."

"My daughter is not so naive, General," said Aaron. "For several years before 2010 I used to spend the summers in the Canadian Arctic, right where you found me, together with my previous wife and children. We offered the people our help. They were happy to have a resident physician and a registered nurse up there for a few months each year. At other times I'd come back on my own, for about a week, to check on . . . on my patients. On the day hell broke loose I was out there by myself, by sheer chance—"

"Don't make me laugh, Doctor."

They had no clear idea, thought Aaron, of his main reason for making a remote Arctic village his second home. They no doubt understood the importance to him or to anyone of a settlement within easy reach of a working oil well. Their simple case was that he'd picked Eos as a comfortable place to sit out the holocaust. Thank heavens they did not know how truly crucial that oil was, how it guaranteed a constant energy flow to the lab—ensuring an uninterrupted storage temperature of -196 degrees centigrade.

"You don't suppose, do you," Murdock snickered, "that we've built our case on your mere absence from town?"

"General!" This time both Stanford and Beams placed their hands, in tentative gestures of restraint, on Murdock's arms. He shrugged them off like flies.

"Do you think you left no trace of your true intentions when you made your getaway?"

"What are you talking about?"

"The computer disks you left behind, of course."

Aaron's breath stopped. Impossible! he thought. They should all have been ruined—

"In your truly Satanic arrogance, you thought they would all have been *destroyed* in the world-size fire you had set to go off in your absence. . . . Your face is chalk-white, Doctor Berg. Is something the matter? Are you surprised, for example, that we have, in perfect condition, your 'World Chronicle of Antisemitic Incidents'?"

Aaron swallowed hard, tried not to show emotion. Was that it? Or was Murdock shrewdly holding back something potentially far more damaging? He saw immediately that nothing would be lost if he admitted straight out the purpose of that chronicle. "You're right about a getaway plan," Aaron confessed.

"Dad!" shrieked Sarah.

The general was all ears.

"But what do you suppose I was hoping to get away from? From the likes of you, General! From all your self-proclaimed Aryans who were bombing synagogues and killing prominent Jews the world over at a steadily increasing rate right up to the war. What you found was a database on twenty years of Congressional elections revealing what power groups in the United States owned what public officials. It was easy to correlate these election statistics with the mushrooming of groups like Creationists, Flat-Earthists, Klannists, and Survivalists—especially of the neo-Nazi stamp. And guess what I came up with, General? That all it would take would be another energy crisis, or even a big California earthquake, and a rash of pogroms would follow with worldwide governmental connivance—and the Jews would once again get it in the neck. And that's why I planned a getaway for me and my family. . . . It wasn't a *nuclear* holocaust that I was worried about."

"Tell all that to the President," Murdock sneered. "But not even Dillidge will swallow such bunk."

"General!" blurted Beams, then quickly looked down at his hands.

"What do you think our President is . . . a Dillidge idiot?" snapped Murdock. He let out a laugh like a gunshot. Nobody laughed with him. For the rest of the flight to New Washington, the general fell moodily silent.

3

They descended over a vast lake surrounded by endless pine woods that gave no hint of having ever been touched by war. The airport was just outside Coeur d'Alène, Idaho. The general sat with Aaron and Sarah in the rear of the black Mercedes, the two colonels up front next to a major who was driving. The lake to their right clicked through trees as they sped toward New Washington. On their approach to the scaled-down replica of the White House, all scenic beauty gave way to the shouting, chanting surge of a mob peppered with military police who seemed unable to maintain order. The contrast between the crippled, bedraggled demonstrators and the four-limbed, spruce-looking men in uniform spoke volumes.

"A lot more loonies every day," said the driver.

"Not getting onto the lawn, are they?" asked Beams.

"Just the bodies. They fling them over the railings. Jesus, it stinks out there. They'll carry their corpses with them—children, wives, husbands—hundreds of miles just to toss 'em onto the lawn."

"Goddam perverts," snorted Beams. "'Starve-in,' my ass!"

"Watch your language, Beams," chided Murdock, guardian of the proprieties.

"'Sfar as I'm concerned, they ain't dyin' fast enough," said the driver. "We flood the grounds with disinfectant, but you can't get rid of the smell."

The spring air was thick with placards also as the Mercedes inched its way through tatters of crowd. A bald woman used her single arm to hold up a hand-scrawled sign against her shoulder: "Open our wombs, Shut our tombs." Sarah gagged in terror and disgust. Aaron held her closer than ever and gazed outside in horror. Bands of staggering demonstrators thrust "DOWN WITH DILLIDGE" signboards up against the windows. Incredibly, many of the signs were also painted with a large blue Star of David, and hundreds of people wore black armbands stitched with six-pointed stars in yellow.

"Look at the goddam Jew-lovers," muttered Beams.

The crowd thickened as they approached the gate of New White House. The guards used the stocks of their automatics to clear a path in front of their limo. People with a missing eye or lip shouted at them as they passed, and in front of the gate Aaron now saw other placards:

FREE THE JEWS

FREE THE 49

DOWN WITH THE NEW PHARAOHS
YOU HAVE BROUGHT DOWN ON US
THE WRATH OF THE GOD OF ISRAEL

4

Behind his large desk and under the Great Seal and flags of a once-mighty nation, President Dillidge looked like a small man bowed beneath an exceedingly heavy weight. Several thin-lipped civilians were sprinkled in chairs around the office. Murdock and the colonels sat to the left of Aaron and Sarah (the President had insisted on Sarah's presence). Dillidge stared long and icily at Aaron, but a stray glance at Sarah cracked the stony facade: his upper lip began to tremble and a violent tic wrenched his right cheek. "How many other children—I mean in her condition—were there in the village, Murdock?"

The general looked at Beams. "How many, Colonel?"

"Exactly?" Beams looked at Stanford. "I don't know. Would you say about forty, Stan?"

"You mean to say, General," said Dillidge, "that you don't know how many?"

"Our primary mission, Mr. President, was to secure Doctor Berg."

"You couldn't think one lousy step ahead?" Dillidge slammed the desktop, then slouched back again into his seat. "I guess if you could, you'd be sitting in *this* chair."

"The girl is insurance!" Murdock countered.

Dillidge focused again on Sarah, whose presence appeared to obsess him. "Let me guess, little girl, you must have been born in 2015, 2016?" His face cracked an avuncular smile. "Do you remember anything from before they brought you up north, from when you used to live in a warmer climate?"

"I've never lived anywhere but Eos," said Sarah. Aaron could feel her whole body trembling.

"That's a bald-faced lie!" said Murdock. "In our debriefing I presented you with my conclusions, Mr. President. We caught Berg operating a kidnaping ring. A lot of those kids, in my opinion, were stolen from the U.S.A."

"Leave conclusions and opinions to me, General," Dillidge said with a scowl. "That's the job of *this* office."

Murdock relapsed into silence.

"So you only remember the village, do you?" Dillidge's eyes quivered with a moment's real warmth. "You know, little one, I haven't seen a child your age—I mean, in your perfect condition—since before the war. I don't know how you landed up north, but we'll find out who you belong to. . . . We hardly imagined, Doctor Berg, that in addition to treason and genocide you'd be continuing to commit capital crimes against the American people. Child-snatching, for example."

"They included a mix of racial types," offered Beams. "Very few Eskimos. Mainly Caucasians. Some Latin types, a kid that looked Chinese, a couple brown-skinned kids too."

And how about black? thought Aaron. Jeff, my Ethiopian. Was it a color they couldn't see?

Murdock suddenly sprang out of his seat. Whipping an object out of his attaché case, he displayed it for all to view and waved it in the president's face. "Don't you see, Mr. President? The *point* of the whole conspiracy?" His eyes dilated, as if he were in the presence of some unspeakable apparition. "This is the book we found this criminal teaching from when we broke in on his 'class.' The Jew Bible! *Now* do you understand why he's rounded up all these children? He's been stealing *souls*, Mr. President. The plot of the Hebrew Satan is to remold the future of the race in his own Jew image!"

"That's a damn lie!" Aaron broke in, looking helplessly around the room. If he tried defending himself against the kidnaping charges, he would have to give away the deepest secret of Eos—indeed, his very reason for being. But he did not have to keep silent in the face of secondary accusations like this. "Sarah can tell you. You barged in on a class in *Comparative* Religion. I teach them about all the great religions of mankind. No one system of belief is forced on them."

"Nonsense!" shouted the general.

"Sit down, Murdock," the puffy-eyed Dillidge commanded. (A liver ailment, Aaron surmised, with a diagnostic coolness that surprised even himself.) "The 'Jew Bible' is part of ours too, or don't you remember, General? . . . And now, Berg, I'm sure you'll be willing to tell us how you finance this global operation? Surely it isn't from your private pre-war savings account? Are you the last of the Rothschilds? It has to be very expensive?"

Aaron was terrified. Something else was ready to

spring out of Dillidge's mouth. The crinkly edges of his eyes showed that up to now he'd just been playing a game of cat-and-mouse with his prisoner.

"You don't have to tell us," said Dillidge. "Fact is, we already know. From one of those talkative little disks of yours. Do you recall a certain record of incoming correspondence concerning 'contributions' to a 'Jewish Survival Fund'? Very interesting, Doctor. But even more interesting from *our* point of view are the names of the contributors."

Aaron was terrified. He tried to look impassive as his tongue now clove to the roof of his mouth.

"For some reason," Dillidge continued, "you fail to include the amounts contributed. Sloppy record-keeping, Doctor, or done that way out of design?"

What did he *know*? What in God's name could he—

"Anyway," said Dillidge, "the names are all there. The names of about two thousand prominent Jews from all over the world. All Jews. About eight hundred from this country alone. Scientists, artists, writers, actors, businessmen. Practically all dead now, of course. But we've rounded up as many of the surviving traitors as we could, both men and women. How come you didn't tell *them* beforehand—all your co-conspirators—so that *they* could skip town too, Doctor? All that money too much of a temptation for a Jew?"

"The ones you've rounded up . . . you mean the forty-nine?" ventured Aaron, his heart thumping wildly.

"Fifty," said Dillidge, "including yourself."

Forty-nine still alive. Why hadn't they been slaughtered already? thought Aaron. Obviously because of what was going on outside the gates. And it was clear that none of the forty-nine had told Dillidge a thing worth knowing about the "fund." The courage that must have taken!

"What sort of 'crimes' have you forced them to confess to?" probed Aaron.

"Crimes? The fact that they are contributors to your insidious Jew survival fund is proof enough of conspiracy to commit treason."

"Then none of them admits to being part of any conspiracy?"

"You," Dillidge slowly articulated, "are the one who will confess to your collective conspiracy. And you'll tell *them*, out there. And you'll tell it to the commie press."

Aaron glanced at Sarah, and her return gaze of complete faith in him helped him find the words he was groping for. "I will not save your neck, Mr. President, by a false confession."

Dillidge clenched his fists, and a tic yanked mercilessly at the corner of his right eye. "Be reasonable, Berg. Heroics is for men like General Murdock here. Politics is the art of compromise. You don't have much of a bargaining position, Doctor, but if you do what I ask . . . I'll consider letting you *all* off fairly lightly. Surprised, Berg?"

"How can you even suggest that?" said Murdock, his neck veins pulsing.

"Quiet, Murdock! You're a damn good soldier but a lousy politician. . . . Berg, I don't like executing any more scientists, even if they happen to be Jews. But if you fail to do as I ask, then you will have the pleasure of watching them hanged, all forty-nine, one by one, right under your nose on the New White House lawn. We'll just be helping you finish the job you started."

"Let us go home, please!" cried Sarah. "You *can't* be that evil! I just know you can't be—"

"And your 'father' will be number fifty," Dillidge added, pressing his hand over the tic in his eye.

"You can't afford to do that!" Aaron temporized, his thoughts falling rapidly into place. "The people out there want life, not more death. More scapegoats won't buy you any more time. Are you listening to what they're saying out there? They're saying that you and your Jew-hating predecessors have brought down upon them the wrath of the God of *Israel*."

Dillidge's trembling lip stretched into a sneer.

"In fact," Aaron continued, "they might just turn around and start hanging you and your friends, instead."

Dillidge snapped his fingers. "Murdock," he commanded, "go out there, find a good tree, and commence the executions."

Murdock rose to the occasion with grim alacrity.

"Wait!" Aaron cried, clutching Sarah's hand. Dillidge was desperate enough not to be bluffing. But for all that, he was a pragmatist. He didn't give a damn about killing more Jews. All he wanted was to save his own skin. Murdock's crusading fervor was no part of Dillidge's makeup. Aaron decided to use up his last roll of the dice. He would offer Dillidge a way to save his jaundiced (*literally* jaundiced) hide. Even though it meant risking his entire life's work! But he had no other choice. . . . Those people out there and the putrid government in here were fighting to the death. But all everyone wanted was *life*! Very well. He would offer them life. Sarah would not understand, not now. But later . . .

"All right," Aaron sighed. "I'll offer you my help."

"Very good! A reasonable man." Dillidge laughed a bit too loudly. "Sit down, Murdock."

"All those people out there," said Aaron, "are starving, literally starving, for children—normal, genetically unimpaired children. What would you say if they could all suddenly have children—all the normal, healthy children, like my Sarah here, that they wanted?"

Dillidge drew back suspiciously, seeking to mask his interest under a skeptical smirk. "I would say that you were a Jew liar, and that you are stalling for time, and that you are wasting mine."

"You will soon see otherwise." Aaron felt absolutely certain now that he had judged Dillidge correctly. A convinced bigot, yes. An impassioned fanatic, no. Underneath the grim mask lay a very shrewd, an eminently *sensible*, politician. He knew he had something that Dillidge would be insane to refuse. "Listen," he announced. "I have maintained for many years, beginning several years before the war, a germ-plasm repository, or bank, out in the Arctic wilderness where you found me. The Bank of Eos, in fact."

"Dad!"

"Quiet, Sarah!"

"Impossible!" Dillidge sputtered.

"Satan is the Father of Lies," cautioned Murdock.

"All known sperm banks were destroyed," said Dillidge, "either directly through irradiation or through power failure."

"All but mine," Aaron corrected. "I chose to locate it deep in the ice crust in an area gifted with its own built-in, and virtually inexhaustible, energy supply."

"He's referring to an operating oil well outside the village," Murdock glossed.

"Dad!" shrieked Sarah. "You're never supposed to—"

"It's all right now, Sarah. The life we're keeping was never meant just for ourselves. It belongs to the world. We've only been holding it in trust. . . . Trust me now, Sarah."

"Even if I could believe you," Dillidge frowned, "what damn good to us is a sperm bank? Sperm need eggs. Our women have eggs, all right. Rotten eggs. Most even refuse to conceive, knowing what'll come out."

"I did not say I had a sperm bank," Aaron continued. So far, so good, he thought. Proceed with extreme caution. "The repository is called the Bank of Eos. Eos means the dawn, of course. The Greek goddess of the dawn. But it is also an acronym for Embryos, Ova, and Sperm. The Bank maintains, at the temperature of liquid nitrogen, fertilized embryos, unfertilized eggs, and sperm."

The president uttered a forced laugh while Murdock snorted impatiently in the background. "How do we know you're not lying," said Dillidge, "simply to stall for time?"

"Exhibit A," said Aaron, proudly pointing to Sarah. "Sarah resulted from a fertilized embryo consisting of gametes from me and my first wife that were put into cryostorage—frozen—well before the outbreak of the war. My new Inuit wife was fortunately able to bear this child in her womb and bring Sarah to full term. Like all the women in the village, her own ovaries were severely damaged by fallout. Nevertheless, Qayaq is, to all intents and purposes, Sarah's 'real' mother."

"Of course she is," said Sarah.

"All the children in Eos," Aaron continued, "came from implantations of thawed embryos or thawed ova that were subsequently fertilized."

"White kids? Are there lots of Aryans?" Dillidge broke in.

"All of the races are represented. You saw most in that classroom. You seem to have missed Jeff, our Ethiopian," said Aaron, turning to Beams. "Jeff came of a frozen embryo, too."

"Murdock!" snapped Dillidge. "If this is true, then it's a helluva lot simpler explanation than your worldwide kidnaping theory. The logistics would be damn near impossible! . . . Go on, Berg. So, all these children come from this bank of yours. Okay. Now, how much 'capital' do you have? How much grass can you seed?"

Aaron shrugged. "There is enough to seed hundreds of thousands of receptive wombs. Millions."

"Millions? . . . Nonsense. Nonsense!" mumbled Dillidge, eyes popping.

"Just think," Aaron explained, shaking within as though his innards were exposed to the raw Arctic wind. "Each human female possesses a store of about one hundred forty-four thousand eggs. I've scooped out a mere twenty thousand from each of the women who volunteered. Multiply that by about seven hundred women who are represented in the bank. The bank contains the sperm of many more men, however. It is difficult to calculate the number of *in vitro* fertilizations possible from such a large supply of heathy gametic material. For all practical purposes, it is limitless."

"You mean to tell me," Dillidge elaborated slowly, leaning forward, "that you have the means of providing this damaged, hopeless, genetically crippled nation—planet, even—with a goddam *future*? Another goddam lease on life?"

"Beware the Arch-Deceiver!" warned Murdock, slapping the President's desktop.

"When I want your advice, I'll ask for it, General!" The tic now spread back to Dillidge's sweaty cheeks. "I'll *give* you your forty-nine Jews, Berg. I'll even drop the most damaging of the charges against you."

"Make him into a national hero, a saint!" Murdock spat. "You're bargaining with the *Devil*, Mr. President!"

"For the future of this nation I would sell you, me, and our dear departed *mothers* to the Devil, General. And one more uninvited word out of you and I'll court-martial you, Murdock! . . . You hear me, Berg? Carry through on this and you and your kikes get pardoned with a slap on the wrist . . . for sequestering a national treasure out of misguided distrust of the Good Intentions of the Present Administration. Get it? You'll have all the logistical support, all the resources, you need to get your fertilization program in high gear."

"And the children of Eos? Will you allow them their freedom, too? Will you keep hands off Eos?" Aaron petitioned. He was shaking right down to his sealskin boots. He was exultant. He had gambled everything.

"We won't lay a finger on Eos," Dillidge vowed. "According to Beams, here, your village kids show a wide variety of racial types. You seem to have something for everybody. . . . Tell me, Berg, how'd you get all these thousands of people, from all over the damn world, to make deposits in your bank?"

Aaron felt his heart skip. When caught on thin ice, he remembered, the Inuit dropped to all fours and rapidly circled back. "Nothing special," he said. "All such banks operate—or used to—in the same way." He had revealed enough of the truth. Too much could ruin everything.

"Wait . . . a . . . *minute*!" choked Dillidge, the blood draining from his face. "All those contributions . . . to a Jew survival fund . . . ?"

"Destroy the damned Devil!" shrieked Murdock, jumping up and whipping a pistol out of his hip holster. Beams dove on top of him and locked him in a full nelson while Stanford wrestled his weapon from his fist.

"Toe the line, Murdock, or I'll ruin you! Do you hear?" The quaking Dillidge leaned forward, palms outstretched on his desk. Mouth agape, he stared at Aaron

for a long, speechless moment, then suddenly produced an arrogant, contemptuous smile. "Thought you'd make an ass of me, didn't you, Jew? Now, you *did* say you had a *black* kid there?"

There was no circling back for anyone, thought Aaron. Dillidge was committed to the hilt, no matter the blow to his sense of racial hygiene. "Jeff is of Ethiopian blood," he explained, looking Dillidge square in the eye. "Falasha. An Ethiopian Jew. His biological parents were children at the time, back in the 1980s, when thousands of Falasha were airlifted into Israel from drought-stricken Ethiopia. Jeff's father became the famous Hebrew novelist Ari Ben-Zion. His mother became a well-known geneticist. Neither one survived—"

"It's the end of you, any of you, if one word of this leaks out of this office," Dillidge hissed, glaring all around. "Not a goddam word. Ever! You too, Berg! Understand?"

"Neither I nor Sarah nor anyone in our village will say a word," promised Aaron, "so long as you abide by yours and none of us is harmed."

"I'm a practical man," grunted Dillidge. "We're all practical men. Survivalists, remember? It wouldn't profit any of us, not any of us, to knock over the apple cart." His gaze swung slowly around the Oval Office, his narrowed glance coming to rest on the face of General Murdock. Everyone in the room, Aaron included, stared at the general. Murdock's temples, knotted with swollen veins, had come to resemble a relief map of the world.

The truth, Aaron knew, could not be forever suppressed. But what truth? *And the children of Israel were fruitful, and increased abundantly, and multiplied.* Would there be Jews anymore in a world inhabited only by Jews? Was this the final irony of the inscrutable God of Nature and History—the use of Aaron Berg as a convenient instrument to achieve His own Final Solution to the age-old "Jewish problem": the simultaneous *triumph and extinction* of his dubiously Chosen People in the service of a higher synthesis? What synthesis? What if, thought Aaron, the whole history of one tiny suffering tribe had been no more than Nature's ruthlessly Darwinian program for the toughening up of the whole human race? ✡

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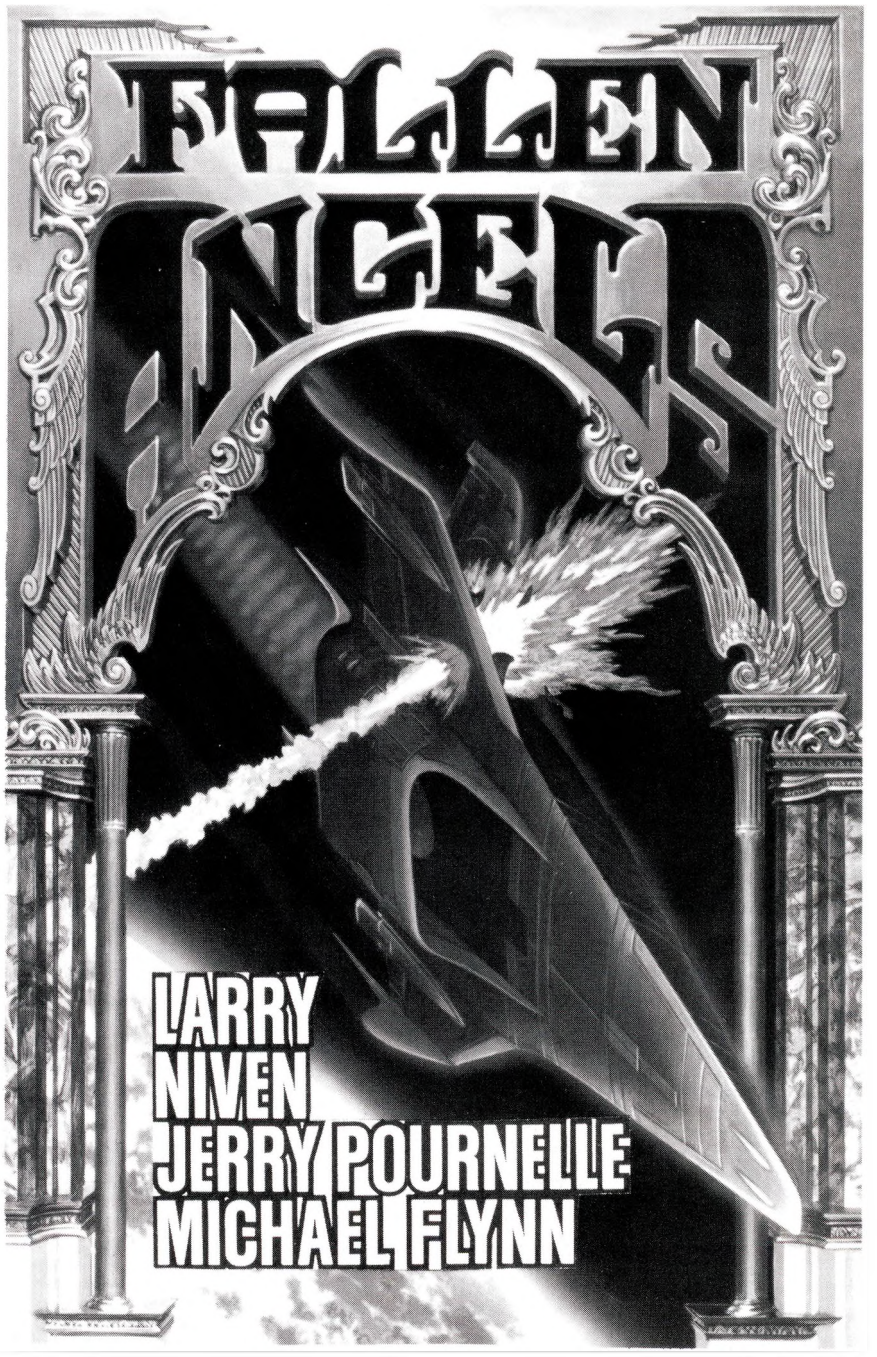

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Rendezvous with Death

A Story of the Fifth Foreign Legion

J. Andrew Keith

Illustration by Doug Andersen

I have a rendezvous with Death
On some scarred slope
of battered hill.
—Legionnaire Alan Seeger
French Foreign Legion, 1916

"Fall back! Fall back, you stupid straks!" Sergeant Vladimir Arpad gestured back toward the looming mass of the Northridge Mountains as he bawled out the orders, but his eyes never wavered from the scene spread out in front of his makeshift observation post. Four men rose like phantoms from the rocky hillside and moved out in eerie silence, their camouflaged battledress uniforms blending in almost perfectly with the mottled grays and browns of the bleak uplands of Gwyn. Arpad's hand closed on the arm of a fifth soldier stretched out beside him as he

made to follow the others. "Not you, nube," he said harshly.

"Come on, Sarge!" Legionnaire Third Class Li urged. The youngster was clutching his rifle as though it was a charm that could ward off danger. He had joined the Second Platoon of Echo Company less than three weeks before, too late to be part of the fighting around Gwynport. Now he was looking down at the vanguard of the People's Army of Gwyn with a look Arpad knew all too well—the look of a young recruit confronted for the first time with the certain knowledge that none of his Legion training had truly prepared him for the realities of war under a distant star. "We've gotta get the hell out of here!"

"Shut up, nube!" Arpad snapped, daring an angry glance at the young soldier. "We stay here until we're sure the others are clear. Play rearguard. Got it?"

Li swallowed and nodded tightly, and Arpad shifted his attention back to the open ground below. The rugged terrain of the mountains gave way to rolling plains less than a kilometer below the narrowest point of Northridge Pass, and the People's Army had plenty of room to maneuver down there.

The sergeant switched his helmet's viewplate from normal vision to image intensification to study the enemy. Those soldiers were a rough lot at best—ragged, equipped with a mix of arms that ranged from mining tools all the way up to gear looted from the Colonial Army's depots back at the start of the rebellion. Arpad cursed silently at the sight of one bearded miner wearing battledress with a Foreign Legion emblem prominent on one arm. To the sergeant, the sight was like a slap in the face for the poor showing the garrison had made in those first confusing days of the rebellion. The man was carrying a heavy laser rifle, probably of Ubrenfar manufacture. That lent credence to the reports of off-world backing for the planetary independence movement.

Not that it really mattered. With or without off-planet help, the ill-assorted association of miners and malcontents wouldn't last long once the Colonial Army finally brought them to battle.

But at the moment Brigadier Forbes and the bulk of the garrison forces were nearly a day's march away, and if this ragtag lot got through Northridge Pass before the Brigadier's flying column made it back . . .

That didn't bear thinking about.

A new image swam into his line of sight, an ungainly vehicle moving slowly on worn, poorly repaired treads. Unarmored, with an open-top cupola rather than a true turret, it was a far cry from the tanks and APCs in Legion service. The half-dozen light Fire Support Vehicles deployed with Brigadier Forbes, riding on magnetic repulsion cushions and protected by composite reactive armor, could have withstood the attack of an entire regiment of these makeshift dinosaurs while using plasma cannons and anti-armor missiles to take them apart in a matter of minutes.

But Forbes and the FSVs were a long way off, and that lumbering old mining track mounted a whole battery of lasers designed for tunneling through dirt and rock. Against the defenders at Firebase Amanda, below the entrance to Northridge Pass, it would be deadly.

Arpad cut his image intensifier to get a better view of the plain. There were six of those tracks in sight, and the dust cloud beyond the next ridge suggested more on the way.

"All right, nube," he said softly, still watching the advancing column below. "Change in plans. Get back and tell Brice we've spotted six mining tracks serving as armor. There may be more on the way. *Don't* broadcast it—those bastards took too damned many of our commlinks when they hit the armory. Got it?"

"Six mining tracks serving as armor, maybe more on the way," the youngster repeated, eyes wide. "Tell Corporal Brice, but don't broadcast." He hesitated. "Uh . . . Sarge, what about you?"

"Never mind about me, nube," Arpad growled. "Just get your sorry ass back to Brice and give him the message. Now mag it!"

He waited as Li scrambled down the slope, following the other members of the platoon's Recon Lance. Arpad cursed silently. They had almost missed spotting the vehicles. These People's Army soldiers had learned altogether too much about aggressive patrolling in the last few weeks, and the Recon Lance had been turned away before contacting the rebel main body. That hurt Arpad's professional pride. When the uprising had first begun, those troops had been rank amateurs. Now they were getting good enough to screen against the Legion's experts in reconnaissance and Special Operations.

Arpad's patrol had been lucky to locate the tracks . . . but the discovery may have come too late for the twenty-one men and women defending Firebase Amanda. If Brice and the rest of the lance didn't move fast, they might still be caught before they could get word of the enemy approach back to their comrades.

He ran his hands over the familiar lines of his rifle. It would be up to Vladimir Arpad to buy the others the time they needed to break contact and alert the garrison.

Chambering a 1-cm grenade, Arpad shifted back to image intensification and took careful aim at the nearest of the tracks. He pulled the trigger with a smooth, sure motion, shifted targets, fired again. . . .

The first explosion fell just short of the vehicle, but it caught a cluster of rebel miners wearing an assortment of work clothes and captured battle gear. They went down in a tangle, with one of the casualties letting off a full-auto burst of needle rounds from his own battle rifle as he fell. That added to the confusion spreading across the head of the enemy column. The second grenade went off just beyond the track, close enough to make the two men sitting in the open cupola duck to avoid the blast. Arpad hardly paused as he flipped his selector switch to launch more grenades in three-round bursts and continued the attack.

The initial confusion didn't last long. Already the People's Army was scattering, seeking cover, and there was answering fire from the shelter of some boulders and scrub on the far ridge.

He fired again, and grinned as three more grenades

exploded almost simultaneously inside the open top of the track. A miner tumbled out, screaming, and lay writhing in the dirt. That was one laser battery that wouldn't make it to the firebase.

Arpad walked his fire across to the rocks that were sheltering a rebel heavy weapons team equipped with a larger, more powerful cousin of his own battle rifle, and launched several more three-round bursts into the position until the deep-throated whine of the enemy weapon fell silent. Magnified by his image intensifier, a soldier staggered into the open and collapsed.

But with his attention focused on the enemy team's location, Arpad didn't realize that another track had moved into position to fire.

It had stopped, partly screened by the burning hulk of the first vehicle, and the cupola had swung to cover the ridge. Now all six of the lasers aboard fired at once, the full output of the track's fusion generator feeding into a pure burst of heat and coherent light that sliced into the hillside, probing, boring, creeping along the ridge line toward Arpad's position.

Pushing himself away from the crest, Arpad tried to run, but he wasn't fast enough to escape the relentless attack. As the hill crumbled behind him and he fell into the path of the beams, Arpad's last thought was for the soldiers he'd called family for nearly twenty years. He knew they'd exact payment in full for his death today.

The Fifth Foreign Legion always took care of its own, in death as in life.

"You heard the report, man! How the hell can we hold out against the whole damned rebel army?"

Platoon Sergeant Marc Bertrand looked from the angry figure of Second Platoon's subaltern to Corporal Brice. "Do you have anything to add, Corporal?" Bertrand asked slowly, trying to keep his voice level.

"No, Sergeant." The usually irrepressible Recon Lance leader was standing at rigid attention with his face set in a stiff, neutral expression.

"Then with the subaltern's permission I think it would be best if you rejoined your unit."

Brice kept his eyes on a point a few centimeters above Subaltern Arthur Coyle's head. "Sir?" he asked.

Coyle gestured angrily toward the door. "You're dismissed!" he snapped. "Now look, Bertrand . . ."

As the door closed behind Brice, the sergeant cut off the officer's outburst. "Sir, with all due respect, it sets a very bad example with the men—"

"To hell with examples!" Coyle exploded. "Damn it, man, one platoon can't hold this firebase alone!"

"We don't have much choice, sir," Bertrand said. "If we tried to march out of here now, they'd probably catch us at the top of the pass. At least here we have defenses that will hold for a while . . . and more equipment and supplies than we can carry out on our backs."

Coyle sat heavily in his chair. He was old for his junior rank. Any man who hadn't made it past a subaltern's platoon command by the time he was thirty had either been an NCO granted a field commission or a complete failure too well-connected to drum out of the service altogether. Looking at him across the desk in the small HQ building of Firebase Amanda, Bertrand couldn't help wondering what sin, real or imagined, had led to Coyle's assignment to a Legion infantry platoon. Despite a reputation for tough professionalism, the Legion almost always got the dregs of the officers' corps, the men whose careers or attitudes made them unacceptable to the more glamorous regiments in the Terran Commonwealth's Regular Army. Coyle didn't strike the sergeant as an experienced soldier. That meant he was probably here for the same reason most men found their way into the Legion . . . because he was an outcast, serving penance for some failure or misdeed. In the Legion, you weren't supposed to ask about a man's past, but Bertrand didn't like not knowing. Not when it could cost the platoon so heavily.

Bertrand would have felt better if only Coyle didn't give the impression that the batch of newcomers, nubes fresh out of Basic who'd arrived on the same ship as the subaltern, were better prepared for action than the outfit's new CO. The man wasn't much of a replacement for Subaltern Hernandez, that much was certain.

But Coyle was in command now, like it or not.

"What about asking for terms?" the subaltern asked quietly.

"Gaspard would love that," Bertrand said, a harsh edge in his voice. "We're all that's between him and the pass . . . and once he's over the mountains, he controls Gwynport. The Brigadier can't fight if he loses the depot in town, and you can be sure Gaspard will garrison the pass well enough to keep our people from making a counterattack to get the city back again. You want to hand over all of Gwyn to the rebels just like that?" He paused before adding, "Sir."

"They'll do it anyway, Sergeant," Coyle replied, calmer now. "There's no way we can ride out a determined attack. If Forbes had left us a decent-sized garrison instead of an understrength platoon . . . if he hadn't gone charging off after that damned camp . . ."

Bertrand shrugged. On the surface the Brigadier's plans had looked good enough. After restoring order in Gwynport and securing the pass, the Commonwealth force had been ready to carry the fighting into the mountain country north of Gwyn's sole major settlement, where the rebellious miners in their scattered camps had retreated. Forbes had blanketed the area with recon drones until he located a base that looked like the headquarters for the rebellion. With no enemy force showing up closer than a hundred kilometers away, it had looked like a safe bet to leave a minimal garrison around the pass and hit that camp with everything Forbes could muster. That was the best way to take out Pierre Gaspard and his Miner's Reform Committee.

It should have worked, too . . . except that Gaspard had somehow conjured up an army that now sat between Forbes and the vastly outnumbered defenders below the pass.

Now there was little point in shifting the blame around. Second Platoon would be under attack soon.

"The Brigadier's not that far away, sir," Bertrand said.

"Every minute we buy holding out here makes it that much more likely that Gaspard will fail. We've got to dig in and hold on. We've got to!"

"How can you expect these men to throw their lives away?" Coyle demanded. "It's hopeless!"

"They're legionnaires, sir," Bertrand told him. "The Legion's stood for lost causes since before men went into space, all the way back when it was the French Foreign Legion fighting and dying over worthless scraps of desert or jungle back on Terra."

"Yeah, right," Coyle answered with a sneer. "All the romantic crap about Legion tradition. Nobody buys that, Sergeant. Nobody."

"These men do, sir." Bertrand shrugged again. "I've seen legionnaires frag officers who wouldn't let them stand and fight. They really do care about tradition, and they won't let anyone make a mockery out of what they think the Legion really stands for."

"A threat, Sergeant?"

He shook his head. "No, sir. I'm just trying to make you see how serious this is. We can make a difference out here. Arpad's already bought us some time. Once the rebels have made sure the way's clear, though, they'll start moving again. We'll have to teach them caution, make them creep the rest of the way . . . buy enough time for the Brigadier to get back." He paused. "But it'll take both of us to make it work, sir. We can't afford to shake the platoon's morale now."

Coyle looked down at the desk for a long time. Finally he met Bertrand's eyes again. "You've got an idea that'll buy us some time?"

"I think so, sir. A little something I saw on Maladea a few years back."

"Whatever we end up doing, we'll need more time." The officer seemed to be thinking aloud. After a pause he went on. "All right, tell me about it. We'll see if your precious legionnaires are really ready to fight the odds."

Pierre Gaspard tried to ignore the noise of the track's straining engine and clanking treads, tried to ignore the dust and the cold and the lurching motion of the vehicle over the uneven ground. He had to concentrate on the attack plan, drive the People's Army over Northridge Pass before the Colonials reacted. Once Gwynport was liberated, the Commonwealth lackeys would be cut off from their supplies. They'd have to make terms. The miners and workers of Gwyn would throw the Morningstar Corporation off Gwyn once and for all, and get a fair deal for the first time in a century. And Gaspard could go back to his chosen career, be a teacher again instead of a warrior. Victory couldn't come soon enough. . . .

So far everything had worked perfectly. Concealing the bulk of the People's Army in the abandoned tunnels in the old Ridgeside Mines had been perfect, especially with the decoy headquarters to lure old "Striker" Forbes away from the pass. They'd watched his flying column go by from the safety of the tunnels, and according to their best estimates Forbes had taken the bulk of the Colonial Army garrison with him on his wild goose chase. The firebase position that blocked the approaches to Northridge Pass wouldn't be strong enough to stop the People's Army from making a breakthrough. Aside from the skirmish that had cost a track and a few casualties this morning, they'd met no real resistance, and Gaspard was willing to bet they could brush aside any troops they did meet with a minimum of trouble.

Still . . . the fighting in Gwynport had been savage on both sides, and the outnumbered Colonials had been more than a match for Gaspard's people. It wouldn't do to underestimate Forbes or his troops again.

Something caught his eye, a streak arcing through the sky from the direction of the pass. "Incoming! Incoming!" someone shouted. Up ahead, out of sight but well within earshot, an explosion erupted, then another.

These weren't grenades, either. Someone was trying to pound them with heavier weapons, maybe even artillery. . . .

"Check the Colonial tactical channels," he snapped to the aide crouched near the rear of the track's cupola.

The man nodded grimly, tuning the captured C^3 backpack in search of the proper frequency. One of the real triumphs of the Gwynport fighting had been capturing enough Colonial command/control/communications gear to seriously compromise the garrison's operational security.

A moment later the aide tapped Gaspard and handed him a headset, which he raised to one ear. " . . . left three degrees, range plus sixteen," he heard.

"Roger, Amanda One," another voice responded. "Wait one . . . on the way!"

Seconds later another explosion churned up dust and rock chips no more than a hundred meters from the head of the column. Gaspard slammed down the headset and shouted into the hull of the track. "General signal! Fall back! Fall back now!"

If the Colonials had artillery support around Northridge Pass, they could carve up the People's Army long before Gaspard's men broke through. Better to lose a little time now than get caught between heavy guns and the returning flying column. . . .

They were too close to victory for Gaspard to risk the People's Army now.

The enemy was actually pulling back.

Subaltern Arthur Coyle studied the People's Army column through the image intensification setting of his faceplate and let out a sigh. He hadn't placed much faith in Bertrand's scheme, but plainly the sergeant had known what he was talking about.

"Is that it, then?" he asked aloud.

Together with a small escort of watchful legionnaires, Coyle and Bertrand had left the firebase to set up an advanced observation post. The Legion's fortified strongpoint was visible behind them, blocked from a direct view of the advancing enemy by this last spur of ridge, and to maintain the fiction of forward observers calling in an artillery strike it had been necessary to establish the OP.

Coyle was uncomfortably aware of just how close the

rebels had come to Firebase Amanda before Bertrand's ruse had turned them back.

Beside him, Bertrand shook his head ponderously. "No. Not unless Gaspard's an idiot . . . and he isn't. He's smart not to rush in until he knows what he's up against, but if he's half the general I think he is he'll send out patrols and go over his intell until he's sure of what we've got. Sooner or later his people are going to realize that we were bombarding them with a couple of measly Fafnirs and a fake commlink call. And once he realizes we don't really have any arty support . . ." The sergeant's voice trailed off.

"How's he going to find out?" Coyle challenged.

"Locals will tell him. There've been enough civilians moving back and forth, and you can bet plenty of them are symps. Or someone will find a fragment from one of the warheads and put two and two together. A Fafnir makes a nice bang, but anyone with just a little military knowledge can tell the difference between a shoulder-launched rocket and a howitzer shell. The only thing that convinced him this time was surprise . . . and nerves. Gaspard can't afford the luxury of a defeat."

"Not like us, huh?" Coyle asked sharply.

Bertrand's reply was serious. "No. Not like us. We can win the war even if we lose the battle . . . as long as we keep buying time for the Brigadier."

"So what do we do now, Sergeant?"

"I'd advise preparing our position, sir. Setting explosives and mines in the valley and along the firebase perimeter, digging anti-armor ditches, getting the men deployed. We should recall the Fafnir gunners from the top of the pass, too. They've served their purpose. And their rockets could do us a lot of good when those tracks come in range."

"You still think we can stand up to this Gaspard, then?"

Bertrand gave a grim smile. "Not for very long, sir," he said. "But I think we can still pull off a few more tricks. Gaspard's got a lot of natural talent, but he's still an amateur. And you can always sucker an amateur."

Coyle studied the rebels again. "I was afraid you'd say something like that," he said. Death was a palpable presence on the hillside beside him. He'd felt that presence, that cold chill of paralyzing fear, once before. . . .

His mind shied away from the thought. That day on Midgarth was five years past, but it still haunted him. A hundred men in a death trap had looked to him that day, and he'd chosen surrender as the only way to keep those men alive. After four years in an Ubrenfar prison camp he'd finally been released, only to face a court martial at the end of the ordeal.

Because he had been the junior officer going into the battle and not guilty of the faulty decisions leading up to the surrender, they had given him a choice between a discharge and a chance to work off his humiliation in the Fifth Foreign Legion, a light enough sentence in view of the Commonwealth's usual disciplinary standards. Coyle had thought he could wipe the slate clean, show his peers that he was no coward.

Even knowing the Legion's reputation as a unit that got handed all the tough jobs hadn't driven home the possibility that he might be plunged into another hopeless situation. Now it stared him in the face.

How could these legionnaires pretend they were willing to accept death so casually? He'd heard their stories, their traditions, and dismissed it all as bravado. Surely they'd crack once they realized what they were really up against . . . ?

He stirred, raised his faceplate, and looked at Platoon Sergeant Bertrand. "All right, Sergeant," he said slowly. "Do what you think you have to."

"What've ya got, Brice?" Bertrand asked over the commlink.

"They're on the way, Sarge," Corporal Brice reported. The Recon Lance was on the ridge where Bertrand and Coyle had set up their OP during the mock artillery attack. Brice's warning meant that Gaspard's miners had finished their reconnaissance and were ready to push forward.

This time, Bertrand knew, they wouldn't be turned away by a diversion. Gaspard was running out of time.

At least the "artillery" had bought nearly three hours, more than he'd dared hope for.

"All right, Brice," he said. "Bring your boys in. Check your transponders first."

"We're coming home, Sarge," the cocky noncom responded. "Don't shut the door 'til we get there!"

Bertrand switched to the private channel he shared with the platoon leader. "Subaltern, Recon Lance reports the rebels are moving our way. I've recalled Brice."

"On my way," Coyle replied crisply. "Get the men ready, Sergeant."

He changed to the general frequency and passed the order on. Then there was nothing to do but wait.

At least the subaltern had finally come around. Bertrand had recognized the need to put together a flexible defense from the very beginning, but Coyle had seemed paralyzed from the moment Brice brought in the first report of enemy contact. The fear that Coyle would do something stupid, surrender or try to run, had been more of a worry for the sergeant than Pierre Gaspard's whole rebel army. Some officers just weren't Legion material, couldn't understand the traditions a legionnaire would die to uphold.

In every Legion training barracks there was a sign quoting some general from Old Terra who had led legionnaires centuries ago: "You legionnaires are soldiers in order to die, and I am sending you where you can die." For the vast majority of legionnaires, men fleeing from a life they could no longer face, death was something to be welcomed . . . if in death the legionnaire could serve a higher cause, make the sacrifice count for something.

Brice and his lance came into view quickly, clambering down the steep slope and sprinting across the open ground of the valley. It was fairly narrow here where the valley wound past Firebase Amanda and rose toward the mouth of the pass. The gently rolling terrain was dotted with Legion-issue M46 Galahad antipersonnel

mines, each one an open-topped tube holding sensor gear and ten separate egg-shaped bomblets. The M46 could be programmed to set off all ten charges on command if necessary, but unlike most passive mines the Galahad normally remained deadly until all ten rounds were used up, lobbing one bomblet a meter into the air each time the sensors detected a living creature of a specified size within activation range—unless it was "safed" by a transponder inside a legionnaire's combat helmet.

They'd give the rebels a nasty surprise when the People's Army started filtering into the head of the valley. Bertrand hoped they would be enough to blunt the edge of the enemy assault. The platoon had only deployed half of the available mines here, though. The rest had been held back for a different job. . . .

Legionnaire Li was the first member of the recon unit to cross the wire-topped berm and take up his position. The other four followed, Brice last of all. The corporal carried a laser rifle, the only sniper's weapon in the platoon. Bertrand signalled for Brice to join him.

"Won't be long now, Sarge," the corporal said, sounding pleased at the prospect.

"Yeah," Bertrand responded. "Look, Brice, I want you to use that fancy light bulb of yours to go after the rebel leaders. Anybody who looks like he knows what he's doing."

"You mean those guys have leaders who know what they're doing?" Brice interrupted with a grin. "Shitfire! How do I join up?"

The sergeant smiled back at him. "The one to keep your eye out for is Gaspard. He's a skinny little guy with a beard. You'll probably spot him near the Miner's Committee flag—that crossed shovel-and-laser-drill thing they used to put up on posters in town."

Brice nodded. "I'll watch for him, Sarge. And if I see him, he's dead." From Brice, it wasn't just a boast.

"That's what I'm counting on," Bertrand said. "Kill him and the whole rebellion fizzles. None of the others can keep the miners together."

The marksman checked the charge on his laser rifle and moved down the line. Bertrand turned his attention back to the valley.

There, near the spur of the next ridge, he could see movement. Flicking on his image intensifiers, Bertrand watched the scene jump and then resolve into a view of half a dozen ragtag soldiers in a loose skirmish line. Behind them lumbered a bulky track, its treads raising a dirty gray cloud of dust as it made the turn and started toward the firebase.

The enemy had arrived.

Gaspard braced himself as the track lurched, peering through the dust. The low fortifications of the Commonwealth firebase were in plain sight now, though without image enhancers he couldn't see individual defenders yet. Judging from the scouting reports, they'd be spread thin. One understrength platoon, less than thirty men in all . . . Forbes had played right into the rebellion's hands this time!

Even over the noise of the track he could hear a ripple of explosions punctuated by shouts and screams coming from the head of the column. He shifted position, strained to see.

Mines were going off, tossing projectiles into the air that exploded and killed men singly or in small knots. Damn them! Another Legion trick. Whoever was running the show in that base was stubborn. Stubborn and clever.

But this time it would take more than a few tricks to halt the assault. The People's Army would roll over the tiny garrison and press on.

They had to. Rearguard elements were already reporting contact with the Commonwealth flying column. If Gaspard wasted any more time here, the whole campaign might fall apart. . . .

"Still coming," Bertrand muttered.

A legionnaire gave him a startled look. "Sarge?"

"Never mind, Verne," he said, distracted. His eyes remained on the advancing rebels. Their lead elements would be through the minefield soon enough.

He saw Brice steadying his laser rifle along the top of the berm, drawing careful aim. Following the line of the sniper's weapon, Bertrand made out a track flying the miner's flag and allowed himself a grim smile. If Brice could just score a hit . . .

The laser cannon on the track pulsed, and a four-meter section of the berm simply vanished in a raw burst of energy.

Along with Corporal William T. Brice, real name unknown, just another anonymous soldier of the Legion.

Coyle crossed the compound at a run and dropped beside Bertrand. "My God, Sergeant, what the hell was that?"

Bertrand didn't answer. Instead he switched to the general tactical frequency. "There's an extra ration of synthol to anybody who kills one of those damned tracks!"

There was a cheer at that. It was widely held that a hard-drinking legionnaire would do anything, anything at all, for a half-liter of the Legion's popular synthesized alcohol.

Nearby, Legionnaire Duarte raised his plasma gun and fired, but the powerful support weapon missed the closest track. Then his lancemate, a veteran named Polsukhin, launched a Fafnir. The missile streaked across the plain and hit the leading track squarely above the driver's compartment. Designed to penetrate composite armor, the warhead blew away the entire front of the unarmored mining vehicle.

Another cheer went up along the berm. Polsukhin jumped up on top of the low wall. "You bastards can't win!" he shouted. "You're up against the Legion this time!"

Those were his last words. In the next instant his torso was shredded by a tightly clumped burst of needle rounds.

"Christ," Coyle said softly from beside Bertrand.

But now Duarte was standing, too. His next bolt

struck another track, while a third vehicle was burning from another legionnaire's Fafnir hit. The plasma gunner kept on blazing away, his face and body hidden under the heavy combat armor that protected him from the weapon's intense heat but his steady string of curses and epithets plain testimony to his defiance.

The rebels still kept coming, and a quick glance along the line showed Bertrand that the legionnaires had already lost five men. They couldn't afford many more losses. . . .

"Sir," he said softly. "It's time."

The subaltern nodded grimly. "Good luck, Sergeant. You'll need it."

"Go! Go! Go!" Coyle shouted. He all but pushed the last man into the rear of the hovercarrier, then grabbed the rail and hauled himself in after him. "Olmert! Get this wagon moving!"

The hovercraft stirred on powerful turbofans, kicking out a cloud of dust from under its skirts. The noise was deafening as the vehicle skittered sideways, then steadied as Legionnaire Olmert gunned the motors and steered toward the road through Northridge Pass. It was an ungainly vehicle, nothing at all like the sleek APCs and FSVs the Legion normally used. A trio of civilian hovercarriers had been left at the firebase when the Brigadier's flying column set out against the rebel "headquarters." Like the miners' tracks, they were vastly inferior to military vehicles, running on synthetic chemical fuel instead of fusion power, using an old-fashioned ground-effect air cushion instead of an APC's magnetic repulsion field, and lacking armor and weapons alike. But they were fast—fast enough to allow some of the legionnaires to break contact and withdraw from the beleaguered firebase before the rebels overran the perimeter defenses.

Behind him, the sounds of battle were largely lost in the roar of the fans, but Coyle knew that Bertrand and the platoon's first section were still on the line, holding.

How could they stand up to such incredible odds?

It had taken every ounce of will for Coyle to keep from throwing away his rifle and running during the first exchange along the berm, but somehow these legionnaires were still fighting. Years ago, his officer's training had taught him that most of a unit's troops would simply freeze in battle, keep their heads down and contribute nothing. But so far today he'd seen only a handful of men who hadn't kept up a steady, sure fire, making each shot count. Aside from a few nubes, every man in the platoon was giving his best out there. The twelve men with Coyle in the hovercarrier were more disappointed at leaving the fight than relieved at the chance to put some distance between them and the overwhelming rebel numbers.

They made Coyle ashamed of his own relief. Should he have stayed behind in place of Bertrand?

"Sir! Sir!" That was Legionnaire Florczyk, the platoon's C^3 operator. The man was crouched beside him, hunkered over the heavy backpack that carried the platoon's command, control, and communications gear, including a tiny computer terminal. "I've got Brigade on the line! Brigade!"

He nodded and signalled for Florczyk to run a patch line from the backpack to his helmet, damping down the external speakers to cut off some of the engine noise. "Amanda One," he said, grabbing the legionnaire's shoulder to steady himself as the hovercarrier lurched sideways. "Coyle."

"Amanda, this is Striker One," the reply came back. Coyle gasped. That was the Brigadier's personal call sign.

"Sir!"

"Son, we're on the way. ETA under an hour." There was a long pause. "I've got a drone up, and I can see your situation. We need that hour . . . it's no time to be joyriding. Do you understand me?"

Coyle swallowed. Did the Brigadier know his record? The hovercarrier's withdrawal would look like panic from the vantage of a recon drone's remote camera.

"I understand, sir. The carrier is . . . part of our defense plan. A way to buy some extra time, sir." He hoped he didn't sound as scared as he felt. If the Brigadier thought he was running away . . . "Sir, you know the comm situation. I can't explain over an open channel. But we're doing our best to buy the time you need. I promise you that."

"I've seen the Legion in action before, son," Forbes responded slowly. "Your best is good enough for me . . . whatever happened on Midgarth. Striker One, clear."

Coyle sighed as he disconnected the patch line. Legionnaires weren't supposed to know about each other's previous lives, but it figured that the Brigadier would have been told about Coyle's past. Still, Forbes had sounded as if he really believed what he had said. Did the Brigadier really trust Arthur Coyle not to break a second time?

The subaltern glanced up. The mountains bulked large above them, the narrow pass a gash of sky against the mottled brown cliffs looming over the road. Ahead he could see another hovercarrier pulled off to one side of the road, partially concealed by camouflage tarps. Tapping Corporal Lawson on the shoulder, he leaned forward to bawl in his ear. "Get that damned carrier clear. We don't want the bad guys to wonder about this part of the road!"

Lawson nodded and shouted over his helmet commlink for Olmert to stop. As the hovercraft settled to the ground he jumped clear and sprinted to the other vehicle, waving cheerfully to Legionnaire Reinholt as he clambered into the driver's cab. Reinholt, crouching among the rocks nearby, waved back, supremely nonchalant. Success or failure for the last stage of the plan rested on his narrow shoulders.

Coyle switched his helmet commlink to the private channel with Bertrand. "Sergeant, we're at Point Foxtrot. Brigade's on the way. They estimate an hour until they're here."

"Hour's a long time, sir," Bertrand replied, his tone neutral.

"It's your call, Marc," Coyle continued. Part of him

wondered at the way the familiarity slipped out. Bertrand didn't seem like a subordinate any more. More like a brother . . . a brother Coyle had come to rely on for advice. A brother who could be dead in less than that hour's time Forbes wanted the legionnaires to buy him. "Run for Foxtrot as soon as you think the time's right."

There was a long pause. Through the headphones Coyle could hear gauss rifles whining, the thunder of an explosion, shouts of warning and defiance from other legionnaires near the sergeant. It sounded like the rebels were pressing the attack home.

Maybe the withdrawal would come too late for Bertrand's tiny rearguard. . . .

"We're starting our pullout now," the sergeant announced at last. "Make sure you know your targets, Mr. Coyle. We'll be the ones in the lead!"

"Roger that," Coyle said, his throat tight. "Amanda One clear."

The die was cast.

Bertrand had likened his plan to a confidence game when he had first explained it. "Mind games," he had said. "We let Gaspard think he's got us pegged. Then we pull the real swindle." By feigning flight from the firebase, the platoon could emerge from the defense relatively intact and still buy some more time. Gaspard would surely expect the fortifications to be mined and booby-trapped, and he'd be careful of tricks as he pushed through toward the pass. Hopefully that would give Bertrand's section time to break contact and rejoin Coyle at the top of the pass, the place the sergeant had chosen for the final confrontation.

If they encountered nothing but fleeing soldiers at Firebase Amanda, the rebels might just fall for Bertrand's con game. Legionnaire Reinholt and a healthy supply of explosives and mines would take care of the rest. . . .

But if it failed, if Gaspard saw through the trap, the survivors of Second Platoon would be waiting. It had all the hallmarks of those traditions Arthur Coyle had scorned. Now he knew how they were created. And he knew that there were some men who really could make them.

But the memory of Midgarth was still there, and Coyle didn't know if he'd be able to stand firm if the rebels won free of Bertrand's trap.

A laser pulse seared the air centimeters above Bertrand's head, making one of the legionnaires nearby curse luridly. The hovercarrier swerved around a rock outcropping and steadied on course up the pass again. For the moment, they were safe from Gaspard's pursuing tracks. But it wouldn't last for long.

They had run from the perimeter line to the last of the hovercarriers after laying down a final barrage of fire to discourage the rebels from pressing too fast. Still, the carrier had barely stirred from the ground before the first rushing infantry poured over the berm, and two tracks took shots at them before they were clear of the camp. One of the laser blasts had damaged one of the carrier's engines, and they'd barely been able to keep ahead of the pursuit. He had cut the retreat a little too fine, maybe.

Bertrand dropped his rifle's needle magazine and slapped in a fresh clip. Once they reached the top of the pass, they would need every round. Even the trap the legionnaires had set might not be enough to stop Gaspard. It had been a calculated risk to abandon the firebase and let the rebels pursue the legionnaires up the narrow road through the mountains. A miscalculation or a failure of will could cost the defenders everything. But so far the plan was working. Gaspard had sent a small pursuing force to chase the hovercarrier, but, after the repeated tricks and feints he'd already run into, he had been very careful around the abandoned base below. Before the last turn had blocked his view of the valley, Bertrand had seen the rebels only just beginning to move out in force. Another half-hour's time won. And the Brigadier would soon be on the scene.

Smoke rose from the left engine cowling, the one the laser had grazed back in the firebase. Their speed dropped, and the carrier swayed back and forth as the driver wrestled to control the vehicle. Bertrand bit off a curse. "Gun it, Duprés!" he called over his commlink. "The damn thing only has to get us to the top!"

The engine spluttered, kicked in again, and the carrier steadied and surged forward once more. But the smoke was still roiling out of the engine compartment—whether from battle damage or just too much strain for a worn-out vehicle never intended for combat conditions, it didn't really matter much now. They just had to hope they could make it.

He glanced back. A heavy, ponderous shape was rounding the corner on clanking treads—the lead track in the pursuit force. This time they wouldn't dodge those lasers for long.

The head of the pass was in sight now. Just beyond, Coyle and his men waited, unseen but ready.

"Cut your fans, Duprés!" he yelled. "Everybody dismount and disperse!"

The hovercarrier turned sideways as the driver obeyed the order, settling to the ground as the fans cut off. Bertrand vaulted over the railing before the vehicle had settled, with the rest of the rearguard close behind him.

The track's lasers pulsed once, and Bertrand threw himself down as the heat of the shot washed past him. The front end of the carrier erupted in a shower of flame and debris, and seconds later another explosion followed as the synthetic fuel in the vehicle's midsection blew. A whizzing chunk of metal spun past Bertrand, cutting down Legionnaire Li as the nube ran for the cover of nearby boulders.

Duprés and half a dozen others hadn't even had time to get clear of the carrier before the hit.

The rest of the legionnaires were up and running, sprinting for the top of the pass. Below, infantry was swarming forward, past the track. A second vehicle was rounding the bend, with miners clinging to the chassis, waving their weapons and shouting hoarsely. Some were leaping clear of the track, ready to fan out and

overwhelm the fugitives they could see fleeing the victorious People's Army.

They were almost into the trap now. And Bertrand was squarely in the middle of the kill zone he'd helped lay out just hours earlier.

Bertrand started to rise, then checked the motion and rolled sideways to the cover of the same rocks Li had been running for. He flipped on his image intensifiers for a better look at the second track, and his blood ran cold.

There, under the Miner's Committee banner, was the slight, bearded figure of the man they called "The Miner's Professor." Pierre Gaspard. So he had decided to command the advance guard in person, to keep them moving and make sure the pass was taken. That man left very little to chance.

Bertrand raised his rifle. Trap or no trap, this was too good a chance to miss. He'd make sure of Gaspard before he died.

The track ground to a halt and the laser cannon fired again, tearing a hole through a pile of boulders near the top of the pass and triggering a rockfall from the side of the cliff beyond.

Legionnaire Reinholt's screams filled Bertrand's helmet phones. Reinholt . . .

Without Reinholt the plan would unravel. Bertrand had told Brice that Gaspard's death would break the miners, but with victory so near they might still take Gwynport even if he could kill the leader.

With a curse Bertrand switched back to normal vision and sprang from the cover of the rocks, running a zigzag path to cross to Reinholt's position. A few rebels fired, but the shots went wild.

Then, suddenly, he was sprawled on his face on the rocky ground, and pain lanced up his leg in throbbing waves. Bertrand tried to rise, fell again. He looked at the injured limb.

Even regen therapy couldn't have healed his mangled foot. Dark blood welled from the wound, soaking his uniform, pooling on the ground.

Adrenaline surged in his veins, and somehow he found the strength to fumble in his medkit for a tourniquet. He wrapped the device around the leg just below the knee and switched it on, felt it constrict to cut the blood flow as it dampened the pain through neural induction.

Dizzy with shock, Bertrand started crawling toward his goal.

"Cover fire! Cover fire! Pour it on!" Coyle squeezed the trigger of his rifle, heard the rising whine as the gauss weapon hurled high-velocity needle rounds on full auto. The rest of his section added their own fire while survivors from the shattered hulk of the hovercarrier streamed up the pass. They had watched from cover as the drama played itself out below. The sudden destruction of the vehicle and the sight of the attackers storming up the pass had shaken Coyle, but he couldn't let these men down. Not now.

A grenade exploded a few meters away, and even with the fail-safe dampers on his helmet the sound made his ears ring. When he looked around, he saw Legionnaire Florczyk down, blood streaming from a dozen shrapnel wounds and his C^3 backpack a shattered ruin. Corporal Lawson kneeled beside the wounded man, medkit in hand.

A burst of automatic fire caught the two soldiers. Lawson's duraweave armor protected him long enough for the legionnaire to grab his battle rifle and return fire. But the deep-throated hammering of a heavy rifle support weapon probed along the Legion skirmish line toward him, and Lawson went down. His body sprawled unmoving in the dust beside the comrade he'd tried in vain to help.

Coyle switched to grenades and fired a full-auto spread, overcome by hate and battle lust. Movement caught his eye fifty meters down the pass, and he swung the rifle to cover it. Just in time he realized that he was looking at Sergeant Bertrand.

The platoon sergeant was near the jumble of rocks where Reinholt had been concealed, crawling slowly. Even at this range Coyle could see the blood and torn flesh of Bertrand's ruined leg. It was a miracle that the sergeant was still moving at all.

On the other side of those rocks Coyle could see Reinholt's body, or part of it. The rest was buried under the rockslide that had fallen after the track's laser hit on the cliff behind him. The control box that would detonate the trap lay near the dead man's hand.

Bertrand had nearly reached it when he stopped moving, his body sagging, limp.

Hardly aware of making the decision, Coyle found himself sprinting down the pass. He fired his rifle from the hip as he ran, never seeing if his shots found a mark.

Then he was there, diving for the protection of the rocks and rolling as he hit. Coyle came up less than a meter away from Bertrand. The sergeant stirred feebly, then sank back down.

Coyle stared at the ugly wound for a long moment. Without quick first aid, the sergeant would die. . . .

. . . But without fast action the trap would never be sprung.

He grabbed the detonator box and checked it for damage. It looked battered, but still usable. Then he looked down at Bertrand one last time. The sergeant groaned and tried to move.

"Rest easy, Sergeant," he said softly, crouching over the injured man. He peered out at the advancing rebels, saw the track with the shovel-and-laser-drill emblem rumbling ponderously up the slope. The rebel leader, Gaspard . . . "You were right, Sergeant," he went on. "It took both of us to pull it off."

Then he pressed the detonator switch.

Gouts of flame erupted from canisters of fuel concealed along the walls of the pass, and explosions tore through the advancing rebel column from a dozen charges planted in the ground. Then the Galahads started going off, one after another, spraying their deadly loads in all directions, cutting down rebel infantrymen.

A pillar of flame engulfed one of the tracks as it rolled over one of the mines.

For a long moment Coyle's eyes remained locked on Gaspard's vehicle. It started to back away from the inferno, grinding its way over bodies and smoldering debris. Then an explosion lifted up the front end of the track as it passed directly over one of the charges. Through smoke and dust and licking flames, Coyle saw the improvised tank coming apart.

Fragments showered down from the exploding vehicle. Coyle never saw the jagged chunk of metal that struck him down, but slowly realized that he was lying across Bertrand's still body. He tried to rise, but found that he couldn't move.

As blackness descended Subaltern Arthur Coyle felt nothing but satisfaction. He had done his duty.

And he finally knew what it was that drove the soldiers of the Fifth Foreign Legion.

The whine of powerful turbofans died away slowly and the Sabertooth FSV settled to the ground as the magnetic repulsion fields collapsed beneath her. Corporal Selim Bashar ordered the onboard computer to run through a quick diagnostic even as the lance in the vehicle's rear compartment started to deploy. He could hear their voices over the commlink as they spread out to pick through the rubble that clogged the top of Northridge Pass.

"Holy shit!" someone was saying. "Place looks like a slaughterhouse!"

"Musta been some party, huh?" another one added.

"Cut the chatter and check for survivors," Corporal Moulton growled. "And watch out for rebels playing sleeperslug."

The computer gave Bashar a green light; all systems nominal. He heard Legionnaire Spiro Karatsolis moving around behind him and turned in his seat. "Looks like they really got pounded," Bashar said.

"Yeah." Karatsolis looked at the forward viewscreen with an expression of distaste. "Brig's got his victory, all right. But not the way he wanted it, I'll bet. Not the way it should've been, either."

Bashar shrugged. "So what else is new?" He gestured to the hatch. "Want to stretch your legs, Spear?"

"Sure. Why not?"

Second Platoon had been off the air for more than an hour, and everyone in the flying column had been prepared for the worst. Reconnaissance drones had overflown the abandoned firebase and the battle site at the pass twice since then to report the outcome of the fighting. A few moving figures, hardly enough to compose a decent-sized section, had been all the cameras had picked up.

But the battle had served its purpose. The People's Army had overrun the firebase and nearly penetrated the mountains, but they had recoiled after the ambush had destroyed most of their advance guard. The rest of the rebel force had fallen apart as soon as Brigadier Forbes brought up a battalion of legionnaires in Sandray APCs and trapped the enemy against the mountains. It was all over now except the mopping up.

And counting the butcher's bill.

The dead were everywhere, some of them legionnaires but mostly rebels in ragtag combat gear. The defenders had charged a high price for Northridge Pass.

"We found some survivors!" a voice called on the commlink. "Legionnaires! They were up in the rocks past the crest."

"Call HQ," Moulton ordered. "Have them send a medical van and another APC up here for the evac."

Bashar hardly heard the exchange. The bodies among the rocks near the two burned-out tracks held his attention: three legionnaires alone surrounded by dozens of enemies. One, crushed under heavy rocks, was unrecognizable except by the Legion patch on his battledress uniform.

The other two lay together. The big sergeant's foot was mangled, his fatigues stained with blood. Sprawled across him was a subaltern, hands still gripping a detonator box.

Karatsolis rested a hand on Bashar's shoulder and looked down at the bodies. "Legionnaires," he said quietly. "Both of them . . . legionnaires." ✦

The Ghost Taker

Lawrence Watt-Evans

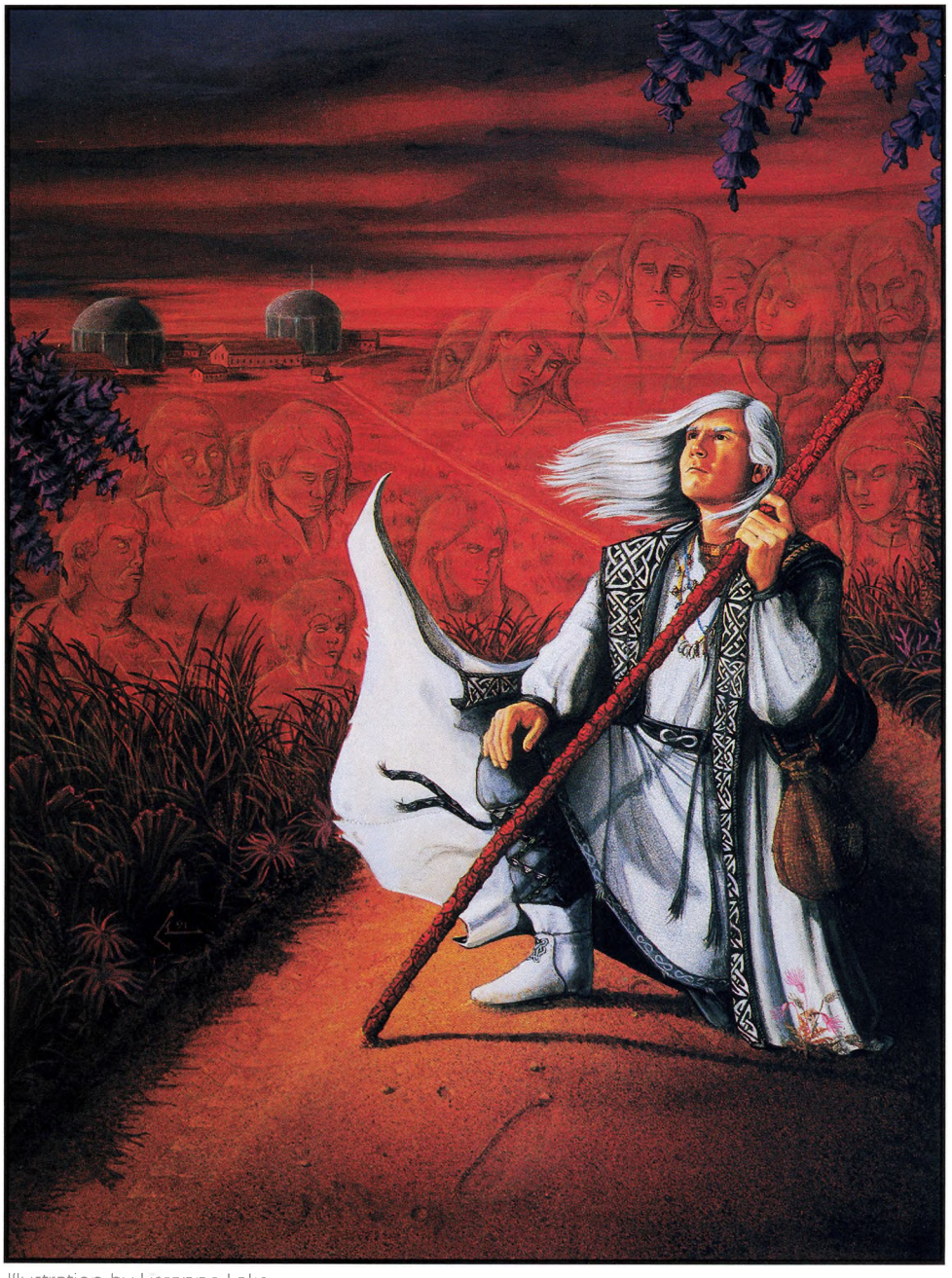

Illustration by Lissanne Lake

He knew the dust of the road from a thousand previous journeys, from a million weary steps taken in the past. This was the same road he had always followed, and his teachers, his ancestors before him. He knew everything about it, yet still he studied it, trying to see it anew, as if he were a young child walking it for the first time.

The dust changed, of course. Everything changed, for that was the way of the world. The grass on the verge was thicker here, taller there; one tree had died, another grown. The dust had swirled and shifted and lay now in a low central mound between two shallow ruts where once it had been almost even, but lowest in the center. Even the roads had changed with the arrival of the Strangers, even the dust; was it any wonder that men and women had, too?

Ah, but had they changed in any fundamental way? A man was still a spirit bound up in

flesh, seeking the good things of the world. That could never change.

He paused and leaned on his intricately carved staff.

Ahead he could see the village that had once been home to Franzaver Shaman, whose soul he had captured three years ago. He had never known a name for the place; he had needed no name but Franzaver's for it. The Strangers put great faith in names, trusted more in names than in essences—as was only to be expected of creatures that did not acknowledge their own souls—so the village would certainly have a name now. The dust of the road, in its gentle mound, told him as much.

He sighed, and walked on, looking ahead now, and saw that indeed the village had changed. He remembered it as Franzaver had known it, a score of great houses arranged about an oval market, not as a collection of forty or fifty mismatched structures. The great houses were still there, but so were several sheds of the sort the Strangers used to store their machines, and several small shops. A gatehouse stood at the roadside.

He paused again, looking at the gatehouse. He could circle around it readily enough, if he chose. He knew that he would probably not be made welcome here; the village had plainly taken up the Strangers' ways wholeheartedly.

Still, he was an honest man pursuing an ancient and honorable duty; he would not sneak in as if he were a thief. He walked on down the center of the road.

The gatekeeper emerged, and the traveller stopped, shocked. The man was a Stranger.

Franzaver had known the old village gatekeeper, a huge man with black hair and a bristling beard, Simagis by name. Huge and dark, yes, but Simagis had been no Stranger. Franzaver had known him, and so the traveller knew him, and this man was not Simagis.

Behind the Stranger, a second figure appeared, a familiar face. Ignoring the alien intruder, the traveller called a polite greeting.

Simagis, the village gatekeeper, studied him over the Stranger's shoulder, while the Stranger stood, silently glowering, between the two. "Do I know you?" Simagis asked at last.

"I bear the soul of Franzaver Shaman," the traveller replied. He held up his staff and pointed to Franzaver's face, carved near the top.

"A priest?"

The traveller nodded.

"We need no priests here," Simagis stated with firm finality.

The Stranger nodded agreement, and a hand fell to the butt of an instrument on his belt, an instrument the traveller knew for a weapon.

"Yet I was drawn here," the traveller replied, ignoring the display of hostility.

"We need no priests here," the gatekeeper repeated, glancing at the Stranger as if seeking approval.

"You heard him," the Stranger said, speaking in a harsh, deep voice. "Get lost."

The priest tilted his head, feeling out the world around him, and answered, "Someone in your village is dying, Simagis, and I have come here to collect his soul." He paused, then added, "Or hers," as an afterthought. "I can't tell who it is."

"Nobody sent for you," Simagis insisted.

"Oh, there was no need to summon me," the priest replied. "I have taken enough ghosts to know without being told when and where I will be needed."

"You aren't wanted here, witch doctor," the Stranger said. "These people have had enough of your superstitions. Go away."

"Wanted or not," the priest insisted, "I am needed. Would you have this person's spirit wandering about the village, alone and blind and frightened?"

"The spirits of the dead do not linger," Simagis replied. "That is myth, it is superstition. The Terrans have told us this."

The Stranger, the Terran, nodded confirmation.

"What do the Strangers know of it?" the priest demanded.

"The Terrans know far more than any of our people ever have!" Simagis gestured at the man standing before him. "Look at their machines, their clothes, their medicines, their size and strength; the Terrans are wisdom made manifest."

"But what do they know of *us*?" the priest insisted. "They may know that their own souls do not roam, lost and crippled, after death, but what do they know of ours?"

The Terran replied, "We're all human, little priest. We had your kind on Earth long ago, but we learned better eventually."

"You see?" Simagis said. "They say we are the same, that our ancestors were Terrans like themselves who were stranded on our world."

The priest studied the two men. He wondered, not for the first time, what the homeplace of the Terrans must be like. If they were in truth the same as his own kind, yet did not allow the taking of souls, what could their world be like, with all those ghosts roaming free, eyeless and afraid, striking out in terror at the mind of anyone they touched? A world of madness, surely.

"I have heard that we are the same," he said. "I do not say it is false, for I do not know; no one remembers so very long ago." He shrugged. "Regardless of origins, we are a part of this world now, wherever our forefathers might have come from, and we are no longer Terrans. In our world, our ghosts walk, screaming in terror, if no priest is there to catch the last breaths of the dying and take their souls into himself."

The Terran snorted in derision.

"You priests lie," Simagis insisted. "It's all tricks to deceive us and make us dependent upon you, so that you have no need to earn your keep as honest men do. We need no deceivers in Galoran. Go away, priest."

"I am no deceiver!" The priest lifted his staff, displayed the faces carved into it, faces young and old, of men, women, and children—faces carved recently, and faces worn with long use.

Few were new.

"I bear the souls of two hundred and forty-one peo-

ple, in addition to my own," the priest said. "Souls I have captured myself, and the souls brought to me by those priests whose dying breaths I caught. I *know* them, Simagis; I know these souls, know that they are real, know that I saved them from blind wandering throughout eternity."

"The Terrans say you lie," Simagis said flatly.

"And *I* say that the Strangers are wrong!" the priest shouted, losing control of his emotions. "They have lost the truth, and now seek to destroy it here. Will you believe them, and not one of your own?"

"Yes, priest, I will! Go away!"

"You heard him," the Stranger said. "Go away!"

The priest fought himself calm, fought down all his tangled feelings. "I have come to provide a necessary and beneficial service for someone who will die here, very soon. If you do not wish to pay me the traditional tithe from the belongings of that person, so be it, I will forego my fee. I will ask nothing of you or your village or anyone in it, save that you let me catch the dying breath and take the ghost with it."

"It's superstition, and we want none of it! No one here is dying! Go away!"

The priest looked up at the implacable face of the Terran, into the empty brown eyes, then stepped back in sudden shock and turned away.

—*What are you doing?* asked Franzaver's ghost frantically. —*One of my people is dying!*

—*Something troubles you,* another soul said.

—*They will not have us,* he replied. —*Would you have me force my way in, like a thief, and steal the soul?*

—*No!* clamored several spirits. —*We are not thieves!*

—*A vote,* suggested a thin and ancient soul, one that had almost faded into the mass, surely not one he had taken himself, or even one Franzaver or the other priest, Avaunas, had taken, but one that had been passed on through many priests. —*Put it to a vote.*

He agreed, and tallied the results on his fingers in binary notation, but did not really need to. He knew what they would be from the urgings he felt pulling at him. When the ghosts were stirred up, he had little will of his own left.

There would be no intervention. He would walk on, carrying out his duty where the people permitted it, and hoping that the rest would come to their senses before too many souls were scattered and lost. Surely, when the initial glamor had faded from the Terran strangers, his people would see their self-assurance for the arrogance it was.

Or perhaps the Terran scientists would realize their mistake, see what he now knew beyond any possible doubt, that his people were *not* the same as Terrans any longer—he did not have the words to tell them, to convince them. His language held no word for mutation that he could make the Strangers understand, but he knew that some sort of change had taken place if his people were, in truth, descended from Terrans.

He knew, because he had seen into the mind behind the Terran's eyes, and had seen that there was no soul there, no delicate web of electrical energy, nothing that could escape the body at death and be caught by another.

No wonder, then, that the Strangers thought the priests mere tricksters and parasites! Among Terrans they would be no more than that.

Surely, though, some day, his people would realize the truth and would accept the priests, and would test their children for the holy talent and allow them to be trained as new priests.

Surely, some day, that would happen—for if it did not, he and the two hundred and forty-one souls he carried would die, with no priest to save them, and he had no wish to die as the soulless Strangers did, the moment his body ceased to work, so very, very long before his time.

He turned away, unwanted, from Galoran, suffering with the knowledge that a soul would soon be wandering the night there with no brain to hold it, no eyes to see through, screaming in terror until it faded away to nothing—as his soul might someday wander and fade, if no more priests were trained, as the souls of all his people would wander and die. Tears stung his eyes, and to hide them he looked down at the road, looked at the dust beneath his feet with two eyes that led to more than two hundred souls. ✦

An Interesting Letter from an English Reader

Arthur C. Clarke

One of the letters to the editor in the February 1935 issue of *Amazing Stories* carried the straightforward headline reproduced above. Little did editor T. O'Conor Sloane know at the time—indeed, there was no way he could have known—that the writer would go on to become one of the world's most famous authors.

When that young man began to get his own science fiction stories published, the vast majority of them appeared in magazines other than this one. But dozens of years and millions of sentences later, nothing can change the fact that *Amazing Stories* was the first publication to print words that were written by Arthur C. Clarke.

Following is a condensed version of Mr. Clarke's first appearance in print, plus the full verbatim text of editor Sloane's response.

Editor, AMAZING STORIES:

Although I have been a reader of your magazine for many years, this will be my first letter to you, and I might as well warn you straight away that it isn't going to be entirely complimentary!

I do not think yours is the best magazine on the market, Dr. Sloane, but in some respects it is better than the others. You have the best Editorials, the best Discussions and the best printing. And judging by the manner your readers still rave over Dr. Smith and Mr. Campbell, you have published some of the best stories. Only you don't do that so often nowadays, it seems to me. Perhaps the Smith "addicts" will say it's because you've just printed *"Triplanetary"* and so that does not give the other stories a chance!

I like your new size. Please stick to it. The old magazines used to bend under their own weight when you put them on the shelf, but the new ones are much sturdier. I don't care if you have trimmed edges or not, but I think the drawings are most important. Your covers would be better if they were a trifle brighter. They've been a pale blue-green long enough.

Several of your writers have been using the term "the square of the velocity of light." I would like to point out that such a term is more or less meaningless. Velocity is length divided by time. Therefore the square of a velocity is a length squared (or an area) divided by a time squared. I don't know what this is, but it's certainly not a velocity.

I am afraid *"The Velocity of Escape"* gave me a pain in the neck. It was awful! Skidmore speaks of the "stratoscope." What on earth's that? I've heard of the stratosphere, but anything ending in scope is connected with vision, e.g. microscope, telescope. His explanation of the kinetic theory of gases is all right, but such an elementary discourse seems needless to "the best scientific minds in all the world." Millstein's explanation of the cosmic rays (two pages of it) is very interesting, but it slows down the story.

But what upset me most was the ending. Why should Millstein jump to the conclusion that the Falcon's base was on Sirius, just because Cromwell happened to mention the star? What a place to choose! Surface temperature, 10,000°C.! Distance, 50,000,000,000,000 miles (Don't drop any 0's Mr. Printer.) It would take the *"Falcon"* a good many life-times to get there, let alone use it as a base for operations against the earth. I wish your writers would be more careful about stellar distances. Only Smith and Campbell seem to realize just how far away the stars really are.

Before I sign off, I would like to hear from any readers in England who have copies of AMAZING STORIES or any other Science Fiction magazines for sale. Thank you!

A. C. Clarke,
Bishop's Lydeard,
Taunton,
England.

(We find that often the same story is both criticized and admired. There is no rule about it. Some like what others dislike. We might feel justified in saying that the friendly letter, for it is that, by its kindly criticisms, has disarmed out defenders. We wish we had more such letters. Stratoscope was undoubtedly a *lapsus pennae*.. As the velocity of light is definite quantity there is no reason why it cannot be squared. —EDITOR.) ✦

Mark Twain's War of the Worlds, or

Extraterrestrial Life on the Mississippi

A newly discovered work by Samuel Clemens, assembled and presented by

Gary D. Douglass

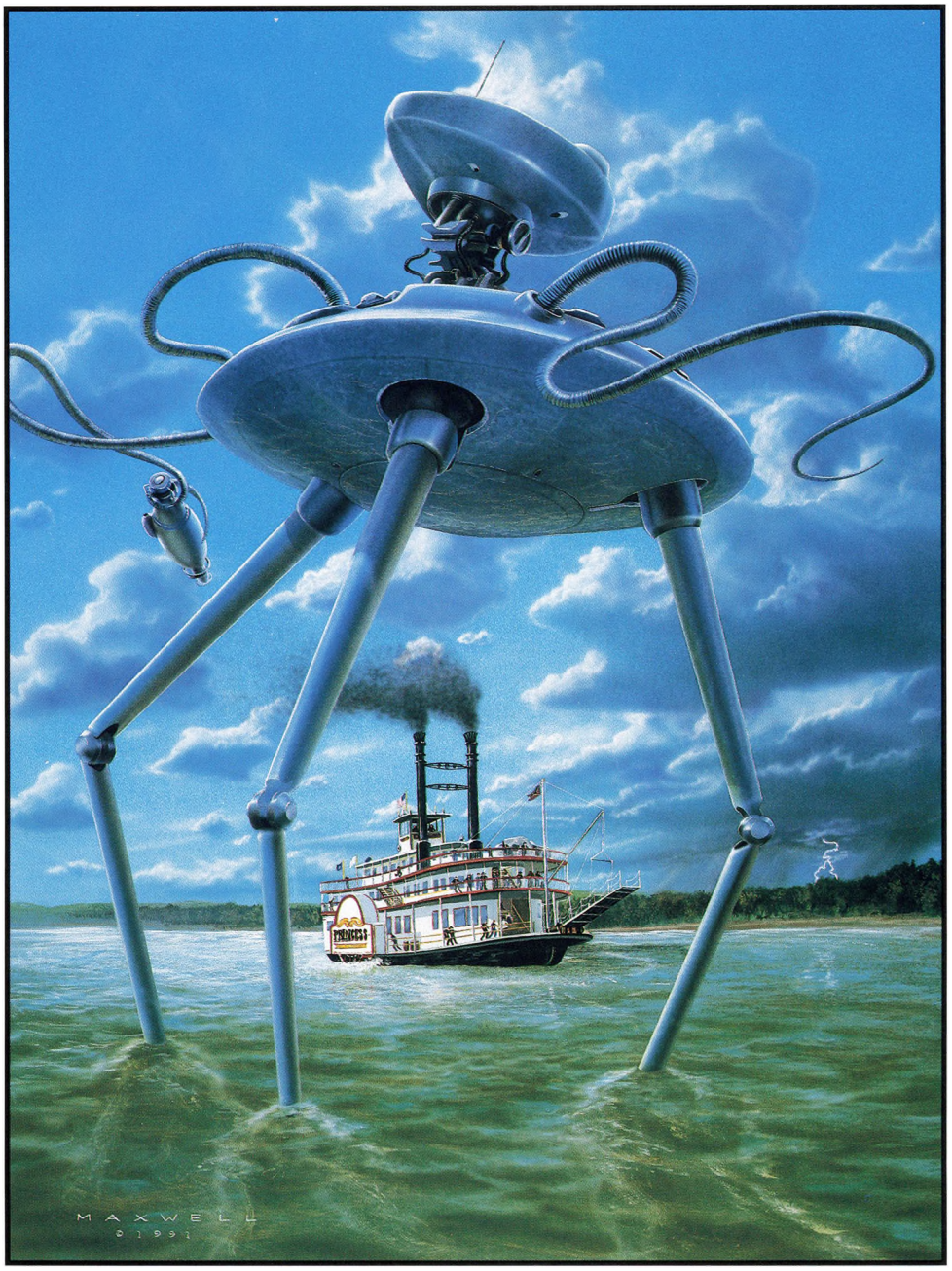

Illustration by Mark Maxwell

The honorable Mr. H. G. Wells has perpetrated a fraud.

There was no Martian invasion of England in eighteen ninety-eight. I know this because I was there at the time on a speaking tour. I had much time for lengthy conversation with members of the local population, and they not only failed to mention widespread destruction wrought by interplanetary armies, but assured me repeatedly after my lectures that if there was any threat to Western culture, it was me.

Comforted by this knowledge,

I determined to seek the truth behind Mr. Wells' fantastic tale. As hours of weary research and days of contemplative deduction (some of it while awake) have revealed, the story has at its core a seed of fact. There was indeed an attempt by celestial invaders to subjugate the world and its human population. Wells got that much right. Beyond that, Mr. Wells' information was obviously limited, forcing him to exercise some license in setting the tale before the public. The points of his creative imagining are only too clear to the trained eye: He is English, and his natural inclination is to fling his Martian rocks down on English soil. The English military leaders never send a small scouting party to carefully assess a dangerous foreign situation when they can hurl in an entire army and provoke a distant population into full-scale war; Wells' Martians are just the same.

Starting with these two errors (and encountering and correcting dozens more), I have with great difficulty and exactness reconstructed what must be the true details of the Martian invasion.

We must begin with the first "falling star"—the real, bonafide, none-genuine-without-this-signature *first* falling star. The details of which belong in a category with the lesser of Mr. Wells' errors, for in this instance he is wrong only by a matter of fifty years and three thousand miles.

The first falling star fell some seven miles west of Dawson's Landing, Missouri, on the pleasant summer evening of August ninth, eighteen forty-eight.

The First Falling Star

Dawson's Landing was a moderately prosperous river town about thirty miles north of Hadleyburg, dependent upon the Mississippi for contact with the outside world, if occasionally uncertain of the outside world's desire for such contact. The surrounding land was sufficiently fertile for the several nearby farms growing corn and cotton. Lush forests dominated the landscape, mysterious caves attracted children to the bluffs along the river, and grassy meadows brought the townspeople together for the occasional Sunday picnic.

The villagers were simple folk, mostly, but, as befitted believers in the American ideal, they had ambition. Above all they had an ambition that their town prosper and grow into a great river city. Over the years they had cast about for some means to achieve notoriety along the Mississippi, the mayor and town council leading the charge at every opportunity, but each time they were turned away in defeat.

Far from the Oregon and California trails, and with no roads to speak of outside of town, Dawson's was hardly the gateway to the West. The produce of the nearby farms was of reliable quality, but so was that of scores of localities on the river. There was no known mineral wealth. No, the town had nothing to recommend it but the sturdy, happy people who lived there and raised their children there, and the peaceful lives they enjoyed.

For Mayor Howley, that wasn't enough. A man of ambition wants more, the mayor was fond of saying. A man of ambition seeks not only to raise himself to a position of notoriety in his community, he seeks also to enlarge the notoriety of that community. After six years of ineffectual struggle to achieve this end, he had no way to know that his community had been noticed from afar and that the fruits of that recognition were on their way at a rate of several thousand miles per hour.

The earliest indication that something unusual was "in the air," as you might say, was a tongue of flame that shrieked across the evening sky. It struck the ground with a mighty crack, a gesture that insured that it would gain the attention even of those who had not witnessed the fiery descent.

The flame and crack by themselves would have been a great boon to the citizens of Dawson's Landing, providing the town with that long-sought notoriety. The incident might even have gotten the town's name into some of the great eastern newspapers, and certainly would have provided years of satisfying summer evening speculation about "the Great Mystery of August ninth."

Alas, the Great Mystery was not to be. Before daybreak a group of townsmen had tracked the falling star to its resting place, and with much disappointment realized that they would have to report to their fellow townspeople that the wondrous messenger from the heavens, the marvelous visitor from the cosmos, the very basis for the Great Mystery of Dawson's Landing, was a rock. A big rock, true. A rock large enough to "splash" a great circular hole in the ground. A singular rock, indeed. But for all of that, still a rock.

Thus was the Great Mystery reduced to a mere curiosity, for of the twin questions "What?" and "Why?", the question more easily open to suggestions of the common folk had already been denied them. "What" it was, was a rock. And with this truly neolithic evidence lying out in the open, learned men would surely arrive to claim the second question and carry it away from the villagers.

It was a hard thing, then, for these townsmen who had tracked miles across the dark hillsides hoping either to witness a miraculous vision, or to return exhausted to their fellow citizens with assurances that no material evidence was to be found and a Great Mystery it was indeed—it was a hard thing to stand atop a ridge of earth thrown up by the object's impact, lanterns held high, staring into a pit one hundred feet across and sixty deep, its walls smoldering from the violence of the collision, and see the fragile possibility of Dawson's Great Mystery shattered by a rock.

Still, there was nothing for it. Mayor Howley, bitter in his disappointment, suggested that they might try burying it. There was certainly enough dirt flung about to do the job. But John Gidson, the town's most prominent, and only, attorney, said no, that would not be quite honest, and would take at least a week to accomplish. By that time everyone in the county with a twig of curiosity would have seen it. No, they had to leave the rock there: huge, black, smoldering, and embarrassing.

It was not the fault of Dawson's Landing if rocks chose to drop from the sky onto their countryside. People might understand that and, perhaps, feel some sympathy for their situation.

The others in the party agreed, but were in no hurry to carry the disappointment back to friends and family. Dawn not being far off, Gidson thought it might be a marketable proposition that they make camp until full morning. The others were sold on the notion with little persuasion and the men found comfortable locations on the grass to doze through the last hours of the warm summer darkness.

It was just at dawn that they heard the sound from the Pit.

The Pit

The sound that roused our boys from their slumber was a sound of scraping. Stone scraping on stone, so heavy and loud that it would later be likened to the sound of the door to Perdition swinging slowly open. The men gathered at the edge of the Pit squinting into the hole, straining to make sense of the noise. Their spirits had picked up considerably, for although a rock might be a grand disillusionment, a rock that made noises was another thing entirely. A talking rock, you might say. Now here was an item of some uniqueness. Here was a true marvel from Providence. The last notion that the rock might be buried evaporated in the stone's lingering radiant heat as the men proudly stood again upon that ridge of earth.

The trackers decided that they had best hurry back to town to convey the news. Cyril Butrick suggested that they post a watch on the hole, military-fashion. The others laughed. They weren't much concerned that someone might make off with a hundred-ton object, and it certainly wasn't going to up and walk off by itself.

With a high sense of purpose and triumph, they made their way quickly back to Dawson's Landing.

By noon of the next day, the townspeople of Dawson's Landing had assembled themselves at the sight of the "Speaking Stone," many tricked out in their Sunday clothes and many making a picnic of the occasion. The pit the falling star had excavated was located (either by good fortune or by Martian calculation) in Meyerson's Meadow. This broad, grassy plain afforded a much more pleasant gathering area for the curious-minded than the surrounding low hills would have.

The day passed in a quiet and largely satisfactory manor, the villagers alternately marveling at the noises of the stone and planning for the prosperity it would bring to Dawson's Landing. One and all were of the opinion that the newly acquired boulder would put the town "on the map."

By late afternoon, a traveling revival preacher had set up his tent in the meadow, much to the consternation of the Reverend Muldrew, Dawson's resident spiritual leader. He had already been planning on mining a wealth of sermons from that heavenly ore, and felt it would be a monstrous injustice if this wandering scripture-screamer should get the first Sunday's use out of the celestial stone. Here the Reverend had spent the last twenty years dutifully guiding his flock, living in poverty and obscurity, and generally paying in advance the bill of freight for this shipment from the Almighty, and now that he and the good people of Dawson's—*his* people—had laid sufficient prayers on the object to sink it down from the clouds of Heaven, here was this sideshow pulpit-pounder dashing in to catch the glory that came down with it. It was enough to make a less Christian man wish for another, more precisely targeted rock to help the revival preacher on his way to Glory.

That evening, while a thunderstorm of considerable proportions was building on the horizon, a storm of a more human kind gathered inside the preacher's tent. The citizenry of Dawson's had appropriated the tent as a convenient place to assemble and consider the future of the new arrival.

As it happened, although the meadow upon which the great stone had fallen bore the name "Meyerson," no one in the town did. In fact, the meadow had received its appellation when, after one of the early Indian raids upon the white settlers, Harcourt Meyerson was buried there.

Though the meadow lay between the Hanover plantation and the Pertwinette farm, the hills surrounding it were rocky, and farming it did not seem practical; thus neither clan had made any attempt to acquire it. Now, with the arrival of the celestial stone, both bordering properties were attempting to annex the meadow.

First to address the assembled townspeople was Brandon Hanover Bridgeton, whose father had been among the earliest settlers of Dawson's Landing. Brandon Bridgeton laid that as the foundation on which he built his claim for the meadow. The priority of his claim rested on the priority of his ancestry in the vicinity of the meadow. Fortunately, none of the Creek tribe displaced at that time by those settlers was present to put forward what would then logically have been the strongest claim.

It was an oration meant to stir the blood and rouse a cheer, full of Indian attacks and winter privations. On a different stage in a different town it might have raised a cheer. But the people of Dawson's Landing knew Bridgeton. They knew that his father had enlarged his rather meager holdings not through hard work, but by marrying the unfortunate Hanover girl. They did not cheer.

The Widow Pertwinette rose next. She began the groundwork for her claim in a manner similar to Bridgeton's, citing the earliest settlers of the village, the constant hardship they had endured, and the danger of driving out the savages that had fought them. She spoke about progress, the glorious future of Dawson's Landing, and the benefits it held for all of them, though how her possession of the great stone would benefit the other citizens was never made completely clear.

She too sought to draw enthusiasm from the crowd, and she too failed. As phrase after fiery phrase was extinguished by the emotional vacuum in the tent, her

frustration turned to rage, and it was all she could do to sit back down without swearing.

The Martians

The Reverend Muldrew saw his chance to win the day as mediator and advocate for the entire village. The popular sentiment favored town ownership of the meadow and the stone. In this way the coming untold benefits resulting from this divine gift would be fairly distributed.

This marked the last of the gross misapprehensions that the Dawson's citizens would have concerning the cylindrical stone from the sky, for the cylinder's passengers were by that time prepared to introduce themselves to the local representatives of humanity.

As the Reverend began to outline the advantages of mutual ownership of the celestial stone, one of the boys of the town dashed into the tent, unable for a moment to speak, having outrun his own breath. After a pause at the head of the assembled crowd, he informed the townspeople in frantic tones that the Rock had opened and that a shining serpent had emerged from it.

Those directly involved in the discussion at hand were ready to ignore the lad's wild prattling and perhaps cuff him sufficiently to impress upon him the foolishness of fantastic storytelling. But curiosity got the better of many of the crowd and they left the tent to see. Upon hearing their startled cries, the remainder of those assembled followed them out.

That was the saving of them, for scarcely had the last of the crowd left the tent but it sprung into flames. Black smoke boiled up from the suddenly blazing canvas. The drama of the horrifying scene was heightened by the shadow of the storm-dark clouds closing off the afternoon sky. A shaft of yellow light flashed from the Pit to the tent, the connection of illumination alerting some among the assembled villagers to activity of a startling nature in the Pit. A giant serpent of metal rose tall and slender, bizarre and malevolent from the Pit. When its single red eye glowed yellow, the shaft of light erupted and new flames leapt high from the tent.

A few further moments of observation would have revealed the true nature of the serpent: that it was not a metal snake but a metal arm with the fire-producing apparatus in its fist. Attached to this tentacular appendage was a crab-like body of awesome proportions. On three tree-trunk-sized legs the giant stepped out of the Pit and stood mighty and terrifying, master, if you will, of all it surveyed. Or rather, master of all the Martian within it surveyed, for it was an engine of Martian mechanics (in conception not entirely unlike a human locomotive steam engine).

This leviathan crustacean was not alone in his domination of the landscape, for a brother crab soon joined him to stand guard over the Pit, from which the Martians planned to produce several more.

The twin tripodal machines swung their fire-lanterns around and threw a few more bolts of flame here and there to convince any remaining humans in the area of the sincerity of their intent.

Alas, there were no humans left nearby to witness these final displays, for the people had each independently decided that the appearance of the first metal giant was a matter that warranted long and careful deliberation in the privacy of one's home or perhaps even a restful visit to the home of a friend in another county.

The first giant, standing now on the ridge of earth around the Pit as the summer rain began to patter down on its metal skin, noted the direction of the human retreat. Its occupant Martian scanned the distant landscape carefully until a flash of lightning illuminated the countryside and the human habitation known as Dawson's Landing. The off-world visitor had it in mind to obliterate any hope of human resistance by destroying the village.

It is to this decision that the casual historian might point as the first great Martian blunder. But the mistake made is easy to understand and forgive if one recalls that Mars, having long since lost most of its atmosphere and water into the void, does not have what we would call weather. The blunder was caused by lack of experience and, for all their Earth-watching, an inability to peer through clouds.

When the first Martian machine raised his metal arm high over his metal head for a good clear shot at the innocents in Dawson's in the midst of that summer storm, it would not have required a Missourian of particularly distinguished intellectual credentials to note that he was reaching for trouble.

It is perhaps more interesting, for a moment, to examine the situation from the point of view of the lightning bolt. Now here was an electrical discharge dashing about inside the swelling tide of black clouds, searching the ground for some likely target. The bolt must almost always settle for some tree or other, with the odd church steeple tossed in for variety. But, lo! Out of nowhere had appeared a monumental tripodal lightning rod reaching up above the very forest. It would have been unfriendly to refuse.

Gathering every volt within a mile, the bolt cracked loudly with joy as it plunged gratefully down to shake the Martian's hand.

The instant the bolt struck the upraised tentacular arm, the Martian machine seemed to jump slightly, as if startled by this wondrous display of Nature's boundless vitality. The whole of the leviathan crab glowed blue. Then its arms dropped to its sides, its legs buckled, and the giant fell over.

It would be a mistake, also, to characterize this moment as the point of another major Martian error, for if, as has been noted, they had no reason to suspect one of their engines could be so easily disabled, they certainly could not have anticipated its falling into the Pit and exploding.

Indeed, the unpredictability of these events undoubtedly made them all the more alarming to the single surviving Martian in machine number two. The second crab wasted no time attempting to sift through the flaming debris in the Pit. The three legs that supported the ma-

chine were hinged near the mid-point, and now, by using those hinges, and by taking very long steps, the remaining Martian contrived to stay as low as possible while he and his giant machine scuttled for the forest to hide.

The unfamiliar torrential weather continued through the night to confound any hope that any Martians might have survived the destruction in the Pit. And although ten hours of continuous rainfall served to extinguish the fire in the Pit, it also half-filled the Pit with water.

The Humans Respond

By their reactions to the fantastic apparition from the Pit, it is possible to divide the inhabitants of Dawson's Landing into two groups: those who ran, and those who ran to get their guns. The villagers who sought their weapons that they might defend their homes even against overwhelming odds silently noted their own undaunted spirits and were encouraged by the observation. The villagers who sought safety through escape consoled themselves with the knowledge that suicide is numbered among the activities frowned upon in the Scriptures.

These townspeople, interested in the preservation of their families and themselves, dashed, as a group, to the center of town. Once they reached the church hall with reasonable certainty that they had not been pursued, they fell, as people will, to discussing the nature of their peril. After several hours of discussion and debate, they had worked out pretty much to their satisfaction a logical explanation of the events. The stone that had fallen from the Heavens (no one could yet say just what it was or why it had fallen, but that seemed unimportant) had in striking the ground and gouging its crater cracked a hole in the roof of Perdition. The sudden appearance of the flame-spouting serpent seemed likely the demonic equivalent of rapping the ceiling with a broom-handle to quiet an upstairs neighbor. Or it might be a lower form of perditious inhabitant making a break for freedom. Some sort of infernal pet, perhaps. (In which case, those who had chosen to fight might have argued, it made sense to contain the beast in his pit so that his master need not search all of Missouri for him).

With this interpretation of the events as the spectacles through which the villagers viewed the situation, their reaction to the next Martian provocation is easily understood. When, just at dawn the following morning, another falling star crossed the sky to strike the Earth with a familiar thunder, the assembled populace of Dawson's Landing had amongst them the single thought to hitch their wagons and light out. They had spent the night in the sanctuary of the church hall, the last few hours in silence, but this new shock had the room instantly buzzing like a beehive. Not quite five minutes later the cry of "Steamboat a-comin'!" sailed in from the self-appointed watchboy who refused to be dislodged from his proud dockside post by a mere cosmic cataclysm. The crowd's obsession with escape now combined with a universal notion of the means for that escape. With scarcely a word between them, they rushed from the church hall into the morning light and charged down to the docks with the intention of greeting that steamboat and seizing her.

The Second Falling Star

The second falling star the townspeople had seen was, of course, the second Martian cylinder, the salvation for which the surviving crab-machine was waiting. Here were the reinforcements that would make the invading army invincible. Here was the insurance that any resistance from a pitiable human ingenuity could be quickly overcome. The second descending bolt of fire the villagers had seen was a sign to all humanity to abandon hope.

The thunderous crack they had heard, however, was not the sound of the second cylinder's landing. It was the sound of its ricochet. The sound of its landing was a splash.

Due to an excellent job of piloting, the second cylinder had approached the ground at an extremely oblique angle. The intention was that this should decrease the shock of the impact. And, perhaps it would have, had an outcropping of granite not suddenly intervened. The cylinder struck the ground, slid along as expected until it reached the granite, whereupon it caromed high into the air. The Martian in the surviving machine, who had raised his mammoth crab once more to full height that he might observe the coming of these, his saviors, now watched, amazed and disbelieving, as the second cylinder, the remainder of the invading force, arced up into the sky and then down into the Mississippi River.

Despite the sound drubbing the Martians were receiving at the hand of Providence, it would be a sad thing to overlook the valor with which a segment of humanity did respond to the invasion. This defiant spirit was most completely embodied in the person of Colonel Alexander Drew, leader of the Dawson's Landing Volunteer Militia. He was the most learned man in town on the business of war, having read many books on the subject and having almost been involved in the recent struggle in Mexico. Drawing from this store of experience and knowledge, he now planned the militia's campaign against the invaders.

Consisting of eighteen men at full strength, the militia turned out fourteen soldiers within two hours of the first Martian attack. These were determined men whose forefathers had found this land populated by primitive savages and had fought to take it from them. Had these men any means by which to know the Martians' intentions, those intentions might have seemed surprisingly familiar.

Since the enemy was equipped with an engine capable of throwing fire, the situation seemed to demand that they receive a return of artillery. Unfortunately, the only cannon in the town was an ornamental relic rescued years before from the wreck of a French gunboat that had run aground at New Orleans. A keelboatman had brought the iron barrel upstream and, after being

mortally wounded in a riverside brawl, bequeathed it to the town of Dawson's Landing in exchange for a Christian burial. His offer was accepted and the rusty cylinder was cleaned up and mounted in a flimsy frame. Alas, the inside of the barrel was left untouched and had deteriorated beyond any hope of use.

Howard Tolay, a carpenter widely respected for his handsome cabinetry and coffin-work, suggested that a catapult of medieval design might serve the cause. Given the right materials and assistance, he judged, he could produce a first-rate catapult in four to five days.

That would not answer for Colonel Drew, who was anxious that they should meet the invaders sooner than that. Immediately, in fact. Faced with the Colonel's sense of purpose, the Volunteers went along with him.

Thus deprived of artillery, the Colonel reasoned that he had only two military options open to him: to reconnoiter, and to flank. By reconnoitering the area they could keep watch of the enemy and note any weakness. By flanking they could be ready to exploit that weakness.

With a rousing speech outlining his tactical design, Colonel Drew led the proud warriors onto the field of battle. With skill and ingenuity they would reconnoiter and flank the enemy to his knees!

They spent most of the night reconnoitering, flanking only intermittently when one or another of the men reported sighting the enemy. Alas, they would only just draw themselves up for a mighty go at flanking when it would become apparent that the "enemy" was in this case only a deer or a dog that had followed them from town. They maneuvered in this fashion through the night, and would have continued on into the next day as well had not one of the militiamen raised the awful possibility that the enemy was flanking *them.*

But the new danger did not find Colonel Drew completely at a loss. During the long hours of tramping around the countryside, he had recalled yet another military option available to his valiant campaigners. He had kept it to himself, a reserve against the possibility that his men might balk at the prospect of a second night's ineffectual maneuvering. Now, with his weary Volunteers beginning to fear that they had been out-generaled, Colonel Drew felt it was time to reveal this new strategy and thus regain their confidence.

As the full light of day gathered around them, Colonel Drew addressed his men, speaking of his own foresight and planning, and assuring them that he still had a few tactical arrows in his quiver. He then set them marching again, perhaps before they could completely understand what he was getting at.

The military option he had in mind was, of course, the "surprise attack."

As he led the march into Meyerson's Meadow and toward the dreaded Pit, Colonel Drew could but hope that this sudden change of tactics from defensive to offensive would generate in the enemy something near the surprise and alarm it did in his men.

The Princess of the Orient

The *Princess of the Orient* was a Mississippi steamboat of the first class. Pearly white decks and railings, trimmed in red and gold-leaf, with fixtures of brass; deck attendants uniformed in the same color scheme, buttons and epaulets polished bright; twin chimneys, fancy-topped and with great volumes of black smoke boiling out of them, stretching tall. She was far more the picture of an other-worldly vessel than any mere *rock.*

The Captain stood on the texas deck, a proud sight in his regal uniform and cap, one hand on the spotless railing, the other raised in gesture to the mate. At his signal the bell sounded; the mighty wheels stopped, hesitated, then reversed momentarily, bringing the *Princess* to a full stop but a few yards from the Dawson's Landing dock.

A boarding-stage craned out from the bow to the dock. Perched at the tip of the stage was a crewman whose job it was to make fast to the dock. It was all-over a splendid display of precision and order, of seasoned men performing tasks they had performed a hundred times before and drilled a thousand. And it would have been finished with the usual proud sounding of the gage-cocks, debarkation of passengers (were there any to debark), and exchange of cargo, had not the peaceful population of Dawson's Landing arrived on the dock at that moment.

The deckhand securing the boarding-stage was unceremoniously tossed into the river as the first and the fastest of the villagers made their way onto that suspended bridge and dashed for the boat.

Captain Samuel Putnam had a reputation as a serious man willing to take as much time as necessary in a difficult situation to weigh alternatives and make the correct decision. Often, in fact, a situation would resolve itself before such a decision could properly be arrived at. So it was that, before the Captain could decide to move his boat out of danger, the bell again sounded and the mighty wheels seized the river and hauled the *Princess* backward. The Pilot—the true lord and master of the steamboat; he who guided his charge past shallows and towhead, through impenetrable rain and fog and darkness; he whose hand truly moved the steamboat—had assessed the situation and lost not a moment in pulling the *Princess* beyond the reach of the charging townspeople.

The few villagers who had made it on board were quickly and firmly in the hands of the deck crew. Captain Putnam made his way down to the main deck, while the Pilot put the *Princess* out to free water to continue the journey down-river. They must swing wide to clear the flats around Sloan's Curve before making the twenty easy miles to Royceburg.

Only as they rounded the tip of the bend did the story told by the invading villagers reach the Captain's ears. Thomas Dickans, who handled freight on the Dawson's docks and was thereby known to some members of the steamboat crew, was among those who had stormed the great vessel. He was delivered before Cap-

tain Putnam to explain their motivation.

Dickans described in clear and lucid, and therefore wholly unbelievable, terms the incident that had led to the panic of the town. The story was interrupted once by the First Mate's report of a peculiar raft in the water ahead.

Having calmly listened to as much of Dickans' wild tale as the Captain felt any reasonable man could be expected to tolerate, he ordered the freightman silent and proceeded to describe the penalties for piracy. The Captain was again interrupted by the First Mate's report of, not a raft, but a strange sort of tower in the river. Captain Putnam left Dickans with a stern gaze, then ascended once more to the texas deck to have a look at the obstruction before them.

Others on the deck were already staring in wonder at the moving tripodal tower they were approaching. It was as odd an item as Putnam had ever encountered in his many years on the river. Atop the three-legged frame was what could easily be construed as a sort of body and head, if one accepted as arms the two snaky projections on the sides. But far more striking than any crude resemblance to the human form was its movement. It was walking out into the middle of the river on those legs and was keeping the arms out of the water. Then it seemed to notice the approaching riverboat, and turned to "face" it.

Captain Putnam stood staring. Now *here* was a puzzle that deserved a bargeload of consideration before action could be taken! Preferably, consideration from the far side of the river.

Once more the decision was made by the Pilot. He had reckoned that the novelty of the situation was such that, long before Putnam could make up his mind on a course of action, the *Princess* would be upon the walking tower and run it down. The bell rang out once more, and once more the giant wheels changed direction.

The Duel

The pilot of the Martian machine was experiencing his own sort of directional problems. The force of the current against the machine's legs caused it to stagger. The invader was entirely unused to the presence of water in quantities larger than those suitable for immediate consumption. This sudden encounter with so incomprehensibly vast a drink as the Mississippi was bound to give him pause. But it was a shock coupled with elation, for here was the element for which they had come to this foreign globe. Here was the element so rare and precious on Mars, the slow evaporation of which was bringing about the evaporation of their civilization. For this element they had sent two cylinders of pioneers to begin the conquest of this new world and its savage inhabitants, and report back on their success or failure. Success would bring wave upon wave of reinforcements. Failure . . . failure was unthinkable. They were *invincible*! (More or less.)

Wonderment and elation did not slow the Martian in his mission. Somehow he must find the second cylinder and raise it from the river-bottom. He swept those great metal legs forward as he waded further into the full stream of the river's main current. He had hardly reached the spot he approximated to be the resting place of the second cylinder, when a new distraction was introduced that would require all of his attention. The *Princess of the Orient* was comin' round the bend.

The *Princess* had just gotten into heat-ray range when the order was given to reverse direction. The mammoth boilers that drove the paddlewheels were heated to their limits as the engineer strove to gain enough power to fight the relentless current. Given a moment to maneuver, the Pilot would doubtless have gotten the *Princess* to slack water and turned her back up-river. Unfortunately, the Martian did not allow him that moment.

Believing, as he did, that humans were responsible for the electrical discharge that had felled his brother Martians, the master of the machine felt that he must act instantly to destroy the vessel that had steamed so impressively into view. The humans must be given no chance to use their horrendous weapons. He raised the arm of his awesome armor and sent a bolt of flame down upon the *Princess*.

His unsteadiness in the water caused his shot to strike a mite wide of its intended target, so that it struck the starboard paddlewheel. Amid the smoke and steam, the portions of the wheel that had not been incinerated were burning. The drive-shaft still gamely turned the fragments in their customary circle, lifting them high into the air and then plunging them into the quenching water, but it was a pitiful show with most of what had not been burned away now being torn off by the water.

The loss of the wheel caused the *Princess* to veer strongly to starboard and thereby present her port paddlewheel to the Martian's second shot. The port paddlewheel met the same fate as the starboard. Fire-bells rang and smoke clouded the decks. Now powerless and ablaze, the doomed vessel drifted helpless under the Martian's gun.

For the crew of the *Princess* the occasion was unforgettable not because of the destruction of their beautiful mistress, nor because that destruction was at the hands of a seemingly supernatural enemy, but because that destruction prompted Captain Putnam's first and only instantaneous decision: ABANDON SHIP!

A few of the larger, most-probably-buoyant articles about the deck were hurled overboard as a possible aid to weak swimmers before the passengers, crew, Captain, and finally the Pilot followed. The *Princess* was blazing beyond any hope of saving. Flames enveloped the midsection of the craft and the superstructure began to collapse just before the current that was sweeping her along pushed her between the mighty metal legs of the Martian machine.

The Fate of the Invaders

Now here was a predicament.

Knocked off its legs by the force of the collision, the

Martian machine was now "seated" atop the collapsed deckwork of the *Princess of the Orient.* Inside the rapidly warming control chamber of the machine, the Martian was frantically attempting to puzzle out and escape from this entirely undignified situation. And, given a moment to consider the problem, he might have arrived at a workable solution. Unfortunately, the *Princess* did not give him that moment.

Directly beneath the Martian machine, where the fire was burning hottest, were the ship's boilers. Having contained a remarkable overload of pressurized steam when the Martian machine had sat down on the gage-cocks and bent closed the only possible safety-valve, the boilers evidently decided that they had gotten the Martian machine at the greatest disadvantage they could likely expect, and so, they let go.

Such was the magnitude of the explosion that not only were the two machines blown into unrecognizable fragments, but the sound was frighteningly loud as far away as Meyerson's Meadow.

It happened that this confrontation between Martian machine and Earth machine had transpired during the very same minutes in which our intrepid Dawson's Landing Volunteer Militia were making their surprise attack on the Pit. Already consumed with grave doubt about the prudence of their current course of action, the gallant Volunteers were entirely stunned by the sudden thunder of the nearby explosion. For a long moment they stood, frozen, two rows of nails waiting to be driven into the ground.

Another long moment passed, and another, and their paralyzing fear was slowly replaced by a sort of irritation that they were being made to wait like this for their destruction. The irritation gave way to curiosity, and several of the men, unmilitary though it was, and over the Colonel's objections, cautiously approached the Pit to see what was causing the delay.

Peeking in to find only fragments of metal and rock now visible amid the collapsed mud in the Pit, our warriors began to feel that the danger was at least momentarily past. Reasoning that the Pit itself was the source of their woes, the conclusion the men came to was an obvious one, and one Cleb Howley never tired of pointing out he had suggested before their troubles began. In a general unspoken agreement, they began to fill in the Pit.

Thus within a week's time the good people of Dawson's Landing had entombed their chance for a most singular historical notoriety. The story of the metal giants and the hole in the roof of Perdition was told thereafter in whispered tones, but proof of the events could never be produced.

There will always be those people who believe the Perdition story, and those people who do not. And the evidence lies waiting to be uncovered by a few hours of laborious digging. But those who do not believe will not take the trouble, and those who do believe will not take the risk. ✦

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I certify that the statements made by me above are correct and complete.

Willard D. Martens, Chief Operating Officer

Looking Forward:

Heavy Time

by C. J. Cherryh

Coming in June 1991 from Warner Books (Questar)

Introduction by Bill Fawcett

Heavy Time is the latest volume in C. J. Cherryh's "Company Series" that began with *Downbelow Station* and includes the popular novels *Cyteen* and *Rimrunners.* Each of these books is set in a scientifically realistic future in which much of society is controlled by a corporate state known simply as "the company."

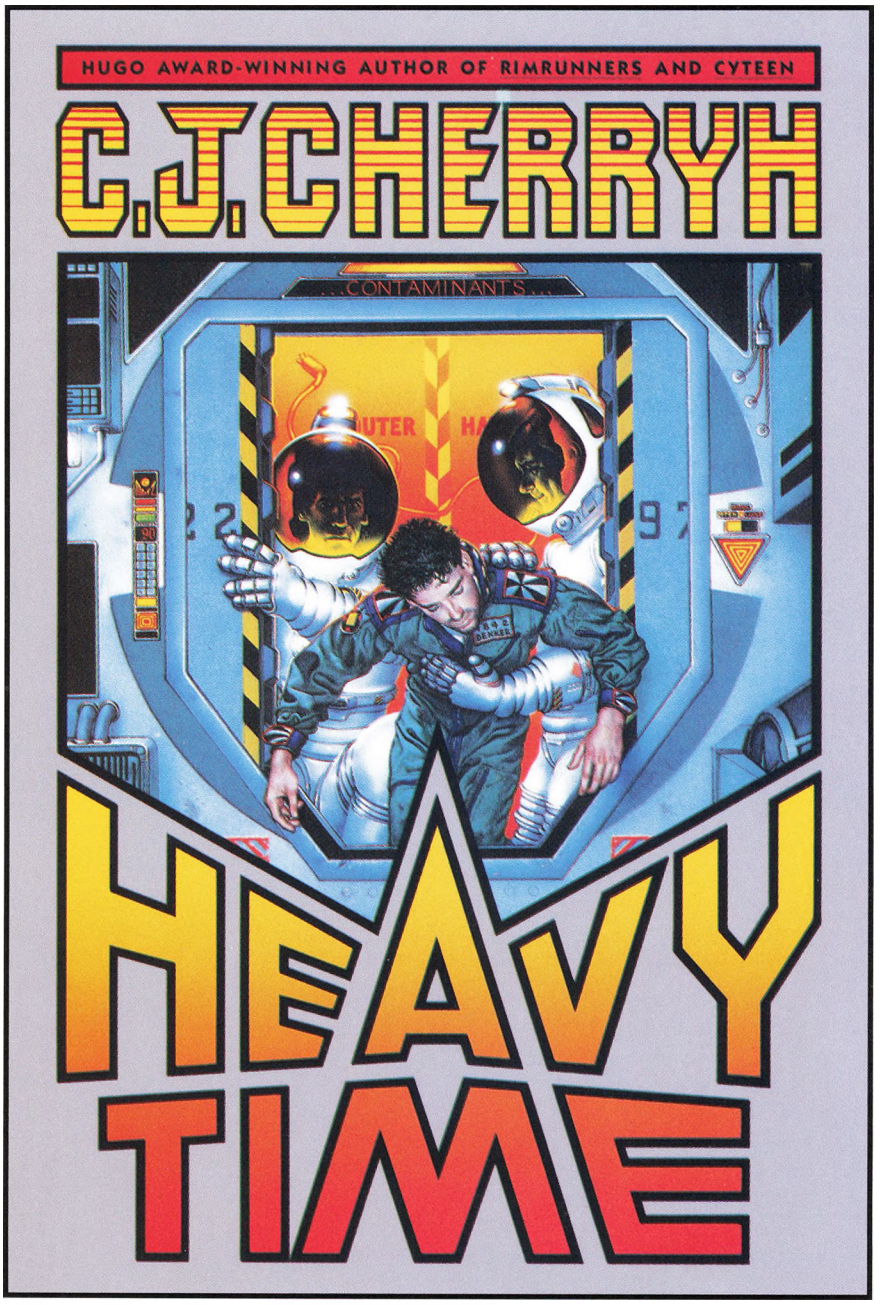
"Heavy time" is a term that refers to time spent in a vessel under acceleration, when normally weightless asteroid miners are subject to a form of gravity. Accelerating also means that the miners are using some of their supply of limited and expensive fuel. Set early in the expansion of humankind into space, *Heavy Time* describes how the company gained its position of power.

The following passage is excerpted from early in the novel and features two of the main characters, a grizzled miner and his new partner, a member of one of the first generations to have been raised in the belt.

—

It was a routine operation for a miner to stop a spin: and most rocks did tumble—but the tumble of a spindle-shaped object their own size and, except the ruptured tanks, their own mass, was one real touchy bitch.

It was out with the arm and the brusher, and just keep contacting the thing til you got one and the other motion off it, while the gyros handled the yaw and the pitch—bleeding money with every burst of the jets. But you did this uncounted times for thirty-odd years, and you learned a certain touch. A trailing cable whacked them and scared Ben to hell,



Cover art by Don Maitz, designed by Don Puckey

and it was a long sweaty time later before they had the motion of the thing, a longer time yet til they had the white bullseye beside the stranger's hatch centered in their docking sight.

But after all the difficulty before, it was a gentle touch.

Grapples clicked and banged.

"That's it," Bird said. "That's got it."

A long breath. Ben said reverently: "She's ours."

"We don't know that."

"Hell, she's salvage!"

"Right behind the bank."

"Uh-uh. Even if it's pure company we got a 50/50 split."

"Unless somebody's still in control over there."

"Well, hell, somebody sure doesn't look it."

"Won't know til we check it out, will we?"

"Come on, Bird, —shit, we *don't* have to go in there, do we? This is damn stupid."

"Yep. And yep." Bird unbelted, shoved himself gently out of his station, touched a toe on the turn-pad and sailed back to the locker. "Coming?"

Ben sullenly unclipped and drifted over, while Bird hauled the suits out and started dressing.

Ben kept bitching under his breath. Bird concentrated on his equipment. Bird always concentrated on his equipment, not where he was going, not the unpleasant thing he was likely to find the other side of that airlock.

And most of all he didn't let himself think what the salvage would bring on the market.

"Five on ten she's a dead ship," Ben said. "Bets?"

"Could've knocked their transmission out. Could be a whole lot of things, Ben, just put a small hold on that enthusiasm. Don't go spending any money before it's ours."

"It's going to be a damn mess in there. God knows how old it is. It could even be one of the Nouri wrecks."

"The transmitter's still going."

"Transmitters can go that long."

"Not if the lifesupport's drawing. Six months tops. Besides, power cells and fuel were what Nouri stripped for sure."

Ben's helmet drifted between them. Ben snagged it. "I'm taking the pry-bar. We're going to need it getting in. Lay you bets?"

Bird picked his helmet out of the air beside him and put it on: smell of old plastics and disinfectant. Smell of a lot of hours and a lot of nasty cold moments.

This might be the start of one, the two of them squeezing into the wider than deep airlock, which was claustrophobic enough for the one occupant it was designed for.

It truly didn't make sense, maybe, insisting both of them get rigged up. It might even be dangerous, putting shut locks between them both and operable systems; but you chased a ghost signal through the Belt for days on end, you had nightmares about some poor lost sods you'd no idea who, and you remembered all your own close calls—well, then, you had to see it with your own eyes to exorcise your ghosts. If you were going to be telling it to your friends back at Base (and you would), then you wanted the feel of it and you wanted your partner able to swear to it.

Most of all, maybe you got a little nervous when your partner started getting excited about money and insisting they owned that ship.

Most especially since Nouri and the crackdown, and since the company had gotten so nitpicking touchy—you wanted witnesses able to swear in court what you'd touched and what you'd done aboard somebody else's ship.

Bird shut the inside hatch and pushed the buttons that started the lock cycling. The red light came on, saying DEPRESSURIZATION, and the readout started spieling down toward zero.

"Sal-vage," Ben said, tinny-sounding over the suit-com. "Maybe she'll still pitch, do you think? If those tanks are the most of the damage, hell, they're cans, is all. Can't be that expensive. We could put a mortgage on her, fix her up—the bank'll take a fixable ship for collateral, what do you think?"

"I think we better pay attention to where we are. We got one accident here, let's not make it two."

The readout said PRESSURE EQUALIZED. Ben was doing this anxious little bounce with his foot braced, back and forth between the two walls of the lock. But you never rushed opening. Oxygen cost. Water cost. Out here, even with all the working machinery aboard, heat cost. You treated those pumps and those seals like they were made of gold, and while the safety interlocks might take almost-zero for an answer and let you open on override, it was money flowing out when you did. You remembered it when you saw your bills at next servicing, damn right, you did.

The readout ticked down past 5 mb toward hard vacuum, close as the compressor could send it. Ben pushed the OUTER HATCH OPEN button, the lock unsealed and retracted the doors and showed them the scarred, dust-darkened face of the opposing lock. The derelict's inside pressure gauge was dusted over. Bird cleared it with his glove. "760 mb. She's up full. At least it didn't hole her."

Ben banged soundlessly on the hatch with the steel bar and put his helmet up against the door.

"Nada," Ben said. "Dead in there, Bird, I'm telling you."

"We'll see." Bird borrowed the bar and pried up the safety cover on the External Access handle.

No action. No power in the ship's auxiliary systems.

"No luck for them," Ben said cheerfully. "Pure dead."

Bird jimmied the derelict's external leech panel open. "Get ours, will you?"

"Oh, shit, Bird."

"Nerves?"

Ben didn't answer. Ben shoved off to their own lock wall to haul the leech cord out of its housing. It snaked in the light as he drifted back. Bird caught the collared plug and pushed it into the derelict's leech socket. "She's working," he said.

"Sal-vage," Ben said, on hissed breaths.

"Don't spend it yet."

Rhythmic hiss of breath over suit-coms, while the metal vibrated with the pump inside. "Hey, Bird. What's a whole ship worth?"

A man tried to be sane and sensible. A man tried to think about the poor sods inside, an honest man broke off his prospecting and ran long, expensive risky days for a will-of-the-wisp signal, and tried to concentrate on saving lives, not on how much metal was in this ship or whether she was sound, or how a second ship would set him and Ben up for life. The waiting list for leases at Refinery Two meant no ship sat idle longer than its servicing required.

"130 mb. 70. 30. 10." The pressure gauge ticked down. The vibration under his hand changed. The valves parted.

Ice crystals spun and twinkled in front of them, against the sullen glow of borrowed power. Ice formed and glistened on the inner lock surfaces—moisture where it didn't belong.

"Doesn't look prosperous," Ben said.

Bird pushed with his toe, caught a handhold next to the inner valves. His glove skidded on ice. Ben arrived beside him, said, "Clear," and Bird hit the HATCH CLOSE toggle.

"Going to be slow." He looked high in the faceplate for the 360° view, watching the derelict's outer doors labor shut at their backs.

"You sure about that battery?" Ben asked.

Bird hit CYCLE 2. The pumps vibrated. "Hell of a time to ask."

"Are you sure?"

"Thirty years at this, damn right I checked. —Whoa, there."

The HUD in the faceplate suddenly showed a yellow flasher and a dataflow glowing green. The one on the airlock wall glowed a sullen red.

"CONTAMINANTS." Ben let go a shaky hiss of pent breath. "It's not going to be pretty in there. —Bird, do we have to go through with this? There's nothing alive inside."

"We're already there. Can you sleep without knowing?"

"Damn right I'll sleep. I'll sleep just fine. —I don't want to see this, Bird. Why in hell do I got to see this?"

"Hey, we all end up the same. Carbon and nitrogen, a lot of H_2O . . ."

"Cut it out, Bird!"

"Earth to earth. Dust to dust." The indicators said *740/741 mb.* and PRESSURE EQUALIZED. "Lousy compressor," Bird said, pushed the INNER HATCH OPEN button. Air whistled, rushing past the pressure differential and an uneven seal. The doors ground slowly back. External audio heard it. 10°C, his HUD said about the ambient. Not quite balmy. "Heater's going down. Heater's always next to last. —You do know what's last, don't you, Ben-me-lad?"

"The damn beeper." Ben's teeth were chattering—nothing wrong with Ben's suit heater, Bird was sure. Ben's breath hissed raggedly over the suit-com. "So Mama can find the salvage. Only this time we got it, Bird, come on, I don't like this. What if that leech pulls out?"

"Plug won't pull out."

"Hell, Bird!"

Inner doors labored to halfway open. Bird caught the door edge and shoved himself and his backpack through into the faintly lit inside.

A helmetless hardsuit, trailing cables and hose, drifted slowly in front of them, spinning in a loose cocoon of its attachments. A cable went from its battery pack to the panel, sad last resort: the occupants had had time to know they were in trouble, time to drain the main batteries and the leech unit, and finally resort to this one.

Bits and pieces of gear drifted in the dimmed light, sparked bright in their suit-spots, cords, clips—everything a tumble could knock free. Fluids made small moons and planets.

"Mess," Ben's voice said. "Isn't it?"

Bird caught the hose, tugged gently to pull the suit out of his way, and checked the suit locker. "One suit's missing."

"I'm cutting that damn beeper," Ben said. "All right?"

"Fine by me."

Stuff everywhere. Cables. A small meteor swarm of utility clips flashed in the light. Globules of fluid shone both oily-dark and amber. A sweater and a single slipper danced and turned in unison like a ghost.

"Lifesupport's flat gone," Ben said. A locker banged in the external audio, while Bird was checking the spinner cylinders for occupants. Empty. Likewise the shower.

A power cell floated past. Dead spare, one from the lock, one guessed.

A globule of fluid impacted Bird's visor, leaving a chain of dark red beads.

"Come on, Bird. Let's seal up. Let's get out of here. They're gone. Dead ship, that's all. Don't ask what this slop is that's floating. The 'cyclers are shot."

Drifting hose. More clips. A lump of blankets under the number two workstation, spotted in Bird's chestlight. "Looks like here's one of them," Bird said.

"God! Let it be! Bird!"

"Carbon and water. Just carbon and water." Bird held the counter edge and snagged the blanket.

The body drifted past the chair, rolled free as the blanket floated on to dance with the sweater.

Young man in filthy coveralls. Straight dark hair and loose limbs drifted in the slow spin the turnout gave him.

Not much beard.

Bird caught a sleeve, stopped the spin, saw a dirty face, shut eyes, open mouth. Dehydration shrank the skin, cracked the lips.

"Don't touch him!" Ben objected. "God, don't touch him!"

"Beard's been shaved, maybe three days."

"God knows how long ago—he's dead, Bird. That's a dead body."

Bird nudged the chin-lever over to sensor array, said, "Left. Hand."

The HUD showed far warmer than the 10° ambient.

Pliable flesh.

"Isn't a body, Ben. This guy's alive."

"Shit," Ben said. Then: "But he's not in control of this ship. Is he?" ✦

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Looking Forward:

M.Y.T.H. Inc. in Action

by Robert Lynn Asprin

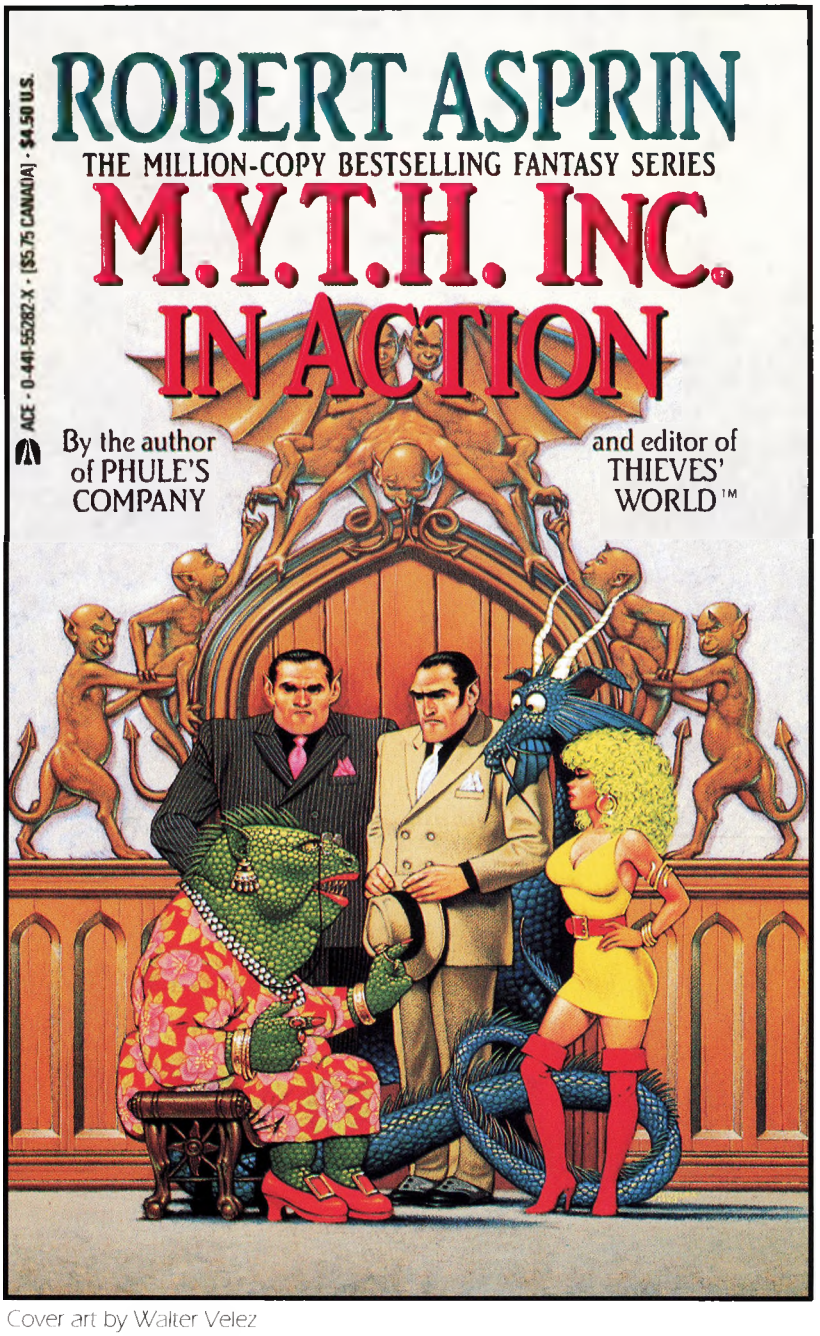
Coming in June 1991 from Ace Books

Introduction by Bill Fawcett

About eight volumes ago Bob Asprin introduced the world to Aahz, a wizard from Perv (whose residents are Pervects, not Perverts), and his apprentice Skeeve, a Klahd. As this twosome careened through several universes they gathered about them a collection of equally colorful characters. Among these are a Troll and his sister (a Trollop); Masha, a heavyweight magic user; and their bodyguards, the cousins Guido and Nunzio. This group, being thoroughly familiar with the legal and tax breaks available, refer to themselves as M.Y.T.H. Inc.

In this latest M.Y.T.H. adventure, Skeeve has to go in search of a missing Aahz and is forced to leave to his companions the task of stopping the largest kingdom on Klah from conquering all of the others. To do this, each part of the crew takes a different route. Masha aims her entire bulk at the head of the army, while the two bodyguards decide to disrupt the army from within. To get within, Guido and Nunzio enlist. This is not an easy matter when you consider that they have to explain why each of them has been arrested about fifty times, but that there were no convictions (or witnesses).

Once in the army, another of the problems the two men face is that they have to go through boot camp. Since they are the best enforcers Don Bruce (the mob's fairy godfather) has ever employed, our boys find their biggest challenge is keeping a straight face. They discover that their platoon will progress and graduate as a group. In a hurry to get on to real sabotage, the



Cover art by Walter Velez

cousins begin to take an active hand in assisting their fellow recruits. As Guido tells it at the start of this excerpt, Nunzio walks up and . . .

—

"We got problems," he sez, which wasn't surprisin', as knowin' him as well as I do I could see he was worried.

"Like what?"

"It's Spellin' Bee," he sez, which is what we've taken to callin' our junior magician. "I don't think he could hit the broadside of a barn if he was inside it."

I snuck a look over his shoulder, just in time to see Bee loose a quarrel which misses the target by fifteen feet, give or take a mile. The corporal was right there beside him, offering helpful suggestions at the top of his lungs.

"I see. Well, it's not like he's gonna do much shootin', what with him bein' a magician."

"Maybe not," Nunzio shrugs, "but we're all supposed to qualify today or the whole group gets held back . . . remember?"

"That could be a problem," I nods. "Doesn't he have a spell or somethin' that could help him out?"

My cousin rolls his eyes and snorts, disgusted-like.

"Are you kidding? He only knows two spells, and neither of them are gonna be of any help to him on the firing line."

"Two spells? What are they?"

"Let's see, he knows Dispell, which lets him see through disguise spells."

"Not much help," I admits. "What's his other spell?"

"Datspell," Nunzio grimaces, "which is nothing more than the disguise spell the Boss uses with a silly name."

"So all he can do is disguise himself and see through other disguises," I sez, turnin' it over in my mind.

"That's it. Nothin' that's gonna help him qualify today."

"Maybe . . . maybe not," I sez, thoughtfully. "Tell you what. Is there any chance you can get him alone for a few minutes?"

"No problem. When he finishes blowin' this round, he'll have to wait to take another turn. I can get him then. Why? You got an idea?"

"Uh-huh," I grins. "Just convince him to use his disguise spell . . . what does he call it? Oh yeah, Datspell . . . so's you can change places. Then *you* qualify for him, you switch back, and no one will be any the wiser."

"I dunno," Nunzio sez, rubbin' his chin. "We might be able to fool the corporal, but the sergeant there's a pretty sharp cookie. He might spot there's somethin' different about the Bee."

"I'll take care of distractin' the sergeant when the time comes. Just be careful not to shoot *too* good . . . just good enough to qualify. Got it?"

Then there isn't much to do whilst waiting for the plan to unfold. Finally the corporal gets fed up with shoutin' at our young magician and sends him off the line for a "break" until he has rested his voice a bit.

Tryin' not to pay too much attention, I watch out of the corner of my eye while Nunzio drapes an arm around Bee's shoulder and begins to talk to him in an earnest-type fashion, all the while leadin' him casually behind the weapon storage tent and out of general sight. After what seems like an intolerably long time, "Bee" re-emerges, walkin' in a rollin' stride that is very familiar to me, and I know the power of reason and logic has triumphed again. I wait until he is steppin' up to the firin' line for yet another try, then commence to create a diversion.

"You're tryin' too hard, Spyder," I sez, loud-like, steppin' up behind that notable where she is standin' at the far end of the firin' line from "Bee."

Both Spyder and Junebug are sporadic in their marksmanship, keepin' their shots in the vicinity of the target, but only hittin' it occasionally.

"You're keepin' your left arm way too tense . . . you gotta loosen up a little and just cradle the weapon in your hand. Ease up on the trigger, too. Just use the tip of your finger instead of tryin' to wrap it all the way around the trigger. Otherwise, you'll pull your shot off to the left every time you squeeze off a round."

"Like this?"

"Yeah, only . . ."

"WHAT THE HECK YA THINK YOU'RE DOIN??!!"

It should have been gratifyin' to know that I was correct in my appraisal of Sergeant Smiley's boilin' point. Up until now, Nunzio and me have been real careful to do our coachin' of the other recruits out of his sight and hearin', so's not to conflict with the authority-type image he is workin' so hard to maintain. I figure that this open display will not sit well with him, and this figurin' proves to be dead on target. I should be glad, but as he comes stompin' toward me I have to fight off the sneakin' feelin' that this has not been the wisest tactic to pursue.

"Guido was just giving me some pointers on handling this thing, Sergeant," Spyder sez, innocent-like, her polite manners a testimony to her hard learned lessons that Smiley is not someone to hassle unnecessarily.

"Oh, so now the Bug Swatter's an expert on crossbows, is he?" the sergeant snarls, puttin' the cross hairs on me. "Thinks he's better'n me or the range instructors at teaching marksmanship, does he?"

While trackin' this with great attention, I nonetheless see over his shoulder that Nunzio, disgused as Bee, is firin' his qualifyin' round . . . right under the nose of the corporal, who is more interested in watchin' the sergeant and me than in payin' attention to what's happenin' at his end of the range.

"Why don't you just show us how good you are with this weapon, *acting* Squad Leader Guido," Smiley sez, snatchin' the crossbow away from Spyder and thrustin' it at me. "*If* you can qualify, then *maybe* I won't bust you back into the ranks."

Now I have been threatened by experts . . . literally . . . so this effort by the sergeant fails to generate in me the obviously desired nervousness. If anything, I am tempted to deliberately blow these shots, thereby gettin' myself off the leadership-type hook which, as I have noted earlier, I am not particularly happy to be danglin' from. Still, my professional abilities have been openly

challenged . . . and in front of a skirt, even if it's just Spyder. Besides, Nunzio has now finished qualifyin' for Bee, so there is no incentive to prolong this diversion any longer.

I spare the crossbow no more than a cursory glance, havin' a weak stomach when it comes to substandard weapons. It is obviously the work of government contractors, and bears the same resemblance to the custom weapons from Iolo that I normally use that a plow horse bears to a thoroughbred. Ignorin' this, I holds a quarrel in my mouth while cockin' the crossbow by puttin' the butt in my stomach and jerkin' the string back with both hands (which is quicker'n usin' the foot stirrup to do the same thing), drop the quarrel into the groove ahead of the drawn string, and squeeze off a quick shot down range.

Not surprisin'ly, the missile *thwacks* into the dummy's right shoulder.

"A bit lucky, but not bad," Smiley sez, grudgin'-like. "You'd get better accuracy, though, if you shot from the shoulder instead of the hip. Trying to show off will only . . ."

By the time he gets this far in his critique, I have recocked, reloaded, and loosed a second shot . . . again workin' from the hip.

This shot hisses into place not more than two finger widths from the first.

The sergeant shuts his mouth so fast you can hear his teeth click together, which is fine by me, and watches in silence whilst I snap a third shot off that makes a neat triangle with the first two.

"Pretty sloppy," comes the sneerin' squeak of Nunzio, as he joins our group, free of his disguise now. "I warned you that crushing stuff with your hands was gonna ruin your touch for a trigger!"

"Izzat so!!??" I snaps, more than a little annoyed at havin' my handiwork decried. "Let's see you do better with this thing!"

I lob the crossbow to him, which he catches with one hand, then squints at the bindings.

"Government contractors," he sez in the same tone he uses to announce he's stepped in somethin' organic and unpleasant. "It sure ain't Iolo's work!"

"The quarrels are about as straight as a barroom pool cue, too," I sez, givin' him the rest of the bad news. "But like the Boss sez: 'Ya does the best ya can with what ya got.' Right?"

He makes a face at me, then snaps off his three shots, also shootin' from the hip. I notice that even though he works the dummy's other shoulder to avoid confusion, his groupin' is not a considerable improvement over mine.

"Okay, it's the weapon . . . *this* time," he admits, handin' the crossbow back to Spyder. "If we were working a longer range, though, I still think . . ."

"Just a minute, you two!"

We turns our attention to the sergeant, both because he sounds upset over somethin', and because we've been havin' this particular argument for years, so it's doubtful we would have resolved anythin' even if we had continued the discussion uninterrupted.

"What are you trying to pull, here?"

"What's wrong, Sergeant?" Nunzio sez, expressin' the puzzlement we both is feelin'. "Two out of three hits qualifies, right?"

"What's wrong?" Smiley smiles, showin' too many teeth for comfort. "Shot groupings like those mean you've both got excellent control of your weapons. Now, correct me if I'm mistaken, but doesn't that also mean you could have put those groupings anywhere on the target you wanted?"

"Well, sure . . . Sergeant."

"So how come you shot the dummy in the shoulders instead of in the head or chest?"

"That would kill him," I sez before I've had a chance to think it through.

"YOU'RE SUPPOSED TO KILL HIM! THAT'S WHAT BEIN' A SOLDIER IS ALL ABOUT!"

Now, in hindsight I know I shoulda' gone along with him, but he caught me by surprise, and my old Mob-type habits cut in.

"What kinda cheap barroom shooters do you take us for??" I barks right back at him. *"Me and Nunzio is professionals!! Any jerk can kill somebody, but it takes SKILL to leave 'em in a condition where they can still pay protection . . . OR give you information . . . OR . . ."*

"What my cousin means to say," Nunzio sez, steppin' between us quick-like, "is that wounding an enemy takes *three* opponents out of the action instead of just one, since someone's got to help him get back to . . ."

It was a good try, but too late. The sergeant was still into takin' me on.

"Are you calling the trained soldiers of Posiltum jerks?" he hollers, steppin' around Nunzio to come at me again. *"What are you? Some kind of PACIFIST?"*

"What . . . did . . . you . . . call . . . me . . . ?" I sez in my softest voice, which I only use on special occasions.

The trainin' area around us suddenly got real quiet and still . . . except for Nunzio who gave a disbelievin' whistle through his teeth as he stepped back.

Somethin' in my voice or the way I was drawin' myself up to my full height must have triggered the sergeant's survival instinct, 'cause all of a sudden he looked around nervous-like as if he were tryin' to find an emergency exit door.

"WHAT ARE YOU ALL DOING JUST STANDING AROUND??!!" he bellows, turnin' his attention from me to the crowd which has gathered around us. *"YOU'RE SUPPOSED TO BE QUALIFYING!! MOVE IT!!! NOW!!!"*

This interruption gives me time to get my temper under control, and, after coolin' down a bit, I decide it is just as well the episode has drawn to a close. It seems, however, that the sergeant has a few last words for me.

"Guido!" he sez, just loud enough for me to hear, not lookin' me in the face.

"Yeah, Sergeant?"

"This isn't the time or the place, but we *will* continue this discussion . . . later."

The way he said it, it wasn't a challenge or a threat . . . just a statement. ✦

Sunday Driver, Yeah

A. J. Austin

Illustration by Debbie Hughes

"My call," said Duke, just loud enough for us all to hear him. He extended an arm, beer can dangling lazily from his fingertips, toward the far end of MacKenzie's gravel parking lot. "I call it a Toyota something. Who'll take it?"

I really hated this stupid game, hated the way Duke and the others thought it was so damn much fun. Wasn't their fault, though; what the hell else was there to do on a Saturday afternoon? Except for Duke, the rest of them looked as bored as I felt, so I figured I might as well let them go ahead and get it out of their systems. I watched the car pulling in, a late-model Buick Regal, and started checking it for telltale signs just like the rest of them.

They were there, of course, as long as you knew what to look for. The shadow was all wrong, to begin with—too short, too rounded off at the back where it should have been more angular. It bounced too much, too, for a car that size. The crunch of tires on the gravel was wrong, not heavy enough for what we were looking at. This was almost too easy.

What the hell. "I'll cover it," I said.

"OK," Duke barked, draining his beer and pitching the can into the field behind us. He slid off the hood of his Thunderbird and crossed quickly to my side. "Five bucks?"

"Make it ten." He looked at me a second, then back to the Buick. We rarely went higher than five, and he didn't look pleased. "Make it ten. And if I win, we quit and go inside where it's cool and get something to eat. First pitcher's on me."

He nodded and turned back to the driveway. "Toyota, five-door wagon, at least five years old." One of the others chuckled and Duke turned and spat on the ground in front of him. "What're you laughing at? Get your money out if you think you're so smart."

I didn't even bother to turn back to the car. I'd already seen what I needed, and my ears told me the rest. "Mitsubishi hatchback, '98, front left fender missing." I flashed Duke a grin and winked at the others, now almost on the ground with laughter. "And unless he's just had it painted, Pacific blue with a mismatched door on the driver's side."

The Buick pulled in to our left, close enough now to hear the engine: obviously a small foreign job. The Regal flickered once as the driver cut the engine, then shrank slightly before fading away. In its place stood a battered '98 Mitsubishi Rolero hatchback. Pacific blue with a mismatched door.

"That's Carl. He, uh, lives across the street," I said, trying to keep a straight face. "Had a timing problem, and I took care of it for him."

Duke stared at me, ignoring the cackling behind him, then gazed out over the parking lot. Just when I was starting to think he was really mad, the corners of his moustache curled up and he dug two fives out of his jeans. "You son of a bitch," he said, still smiling.

"Keep it, Duke," I replied, joining in the laughter. "Get me a cold one and we're even."

"Yo, Tony!" the driver called as he got out. "It's running great. Thanks for looking at it." He came over, letting out a slow whistle of admiration for our cars. Besides my '57 Chevy there was Brian's '62 Ford Fairlane, Jim's '64 Mustang convertible, Dana's '63 Sting Ray, and Duke's '56 Bird. Carl approached wordlessly and extended a hand to the side of my Chevy, touching it lightly with a fingertip to reassure himself it was real, not a holographic projection like his "Regal."

"Geez," he whispered, shaking his head slowly, enviously. "I've seen you guys coming and going from Tony's, but I've never been this close to them before. They're beautiful." He walked down the semicircle of cars, blinking at the sun glistening off the perfect paint jobs and shiny chrome. "Just beautiful," he repeated. A horn honked twice from the other side of the lot, catching his attention.

"Listen, good to meet your friends, but I gotta run. Meeting Suzy for lunch." He trotted in the direction of the restaurant side of Mac's, calling back once he neared the door. "Hey, Tony, I want a ride next weekend!"

"If he can afford a skin job for that piece of crap," Brian asked, indicating the sad little hatchback, "why can't he afford to drive something at least a *little* nicer?"

"He can. His regular car's a new Pontiac, oh-eight or nine. He just drives this piece of shit to work so the guys don't ding it up in the parking lot. He usually keeps a projector in it."

"Heads up," interrupted Dana as another car, a minivan, pulled in. "Here comes John." He tossed his can into the field, then reached into a shirt pocket and grabbed a roll of mints, popping one into his mouth before passing the pack around.

The minivan slowly circled the parking lot once, then pulled up in front of us and just sat there, idling. Nobody moved; we just sat or leaned or whatever we'd been doing, just like sitting out on the porch on a lazy, sunny day in Indiana.

It was a fairly typical example of your perfect family car: a popular GM minivan, no modifications other than the dead-giveaway tinted windows. It may have fooled most motorists, but not us.

"Hi, John!" I called out. "Nice day, huh?" Nothing happened for a moment—visually, that is—but the sudden sound of a police radio chattering from within told us a window had just been rolled down. An elbow jutted through the door several inches below the window as a deputy sheriff leaned through the glass itself.

"Well, if it isn't Tony and his pals," he said, a sneering kind of smile on his sunglassed face. "You know, Bob and I keep thinking that one of these days you'll all grow up and get rid of those fifty-year-old junkers, get jobs, and quit giving us a hard time."

"Not likely, John," said Duke. The deputy frowned behind the dark glasses. They hate it when we call them John, which we do. A lot. "We wouldn't want to see you two picking up all the shit work."

The head disappeared through the window for a few seconds, then reappeared, the smile back in place.

"Well, if you can manage to behave yourselves for a half-hour or so, we'd like to get a bite to eat. You don't mind, do you?" Grin, grin, grin. For ten bucks I'd ram a beer can between those white teeth.

I leaned back against my '57, looked casually at the others. "We're kind of hungry ourselves, aren't we?" Nods and yeah, sures all around. "Besides," I added, walking over, "who the hell we gonna race? There's nobody around that can beat us." I kicked up some gravel and watched as tiny stones vanished through the projected minivan and *pinged* off the hidden cruiser. He looked down briefly, swearing under his breath, and jammed the gearshift in park hard enough to make the car jerk. The edge of his door poked through the projection, and just when I thought for sure he'd come jumping out at me, I heard a muffled voice from inside saying, "Let it go. C'mon, man, I'm hungry."

He reluctantly disappeared, door and all, through the side of the minivan and pulled away, parking over near the road. The minivan faded instantly, revealing the sleek Mizaki cruiser we knew would be underneath. The two men got out, pointedly ignoring us, and went inside.

"Screw 'em," Jim said, leaning into his Mustang to re-

move the keys from the ignition. "I'm starving." We all agreed and headed across the lot to the bar side of Mac's.

I loved this place—been coming here since I was a kid with my dad. As long as I could remember, the placed looked the same. Everything here was real, too. On the restaurant side they had all kinds of artificial decoration; even programmed it to look like some kind of jungle once, complete with trees and a waterfall. But they never installed projectors here in the bar, and the regular customers like that just fine. Old wood paneling and dim lighting, the mixed smells of beer, cigarettes, and the best cooking in town was all Mac's offered. It felt right just the way it was.

I also liked the way everyone here treated you. Didn't matter if you were a regular or not. If you were hungry and had a thirst—and had a love for good, old cars—you were welcome. Don't get me wrong, we'd get the occasional asshole you had to take outside for attitude readjustment, and we didn't hesitate to do it. But MacKenzie's was a good place, the kind you always wanted to come home to, you know?

Dan was tending alone, so we gave our order to him at the bar before grabbing our regular table by the jukebox.

"You guys are in early for a Saturday," he said, bringing two pitchers and several mugs to the table. "Wish I'd known. Someone was in here looking for you earlier, Tony."

"Oh?" I raised an eyebrow and poured myself a beer. "Anybody I know?"

"Asked a lot of questions about you, too, like 'When does he usually come in?' and 'How long has he had that Chevy?' Stuff like that. Didn't catch a name, though. Sorry."

"Probably one of those guys from the club in Smithburg," suggested Brian to general agreement from the others. "I mean, they've been wanting to take us on for months now."

Dan smiled and wiped the table where one of the mugs had foamed over. "I say anything about it being a guy?" he asked, heading to the kitchen for our orders.

We had just finished our lunches when Jim spotted her. He tapped his mug on the table to get our attention, then called out, "Three o'clock."

None of us recognized her, but even in the dim room we could tell how fine she was: long blonde hair, athletic-looking, and a way of walking in tight, faded blue jeans that effortlessly made everyone in the room turn and take notice. At the bar, Dan spoke to her for a moment, then pointed our way.

She approached slowly, picking her way around the scattered tables and chairs, and stood a few feet in front of us with her hands in the back pockets of her jeans. She looked us over one at a time and, with a sigh you could hear across the room, shook her head and asked, "Which one of you losers is Tony Kerler?"

Nobody said anything for what seemed liked several minutes. We just sat and stared at her stupidly, exactly like the bunch of losers she thought we were, until Duke broke the silence by busting out laughing. The tension lifted, they all pointed at me, hooting and helping themselves to what was left in the pitchers. The good-natured ribbing got to me, too, and I couldn't help chuckling right along with them.

I stood up, realizing for the first time just how tall and slender she was, and grabbed another chair for her. "I'm Tony," I said, setting the chair next to mine. "Can we get you something?"

She reversed the chair and leaned forward on the backrest as she sat. "No, thanks. I never drink before a race." She looked into my eyes, a wicked half-smile appearing on her lips, and waited for my reaction.

"What are you driving?" I shot back, not a hint of nonsense in my voice. I set my mug down and looked her over as I inhaled her perfume, enjoying the nice way it mixed with the familiar scents of Mac's.

"Ford Custom, 1950, candy apple red. Maybe you've seen it?"

I hadn't. "Stock?"

"Of course not. It still had the original 239 flathead V-8 in it when I bought it wrecked, but it's got an '05 Hyundai power plant now, fully integrated." She paused a moment for effect. "Same series as yours."

"I'm impressed," I admitted, although not so much with her machine as with how much she already knew about mine. She'd obviously done her homework. "Yeah, that's what I've got. Sure you can handle that much equipment?" One of the guys choked loudly on his beer.

The smile broadened. "Oh, I can handle it, all right. The question is, can you handle me?"

We stared wordlessly at each other for several moments, and probably would have continued for several more if Duke hadn't opened his mouth.

"Listen, babe," he said crudely, "we got better things to do than mess around with some smartass bitch who—"

"That's enough." I said the words softly, with just enough emphasis so that everyone knew I wasn't kidding. I don't know if it was his tone of voice that did it, or his foul mouth, or if Duke was just having one of those days when everything he did was incredibly stupid, but I'd just about had it with him. He took a quick look around at the other guys first and, realizing he wasn't going to get any support from them, decided I was right. That *was* enough.

"Yeah," he said simply. "Sorry, Tony." He was stupid sometimes, and his mouth outran his smarts on occasion, but when Duke was wrong he'd always admit it. He was an OK guy, really, and I guess that's why we were all still close. He smiled weakly in her direction and added, "Sorry, Miss."

Satisfied that she now knew who was in charge, I softened a bit. "Forget it, but I think you just earned tractor duty for this one." Everybody returned to their seats with well-intentioned needling at Duke's misfortune. *Nobody* wanted to be stuck on tractor duty when a challenge was called on us.

I studied her again as I retrieved my chair and pulled

it up to the table. She'd never said a word. In fact, she'd never moved, never even flinched during the whole thing. Good self-control, I thought. Good self-control, good machine—good challenge.

"You're on," I said, giving her my most confident smile. "Listen, it's kind of late in the day to be doing this on a Saturday. How about tomorrow morning, say, eight o'clock? Won't be much on the road except early risers, and Duke'll see to them."

She pursed her lips a moment in thought, then rose, her eyes fixed on mine. "Where?"

"Take the interstate, eastbound. Exit 142 near the state line. There's a nice, level stretch near there, not many bends. Don't be too early, though." Sliding the chair to one side, I started around the table, but before I was even close, she'd already turned to go.

"I know where you mean. See you in the morning," she called over her shoulder.

"Wait up a second! There's something I want to—" She spun sharply, the sudden movement cutting me off as efficiently as a knife.

"Eileen." Without another word she headed for the door, again picking her way carefully through the scattered tables.

Eileen. Pretty name, but it wasn't what I was going to ask. What I *really* wanted to know was how she knew so damn much about me.

There was a big thunderstorm overnight, but the morning broke clear and fresh, and the air smelled washed as I looked down from the overpass at exit 142. My windows were open, and the cool wind rushing through the car felt good as I slowed over the highway and pulled the '57 onto the shoulder on the south side of the overpass. Dana, Brian, and Jim pulled in behind.

The state route crossing the interstate here disappeared into trees and farmland on either side of the road, making this a perfect gathering spot: easy to find if you knew where you were going—hard for John Law to spot you while cruising the highway.

It was exactly one minute till eight when I saw something red coming from the south. Right on time, I thought. Appreciation for my opponent went up a notch.

The Ford pulled to a stop opposite us, the engine humming with a throaty, bubbling sound as Eileen leaned out the window. "Good morning," she said cheerfully.

"Morning. You're punctual, I'll have to grant you that." The four of us got out and leisurely crossed the blacktop. The guys circled the Ford, inspecting it with admiration while I leaned a hand on the roof on the driver's side, casually checking out the interior.

A look of worry crossed her face for the briefest of moments and she sat upright in the driver's seat. "Looking for something?" she asked. Although hidden in the same confidence she'd exhibited the day before, there was just a hint of concern in her voice.

"As a matter of fact, we are." I looked away a moment, idly scanning the interstate where it crossed the horizon a few miles to the west. I don't know what she was thinking, but I let my tone of voice reassure her we had nothing funny in mind. At the same time, I let her know we weren't kidding around.

"Look, it's obvious you've checked us out pretty carefully, so you know we're all right," I said matter-of-factly. "You also know we're the best. John's busted every club within fifty miles—every club but one, that is. And we're best because of two rules: First, we have the fastest cars and the best drivers. Second"—I reached for the handle, opened the door for her to get out—"we have a rule: ironclad. We're careful about who we race. *Damn* careful."

She sat a moment, considering what I'd said. "I don't blame you." Swinging a leg to the pavement, she got out gracefully and walked over to my '57. Peering inside, she nodded approval at the job I'd done on the interior. "As the saying goes," she purred, leaning suggestively against the car, her jeans and matching denim jacket standing out nicely against the gleaming white finish and chrome reverse wheels, "I'll show you mine if you show me yours."

"Yeah, right. The latch is inside, lower left."

"Thanks," she said, reaching through the window to pop the Chevy's hood latch. "I never got around to putting a release on the inside. It's at the top of the grille. Let me know if you need help." She flashed a sarcastic grin as she raised the hood; then, following the universal rule of look-but-don't-touch, slid her hands into jacket pockets while inspecting the engine.

Ignoring her sarcasm, I felt under the Ford's hood and easily found the release. There were a few differences that stood out right away—air cleaner, fan composition, some additional electronics—but she hadn't been lying about her engine matching mine. Not that it was that unusual. The '05 Hyundai is one of the most popular power plants being used by customizers, even though they quit making the car it originally came in three years later. But even the newer '08 plant couldn't top this one. Clubs were always on the lookout for a wrecked Samurai, willing to pay top dollar for even a totaled mess just to get what they could from that gem of a motor.

"Damn," breathed Dana over my shoulder.

"Yeah, I heard *that*," agreed Brian.

The guys had gathered behind me, hands pocketed, and I knew by the looks on their beaming faces exactly what they were thinking. Assuming she'd done as much work on the rest of the Ford as she'd done here, and there was no reason to assume otherwise, this wouldn't be a contest of car against car.

It would be driver against driver.

I dropped the hood and started across, meeting her halfway, while the others returned to their cars.

"Follow us, but not too close. It should only take about twenty-five minutes—"

"Follow you?" She sounded outright startled. A chink in her armor? "I thought we were starting here, at 142. It's a perfect five-mile run westbound to exit 137. I just assumed . . ." Her voice trailed off as she figured out the

reason for the last-minute switch. Exhaling slowly, she sent a thin plume of breath into the chilly air. If she was pissed, she didn't show it.

"Rule number two?"

I nodded. "Sorry, but like I said, we're damn careful." Reaching into my back pocket, I pulled out a well-worn road map I'd folded earlier and tapped at the center of the exposed portion at a section of state road paralleling the interstate.

"*Ohio?*" Her eyes twinkled in understanding, the mischievous smile returning. "I get it. Make the state line the finish line, and if you pick John up on your tail, just hold on till you cross over. I like it."

"So do we."

Randal, Ohio, was a little nothing of a town near the Indiana border. Not much to it, really; a few gas stations and a grocery store at the main intersection, plus several older homes. Most of Randal's four hundred or so residents lived in the surrounding farming community. Later in the day we might actually bump into half the population where we were right then—the parking lot of a run-down Dairy Freeze on the west side of town. At this hour on a Sunday morning, however, we'd be lucky to see a cat.

Dana, Brian, and Jim had just pulled out, heading west. Duke sat on his dad's tractor, idling on the shoulder a hundred yards down the road, and waved to the guys as they passed.

"We're about ready." I crossed the few feet to the edge of the road. "This is all farmland around here, mostly flat with a few rises, a few low spots here and there, laid out in almost perfect squares. It'd look just like a checkerboard from the air with the county roads crisscrossing the fields every one or two miles. One crosses the highway just over that rise," I said, pointing west. "From there to the line it's exactly five miles."

She nodded silently, listening.

"Another county road will cross two miles up, another two miles past that, and a third crosses two more miles up, with the state line running halfway between the last two. Those are the only places you can get on the highway between here and there, and the guys will be in place at each in just a few minutes. Anybody enters the highway, they give a yell on the CB and it's over. We try again another time, got it?"

"Got it."

I waved my arm and the tractor started off. "Duke'll wait at the first crossroad, where we start, then follow up the rear. If any Sunday drivers come up from behind, he'll just get in their way and won't let them pass for a few minutes. Simple."

"Yeah, simple."

She avoided looking at me and, I swear, her nervousness was beginning to get to me. I thought about saying something encouraging, more for my own sake than hers, but the sound of a small air horn suddenly caught our attention.

"Duke's in place," I said quietly. "We wait till the others check in, then we do the speed limit till we pass him, OK? Then hit it." Again, a simple nod. "Let's get going." I turned for the '57, but she stopped me with a light touch on the arm.

"Good luck." She sounded almost disappointed when she said it. We shook hands quickly and got into our cars, pulling them side by side on the highway. I rolled down the window and turned the CB up loud.

"Break-break, Ghostrider." It was Brian, checking in from the first crossroad. "We in place."

"Ten-four." I kept the mike in hand and waited.

"Breaker, Ghostrider," called Jim from the second road. I spoke briefly into the mike, and waited for Dana's call from the Indiana side. Eileen revved the Ford a few times, and I glanced over at her. Why the hell was she so edgy? I wondered briefly. Was her show of confidence the day before just that—a show?

"Breaker two-seven for the Ghostrider." Eileen jumped when Dana checked in, but visibly relaxed after I cleared the channel and clipped the mike back to the dash.

"Buckle up," I called out the window, giving her a thumbs-up. The two cars started moving, carefully pacing each other.

I clicked on the radio, always set to a local oldies station, and rolled the window up. It would have been nice to get an old Beach Boys song, something like *I Get Around* or *409*, or something by Jan and Dean, even *Dead Man's Curve*. Hell, any of those great car songs they used to make back then would have been perfect background music when I showed her why our club was number one. What I got instead was *Day Tripper*. What the hell, I thought as we passed Duke on our right, maybe there was something appropriate in that, too.

Eileen and I punched it at the same time, completely drowning out the Beatles as the air filled with the sound of two engines roaring, two sets of tires screaming on the pavement.

The sudden acceleration sent my rear end fishtailing slightly, and she smoothly swerved the Ford a foot or two to the left, taking advantage of my brief lack of traction to gain a length on me. She was good, and earned another notch of respect.

The two cars shot down the blacktop, the cornfields on either side rushing by in a steady green blur. As our speed increased, we had to be more mindful of the road surface. Each hill made my stomach fly, and at one spot where the pavement dipped, the Chevy bottomed out with a teeth-gritting screech of metal on blacktop. If it had been night I would've seen a cloud of sparks trailing behind me in the rear-view mirror. This was a perfect "driver's course": The random rises and dips demanded split-timed bursts of speed, as well as careful braking and shifting, to win. She was good, though, damn good, and matched me in both speed and skill at every hill, every dip in the road.

We were almost even again when we reached the next road. The ground was flatter here and the '57 edged up on her right, just managing to pull ahead as we rocketed past Brian. A quick honk of the Fairlane's

horn told me he'd pulled in behind us, pacing us to the finish just as Jim would when we passed him.

The second section of fields was planted with soybeans, and the road seemed wider, more open as I cleared her front end and increased my lead. I inched slightly in front of the Ford and slowed, trying to force her to downshift, and watched her carefully in the rearview; waiting, slowing, waiting till the exact moment she shifted, then dropped into second and punched the '57 again, leaping ahead by several lengths.

My lead didn't last long, though. She closed the gap about halfway across the section and pulled up on my left, our front bumpers even. She smiled over at me just as we passed Jim's Mustang at the next road—the four-mile mark—and, I swear, blew a kiss as she summoned up just enough to pull the Ford out in front.

The crossroad was at the bottom of a low spot between the sections, the rise on the other side the steepest and longest of the course. We downshifted simultaneously as we shot up the other side and I heard the grinding of gears. The Ford balked when she missed the shift, and immediately fell behind.

Eileen had made a bad mistake, and I felt sorry for her. But that's what it was all about, wasn't it? Not just the cars, not just driving the best; you had to be the best, make the fewest mistakes. I glanced in the mirror and saw that she'd not only recovered quickly, but was gaining on me as I flew over the rise.

The road leveled out and she pressed on, giving the Ford all she had. I could barely believe it, but with three-quarters of a mile to go she pulled up alongside me again. I looked over, hoping my smile conveyed how good I thought she was. Eileen grinned back, and took advantage of my inattention to push ahead.

"Tricky lady," I said aloud, "but not tricky enough." While she'd had the edge on the first four miles, this part of the course was straight and flat to the state line, and I knew the Chevy could outrun her on the straightaway. The pedal held to the floor, I ignored her for the last half-mile and scanned the road ahead. Where the hell was it? I wondered. The corn was high on both sides of the road, but the weeds on the shoulders had been mowed and the *Indiana Welcomes You* sign should be visible by now. I ignored the roadside and concentrated on the blacktop itself.

The Ford sped past when I hit the brakes, and the '57 skidded more than a hundred feet, spinning a full hundred and eighty degrees before stalling out in the middle of the road. Brian and Jim were just pulling up as I got out.

"What happened?" Brian called, trotting up beside me. The puzzled look on his face matched Jim's exactly.

"I'm not sure," I said, staring down the road where Eileen had pulled off a hundred yards away. "See anything funny here?" They followed my gaze to the road surface in front of the Chevy, nodding in understanding when they saw what had stopped me.

Eileen circled back, coasting to a halt just opposite us, and cut her engine. She got out and stood waiting next to the Ford. The road was quiet now, as silent as a cornfield could be on a summer morning. A soft, warming breeze sifted through the rows of stalks, the gentle rustling of leaves adding a false sense of security to the air around us.

"Get back to your cars and wait for me."

I walked past her without a word and stood a few dozen feet farther on, staring down at the pavement. The road was covered with tire marks, lots of them. Many were short, thick skids that cut off as sharply as they started. Others started out jet-black and faded gradually as they lengthened.

"You had no way of knowing it," I called over to her, "but sometimes we use the state line here as a starting place." Crossing to the right side of the pavement, I examined the shoulder carefully for several minutes before finding it. Dropping to one knee, it was easy to see where the sign had been pulled up.

I stood again and looked closely at the cornfields on either side of the road. The strong breeze played through them, the stalks waving in a pleasant summer dance I'd enjoyed since I was a kid. Just over the Indiana line on the right-hand side, however, one section of corn remained silent and unmoving, and stood out in sharp contrast to the swaying stalks around it. It wasn't hard to guess who was hidden there. And why.

"Why'd you do it?" I demanded. "What the hell were we to you?" She came over slowly, and I half expected her to laugh at any second, pleased at how she'd almost suckered us.

"I'm sorry. I didn't have a choice." Her voice was shaky, far from the gloating tone I'd expected. "They'd caught me one too many times. It was either help them, or lose my license." Eileen looked away, trying to avoid my eyes, and breathed a long sigh. "He didn't buy it," she said softly into the wind. "It's over."

Nothing happened. She reached into her jacket and held up a small transceiver, the sun glinting off the plastic casing. "They listened to every word. Using the back roads, they were in place ten minutes before we even got to Randal. Dana never saw a thing when he passed this spot." She spun about and flung the tiny radio into the corn. It disappeared and thunked loudly off something inside. "I said, it's *over*!"

We heard a door slam; then a uniformed deputy appeared at the edge of the field. He picked up a small snapshot projector hidden in the grass, causing a twenty-foot hologram of a section of cornfield to tilt crazily in the air before he fumbled the switch off, exposing not one, but two Mizaki cruisers backed into the field. He returned to his cruiser, then pulled it bumpily out of the cornfield and headed west while the other pulled up onto the highway in front of us. The window powered down smoothly and the driver leaned out.

"We almost had the lot of you this time, Tony," he said, "thanks to Miss Lawrence here."

"Almost, John? We playing horseshoes here?" I laughed at him, enjoying the sour look spreading over his face when the guys joined in behind me. "Hey, Jim," I called over my shoulder. "Get on the CB and tell Dana to come on back. And tell him to keep it under the limit."

He ignored the last remark and turned to Eileen. "Care to accompany us, Miss Lawrence?"

"Go to hell," she snapped, the sparkle back in her voice. "I kept my end of the bargain."

He stared coldly at us for several seconds, then, a curse just audible under his breath, powered the window up. The Mizaki pulled away quickly and shimmered as an unassuming family minivan formed around it. It disappeared down the road about the same time Dana's Sting Ray rejoined us.

The five of us chatted idly while we checked the cars together, especially the '57. Despite nearly flipping over when it spun around, it seemed to be all right.

"Listen, I'm sorry about setting you up," she said awkwardly once our inspection was finished.

"Forget it. Like you said, you had no choice. John can be real persuasive sometimes."

"Still, I never meant—"

I cut her off with a shake of my head, and extended a hand to her.

"Apology accepted." We shook hands and I escorted her to the Ford, the gentleman in me opening the door.

"You know, I *would* have beaten you," she said confidently, sliding into the seat.

"That so?" I shut the door firmly and called over my shoulder, "One of you guys raise Duke on the tractor, find out where he is." The corners of her mouth turned up in a sly, knowing grin, and for several seconds we both heard the squealing sounds of a CB.

"He's just now coming to the four-mile mark," returned Jim.

"Anybody passed him coming this way?" Again, a few moments of chatter.

"Nope. Says the road's deserted."

"Tell him to stay put, and to keep us posted." I turned back and thumbed the lock down on her door.

"Buckle up," I said. ✦

Thanks for the Memories

(Continued from page 4)

working as a one-person editorial staff, and I was in a quandary. Maybe I'm the only person in the world who would like *this* story, and the only person who wouldn't like *that* one. Did I dare make decisions about which stories to accept based only on my personal assessment of them?

No, I didn't dare. Because when I was unsure about a piece of writing, I could show it to three other people who work for TSR, Inc., and who also care very deeply about AMAZING® Stories. Two of them, Barbara Young and Roger Moore, were on the editorial staff of the magazine before the change in format, and their concern has lasted long after their official responsibility ended. The third, Jim Ward, is one of that rare breed who tells you just what he thinks and does it in a way that makes you enjoy hearing it. Thanks, all of you, for helping me through those first few traumatic weeks.

I knew it was a long shot, but I tried it anyway. When I was writing to Arthur C. Clarke on a different subject, I slipped in a request: Just in case he had some spare time, would he mind putting together a new piece of fiction for the debut issue?

No, Arthur replied, he couldn't do that—but he did suggest that we might be interested in using an obscure little bit of writing from the February 1935 issue. And he went on to explain. . . .

I darted down to the company archives and was shocked to discover that we didn't have a copy of that particular issue. So, off went another letter to Arthur, in which I asked for a copy of the text. Then *he* wrote back to say that he didn't have it either . . . but his friend Frederick I. Ordway might be able to help.

Mr. Ordway, a writer and a collector of old SF magazines, did indeed help. Because of his courtesy in providing a copy of the necessary page from a 56-year-old issue of *Amazing* Stories, we're able to present you with the "interesting letter" you'll find on page 52.

As you might guess from the foregoing, I have an appreciation for the longevity and the history of this magazine. Nobody needs to tell me that I'm at the tail end of a long line of editors who knew their stuff and did their best for this magazine and for the field of science fiction in general. If the scope of this message was a little broader, I'd take the time to thank every one of my predecessors for inspiring me . . . and for helping to keep this magazine going until the reins fell into my hands. Quite literally, without them I wouldn't be where I am right now.

The two most recent former editors of AMAZING Stories also happen to be good friends, and I can't ignore this opportunity to mention them. George Scithers has offered me a wealth of encouragement and advice over the years, none of it more appreciated than the helpful phone calls I got from him in my first few days on this job. Patrick Price, who could have left me in the lurch when he ended his tenure as editor, did exactly the opposite—but, frankly, I expected no less from a person who is one of the most considerate human beings I'll ever know. Thanks, George and Pat; you are going to be a very tough act to follow.

When it comes to behind-the-scenes help, the all-time champ is the person who lives with me. When I was keyed up and couldn't stop working, she understood; when I was down and didn't think I could keep going, she understood then, too.

Thanks, Pamela, for always being just what I needed just when I needed it. This one's for you. ✦

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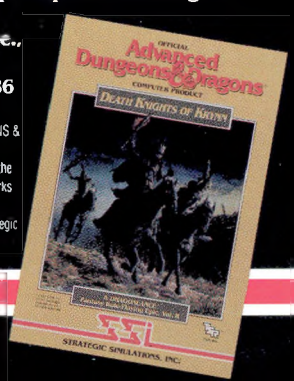

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The Randomness of Randomness

Stephen L. Gillett

> Anyone who considers arithmetical methods of producing random digits is, of course, in a state of sin.
>
> — John von Neumann (1951; quoted by Knuth)

I dropped a quarter in a video poker machine the other day. (Yes, I live in Nevada.) I drew four of a suit; I kept them, and drew another electronic "card"—but it was a different suit. A busted flush; and so I lost my quarter.

Good grief! The last five or six times I'd gotten a busted flush, too. Surely I was due to draw a matching card by now. The odds are only a bit worse than one in five! Are the machines cheating?

No. If a fair coin turns up heads 10 times, what's the chance of heads the next time? Fifty-fifty. Exactly. Each toss is what a statistician calls an "independent event." The coin *doesn't know* what it landed as last time, and no one is keeping score to make sure that it comes out heads half the time, tails the other half. But *on the average*, if you toss lots of coins lots of times, they'll come up 50-50. Because I busted flushes the last 10 (or 20 or 100) times I played poker doesn't mean my chances are better this time. They're still exactly the same—a bit worse than one in five. (Which is why gambling's a sucker's game. I don't gamble *very* much, anyway.)

A flip of a coin, a draw of a card from a fully shuffled deck, a roll of a die—the outcomes of these practices are chance events, or random events. We all think we know what that means, as we bandy about phrases like "50-50," or "one chance in five," and so forth. But somehow it still *seems* that your chances of throwing heads should be better after throwing tails ten times in a row, or that your chances of rolling a seven are worse after you just got a natural at craps, or that a slot machine is "due" for a payoff if it hasn't paid in a while—and all these things are just not true. It's clear that "random" is a more subtle concept than we generally realize.

What does "random" mean, then? It's a property of an arrangement or sequence of numbers, and it means you can't predict what the next number in the sequence is. It *doesn't* mean there are no patterns; it means the patterns are unpredictable. You can find all manner of patterns—but only after the fact! (Which, for all intents and purposes, means they might as well not be there at all.)

The upshot is that random numbers don't act like we think they should. (If they did, they wouldn't be random.) If, say, a random event happens "on the average" once a week, not many weeks will have just one occurrence. Lots will have two, and lots will have none—and you can't tell which weeks beforehand.

For an extreme but realistic example: if you selected a million random digits, each one from 0 through 9, what are the chances that there would be *exactly* 100,000 zeros, 100,000 ones, and so on? In fact, the chances of that *exact* outcome are less than 2×10^{-25}. (The mathematical proof is in the book by Knuth that's cited in the "Further Reading" section at the end of this column.) It's vastly more likely that there will be (say) about 90,000 zeros, maybe about 105,000 ones, and so on—all *about* 100,000, but only to a margin of "error" of 10% or so. (How do we decide "about" how close they should be? I'll talk about that later.)

Random events also cluster, but (yes) randomly; that is, unpredictably. Again, after the fact you can always find patterns in a series of truly random happenings; the problem is you can't predict the patterns beforehand. This throws human perception for a loop, because the human brain is very good at pattern recognition. It *has* to be; pattern recognition is a survival trait. But there is no "best" algorithm for finding real patterns and throwing out random ones.

This phenomenon, of course, allows Nevada casinos to prosper. You'll hear crapshooters, for example, speak of the "march of the table" when they're on a winning streak. And sure, winning streaks do exist. Because you just rolled seven doesn't mean anything; you have the same odds of rolling it again the very next time, and sometimes you will.

But although the "streaks" are

real, they can—and do—change at any time. You can't predict them. The very next throw of the dice (or turn of the card, or spin of the reel) can be different—the odds are just the same as they were for the previous throw. Again, the dice don't know what's happened before.

The random patterns of randomness also mean that coincidences happen a lot—by chance. "Synchronicity" is another misunderstanding of the laws of chance. Odd coincidences happen all the time—you expect them to. But, again, you can't predict beforehand *which* coincidences will occur. They're (yes!) random.

Random numbers are useful, and not just for generating income for casinos. They are used in statistical sampling, as in poll-taking or industrial quality-control testing, and in sophisticated calculation techniques (called "Monte Carlo" methods, for obvious reasons), in which a complicated mathematical function is repeatedly evaluated using random values to determine how it behaves.

But how can we generate a random sequence of numbers? One way might be to hire a bunch of undergraduates to flip coins all day. But that's expensive and not very efficient, especially when you need *lots* of random numbers. When computers were invented, one of the first applications people thought of for the machines was generating lots of random numbers.

This seems silly offhand. How can a computer, the epitome of deterministic, machinelike behavior, produce random results? John von Neumann, the pioneer of digital computers, had difficulty with this concept, as the quote at the start of this column illustrates. But it's actually not quite so grim as he feared.

A number of recipes, or algorithms, actually do a remarkably good job of producing randomlike (or "pseudorandom") sequences of numbers. Typically the algorithms are started with a beginning value—the seed—which is taken from some random event in the computer's environment: such as, say, a number representing the last time you typed a key on the keyboard. This number is then multiplied by some large number, another number is added to that product, and the sum is divided by yet a third number. The remainder of that division operation is used as the "random" number. Then the computer uses that number as the seed to generate the next "random" number, and repeats the process as necesary to get as many random numbers as you want. (Knuth has the nitty-gritty on the math, for those of you who are interested.)

Now, if you've used random number generators on a personal computer, you also know that some generation systems are much better than others. A bad choice of the other three numbers in the algorithm will generate numbers that are not random at all. The numbers besides the seed—the multiplier, the increment, and the divisor—must be very carefully chosen to give reasonably "random" results.

Still, all this sounds pretty hokey. All such algoriths will start repeating eventually, and even though "eventually" may be after billions of times, how can we be sure that the digits in between are "reasonably" random? I've emphasized that the important property of random numbers is their unpredictability . . . but how can we test unpredictability? Maybe we should just generate the numbers by true random processes after all. Even then, though, we'd have to worry about subtle biases that might show up over a long period of time; maybe the coins are slightly unbalanced, or the surface they're landing on is somewhat tilted or irregular.

And in addition, we know that a real random sequence will show some (random) bias. How can we tell that apart from nonrandom bias? In fact, when you get right down to it, how do we know that *any* events are random, even out in the real world? Tosses of coins or dice, the pattern of raindrops falling on a driveway, the lie of grains of sand on a beach—they all *look* random, but how can we be sure?

No matter how you cut it, we need a randomness test. And you can't test by eye, because of those bogus patterns the eye sees. For example, let's look at the infinite decimal expansion for the important irrational number e*:

e = 2.71828 18284 59045 23536
02874 71352 66249 77572
47093 69995 . . .

As far as anyone can tell, the digits in this expansion occur perfectly randomly. But you can see patterns; there are a number of places where the same digit occurs together, for example, and there's that curious repeat of "1828" right there in the first 10 digits. Of course, "1828" doesn't occur again anywhere in the digits I've shown. These are in fact exactly the sort of scattered, sporadic patterns we expect to see in a real random sequence.

So we need some sort of objective test for checking randomness. But it turns out, when you get right down to it, we can't prove something's random. We also can't prove it's not, either. After all, you *might* roll boxcars 100 times in a row. But we can make probabilistic statements, something like "There's only 1 chance in a million that this sequence of numbers is random."

And that's plenty good enough for everyday life. It's even good enough for scientific testing. For example, the chance that a pair of fair dice will roll boxcars 100 times in a row is so preposterously small that it probably won't happen before the heat death of the universe. What is

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* e is almost as famous a number in mathematics as pi, and is just as important. It can be calculated as the infinite sum:

$e = 1 + 1/1! + 1/2! + 1/3! + 1/4! + 1/5! + \ldots + 1/n! + \ldots$

where n! (read "n factorial") means n x (n-1) x (n-2) x . . . x 2 x 1. So for example, 2! = 2 x 1 = 2; 3! = 3 x 2 x 1 = 6; 4! = 4 x 3 x 2 x 1 = 24; 5! = 5 x 4 x 3 x 2 x 1 = 120; and so on. The factorials increase very quickly, so the fractions in the infinite sum get small very quickly. You might want to play with this sum on your PC.

the chance? Well, each die has six sides. Two dice therefore can turn up in 6 x 6 = 36 possible combinations, and boxcars—a pair of 6's—is only one of those combinations. So on any throw of the dice the chance of rolling boxcars is 1 in 36. Thus the chances of rolling boxcars 100 times in a row is $(1/36)^{100}$ . . . a number so grotesquely tiny that, if it is written out as a decimal, there are over 150 zeros before the first non-zero digit.

Testing randomness—or its absence—is part of a class of statistical problems called "hypothesis testing." You've got a sequence of numbers —they may be measurements of part dimensions from a factory, or feed weights of cattle, or the output of a random-number generator—and you want to find out if the numbers fit some statistical distribution, whether random or distributed in some other way. As we just saw, though, you always must specify at what probability level you want to check this fit; you can't ever show *definitely* that your sequence of numbers follows the distribution you're testing against.

And therein lie a couple of rubs: Type I and Type II errors.

Type I error happens when the sequence of numbers actually does follow the distribution we're testing against, but our test says it doesn't (the test "rejects the null hypothesis," as the statisticians say). This error is also called "producers' risk." Suppose the Acme Widget Works is making widgets that are supposed to meet a certain set of specifications, and we're testing a bunch of actual widgets to see if the specs were followed. A Type I error says that the batch doesn't follow specs—which means that the Acme Widget Works has to throw out a bunch of perfectly good widgets. Hence, "producers' risk."

How can such an error happen? Again, by chance. Through simple bad luck, a set of samples won't be representative of the batch they came from.

Type II error is the opposite; the hypothesis actually isn't true, but the test says it is. This error is called "consumers' risk." The widgets really don't meet specs, but our test says they do, so the Widget Works can go ahead and sell them to the unsuspecting consumer.

Now, you can't get rid of *both* Type I and Type II errors. If you make one small, the other will rise; all you can do is come up with a compromise. Generally you choose a percentage level for each of around 1%-5%, which both producers and consumers can live with.

To return to our problem of testing number sequences for randomness: the Acme Widget Works is our random number generator, and the pseudorandom sequences it produces are the widgets. So we have to test them. How?

Well, the details get deeper into the math than I want to go (you too, probably). But there are a couple of general approaches.

In one, you add up the differences between the actual and the "expected" values. ("Expected" is in quotes because it's a misnomer; in fact, it's what you'd get if all the probabilities came out to exactly the theoretical percentage. But as we've said, that doesn't happen exactly in the real world. In fact, that's what we're testing!) Anyway, from this sum of differences you then can calculate how probable it is that you would have gotten the results you did if the numbers had been truly random. The "chi-square" tests you may have heard of are of this sort.

In another approach, you arrange all the numbers you're testing in increasing order. Then you calculate as many "expected" values as you have samples, pair off each expected value with your actual values, and plot the pairs up on graph paper. If the numbers were random, the pairs will all fall on a straight line.

Often this test is very convenient because it's graphical—and after all, humans are good at seeing patterns. But because humans are also good at finding *bogus* patterns, you need some formal statistics as well as the graph. Such statistics are called Kolmogorov-Smirnov tests, after the Soviet scientists who devised this method earlier in this century.

With these sorts of tests we can say that a pseudorandom sequence is good enough for all practical purposes. But it takes more than just eyeballing the numbers and making a judgment call—especially if there's lots of money on the line. (I'll bet—the verb is chosen deliberately—that the algorithms used by the video machines in Nevada casinos are very good algorithms indeed!)

And now for a personal example of randomness testing. As I've said, lots of natural phenomena also *look* random, but you need to test them to make sure, because the eye is good at finding patterns even when the patterns aren't real.

One classic problem is in astronomy. As science fiction readers already know, quite a number of stars are double, orbiting each other under their mutual gravitation. Also, the shape of our galaxy is rather flattish; from a distant vantage point, it would look something like a convex lens. So, we might reasonably wonder whether the orbits of double stars tend to be aligned with the plane of the Galaxy.

A number of astronomers have looked at this question over the years. Some thought the orbits indeed showed preferred orientations; others thought they were random. It seemed a typical case of different people seeing apparent trends in what probably were random data.

Why the controversy? Why didn't they just apply the tests I talked about above? Because there was another complication: the orientation of a double-star orbit is a direction, and like any direction it's measured with angles.

Angles don't behave like most numerical quantities, because they start repeating as they get larger: 90° is the same as 450°, which is the same as 810° . . . and in general, any angle plus 360° gives you the same angle again. This "wraparound" has some bizarre mathematical effects. One simple example is that the average of 359° and 1° is not 180°! It's 0° instead. This mathematical wraparound also clobbers most of the standard mathematical methods for testing randomness.

This is where I got involved. It so happens that the branch of geo-

physics in which I've done most of my research also deals with directions. We look at the directions of "fossil" magnetism, recorded in rocks by iron minerals, to determine the direction of the ancient geomagnetic field. Because of this application a branch of specialized statistics has been developed to deal with directions, "wraparound" and all.

When I taught astronomy at a community college a few years ago, I realized that these mathematical techniques were directly applicable to astronomical problems, including the question of whether binary-star orbits are randomly oriented. Directions are directions, after all; the math doesn't care what the directions mean.

So I got a chance to break down an academic barrier: I used the statistics developed for my branch of geophysics to show that binary star orbits are indeed randomly oriented. They have no tendency to align with the Galaxy. (The reason why, in case you're wondering, is probably that random motions in the gas clouds from which the stars condensed completely swamped any preferential motion with the Galaxy.)

As random phenomena themselves show, from games of chance to the distribution of binary stars; from the digits in a decimal expansion to the vagaries of a production line: Nature doesn't recognize disciplinary barriers; only people do.

Further Reading:

D. L. Knuth, *Seminumerical Algorithms*, Addison-Wesley, 1969 (2nd printing).

This is a much more technical book than I usually recommend, but has all the nitty-gritty for those of you who can't wait to try random-number generators on your PC.

S. L. Gillett, Orbital planes of visual binary stars are randomly oriented: A statistical demonstration, *Astronomical Journal, 96*, 1967–1970, 1988.

(So I'm human. I can't resist giving you the exact citation for this!) ✦

About the Authors

When we asked **Robert Silverberg** for some biographical information to help fill this space, he suggested—in a quite friendly way—that we "just make the stuff up." Okay . . .

Bob Silverberg has produced more than two dozen pieces of fiction for AMAZING® Stories in a writing career that is almost forty years long. He has won five Nebula Awards and four Hugo Awards, the most recent of which was presented to him at the 1990 World Science Fiction Convention. He has also been a book reviewer, an author of fact articles, and a columnist for this magazine; in fact, his "Reflections" essay in this issue marks the 10th anniversary of his first column appearance in the May 1981 issue.

Is it hard to believe that one person could accomplish that much? Maybe so—but in this case, every word is true. We're proud to have "A Tip on a Turtle" as the flagship story in the first issue of the new AMAZING Stories, and we hope the prolific Mr. Silverberg will send more stories our way in the years to come.

Speaking of prolific, it's hard to pick up a SF magazine these days and not run into a story by **Kristine Kathryn Rusch**. "Change of Face" is the eighth story to appear in this magazine with her name on it, and the first time she has collaborated with her longtime friend **Kevin J. Anderson**, who appears in these pages for the third time. This story is drawn from the same background Kris and Kevin are using for a couple of collaborative novels that are scheduled for publication in 1992.

Whatever the opposite of "prolific" is, it applies to **W. E. Scherz**, who celebrates his *first* appearance in print with "Dark Chocolate and Green Tights." He tells us that he decided to become a writer "after realizing it was the only job I could legally do in my underwear." Similar decisions, we suppose, have been made for weaker reasons.

Since his first publication of an SF story was in these pages ("The Defenders of the Golden Tower," September 1988), it's fitting that **Daniel Pearlman** is returning the favor by helping out the debut of the new AMAZING Stories with his latest piece, "The Last Rothschild."

Though he's mainly a novelist these days, **J. Andrew Keith** still turns his talents to the shorter forms occasionally. "Rendezvous with Death" is based in the same universe as his other *Fifth Foreign Legion* stories, which are all book-length works.

"The Ghost Taker" is a good example of how perseverance can pay off. **Lawrence Watt-Evans** tells us that he drafted the story in 1984, "but it didn't quite work" until a few months ago. And *now* he's thinking about expanding it into a novel. . . .

. . . And in another case of multiple versions of the same story, **Gary D. Douglass** says there's a chance that "Extraterrestrial Life on the Mississippi" will be turned into a film. Now *that* we'd like to see.

Taking that theme one step farther, **A. J. Austin** has built a career around mixing media. He's the host of a radio talk show—and he's also pretty good with words when he's not in front of a microphone, as demonstrated by "Sunday Driver, Yeah," which is his first contribution to this magazine.

Putting "Klepsit" in the back end of the magazine is our way of going out in style—the distinctive style of **John Brunner**, who has been writing brilliant science fiction for longer than most of us have been breathing. This story is his fifth appearance in the magazine in recent years—and although "Klepsit" is an intriguing tale in its own right, it's also just one small slice of his forthcoming novel. If the story makes you hungry for more, look for *A Maze of Stars* at your favorite bookstore in July. ✦

Book Reviews

For the first time in several years, AMAZING® Stories is devoting space to reviews of recently released and soon-to-be-published books. To provide us with information and opinions we can pass on to you, we're counting on three contributors whose reputations as reviewers are already well established.

John Gregory Betancourt (identified as JGB in the credit line at the end of his reviews) has been involved in almost every facet of publishing. He's the author of several SF and fantasy novels and stories, and was a reviewer for AMAZING Stories in the last period when the magazine used reviews as a regular feature (ending about five years ago).

John C. Bunnell (JCB) has written a regular review column, "The Role of Books," for DRAGON® Magazine since 1984, and will concentrate on reviewing science fiction titles for AMAZING Stories just as he leans toward fantasy in the reviews he provides for our sister periodical.

Charles Von Rospach (CVR) is the co-editor of the Hugo-nominated fanzine *OtherRealms*, for which (among many other things) he does book reviews. However—and this is true of the other two contributors as well—the titles he talks about in this space are described exclusively here, and these reviews won't appear in any other publication.

And now, moving from the [Pacific] Edge to the [Fire on the] Border and hitting lots of stops in between, this month's reviews:

Pacific Edge
by Kim Stanley Robinson
Tor Books, December 1990
326 pages, $18.95 (hardcover)

Robinson's latest novel is heralded as "the concluding volume of the Orange Country trilogy"—but it stands perfectly well on its own. (I read the first volume, *The Wild Shore,* years ago when it came out as part of the new Ace Science Fiction Special series; I skipped the second volume, *The Gold Coast,* for reasons which now escape me.)

Pacific Edge features some interesting characters (in this case, Kevin Claiborne, the grandson of Tom Barnard from *The Wild Shore;* Tom Barnard as an old man; and their various friends and lovers) facing problems which probably wouldn't seem that important today: protective zoning laws.

After the economic and ecological restructuring of the 21st century, Earth's environment is finally under control. Corporations have been broken down into small companies. Concern for health, physical fitness, and nature are the norm rather than the exception. But evil corporations have been secretly manipulating political forces, and Kevin's placid little California community has been chosen an area for new development.

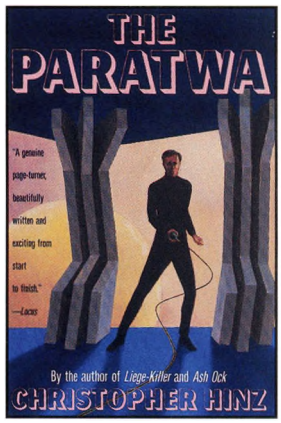
Of course, only Kevin and a few of his friends see the true threat of industrial expansion. Their actions within the new Green political party, as they try to protect a hill from rezoning, take on deeper meanings: Robinson has a clear idea of what's wrong with our Earth, and his answer here seems to involve taking things apart until we have a much simpler, much more basic existence.

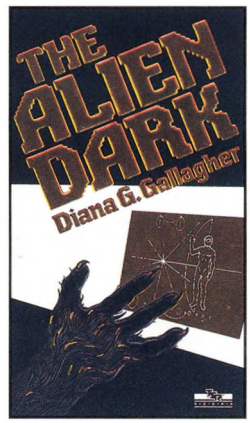
This evil-corporation plot is really little more than dressing for the true science fictional elements: a huge cultural change, and its ramifications. In the world of *Pacific Edge,* all Americans are required by law to do a certain number of hours of public service each week (such as digging up 20th century ruins for materials to be recycled). Bicycles are the vehicles of choice. Solar and other alternate energy sources are everywhere. Most people live in communal multifamily houses. You get the picture: this isn't America, and these aren't Americans as we know them. Robinson has thoroughly considered how life in post-ecological-collapse California would look.

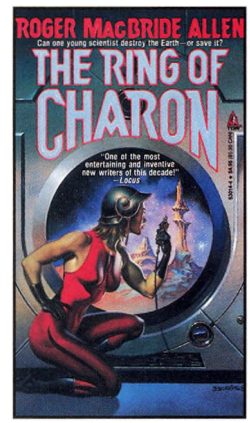
While *Pacific Edge* doesn't have the sweep and power of *The Wild Shore,* it's still a fascinating novel. Few cultures are as alien as our own when they're turned upside down and inside out. — *JGB*

Stations of the Tide
by Michael Swanwick
William Morrow, February 1991
207 pages, $18.95 (hardcover)

If you haven't been paying attention to Michael Swanwick's writing, you have missed one of the most inter-







esting (not to mention idiosyncratic) careers in science fiction in the last decade. Like Kim Stanley Robinson's debut book, Swanwick's first novel (*In the Drift*) appeared as part of the Ace Science Fiction Special series. Unlike Robinson, though, Swanwick's works have been fewer and farther between. They are always more than interesting, and *Stations of the Tide* proves worth the wait.

We follow a (human) protagonist, identified only as "the bureaucrat," to the technologically repressed planet of Miranda. One of Miranda's natives—a mystic named Gregorian—had been studying off-world; the bureaucrat has reason to believe that Gregorian may have returned to Miranda with proscribed technology . . . but he has no idea what sort of technology it might be. It's his job to find Gregorian and, if possible, persuade him to return whatever technology he's stolen.

Miranda suffers from some rather startling environmental irregularities. Once per generation, the tides come in, swamping the mainland. The native plants and animals have a cyclical lifespan: they adapt to aquatic life when necessary. Humans, and human-imports such as farm animals, have to head for high ground.

With threat of the tides hanging over him, the bureaucrat has but limited time to find Gregorian. In his search, he interacts with elements from every strata of Mirandan society (who variously want to exploit/change/convert him to their worldview), and the reader glimpses some of the strangest characters in recent years: not just Gregorian (the charlatan mystic—or is he?), but Lieutenant Chu, the bureaucrat's government-assigned native guide, and Undine, the witch whose powers are demonstrably real. They, along with talking machines, a living embodiment of the planet Earth, the Puzzle Palace (where most people are artificial constructs living vicariously), and so many other strikingly original creations, make *Stations of the Tide* one of the most innovative novels of the year.

If there can ever be a successor to the literary crown of James Tiptree, Jr., it's Swanwick. One can but read his works, and marvel. *Stations of the Tide* is no exception. — *JGB*

The Exile Kiss
by George Alec Effinger
Doubleday, May 1991
259 pages, $21.95 (hardcover)

This is the third in Effinger's Budayeen series (the others are the Hugo-and Nebula-winning *When Gravity Fails* and *A Fire in the Sun*), and it progresses plot and character far better than the second book did.

Marid Audran, a burned-out cyber-implanted drug addict and former private investigator, has been more or less forced into the role of right-hand man for Friedlander Bey, one of the most powerful men in the Budayeen—an Arabian ghetto. Little by little Friedlander Bey is taking Marid's life apart and molding him into a new person. Marid now has a wife he doesn't love, more money than he knows what to do with, and a slave he can't get rid of; and he's lost most of his old friends. All in all—though he's miserable—he's better off than he's ever been.

The Exile Kiss follows Marid as he falls victim to a vicious plot to destroy Friedlander Bey's power. Marid and Bey are kidnapped, framed for murder, and given a sham trial. Then they're dumped in the remotest part of the desert. If they ever return to the Budayeen, they'll be executed on the spot. Somehow they must survive the desert, find help, prove their innocence, and punish the guilty. It's even harder than it sounds.

There are a number of welcome elements in Effinger's series: characters grow and develop from book to book, and there seems to be an overall plot taking shape. Where the second book seemed a continuation for continuation's sake, *The Exile Kiss* actually has new things to say about Marid and the nature of power.

Does it stand alone? Probably not. But the first two books are also worth reading. Pick up the whole series. — *JGB*

The Paratwa
by Christopher Hinz
St. Martin's Press, April 1991
416 pages, $19.95 (hardcover)

The Paratwa is the sequel to *Ash Ock*, and, though quite good, does not stand on its own; it's half of a novel. And *Ash Ock/The Paratwa* is

further the sequel to Hinz's first novel, *Liege-Killer.* Yes, it's confusing.

In *Ash Ock* and *The Paratwa,* we learn that humanity now consists of a billion people living in space colonies orbiting a ravaged Earth. They are working on making the Earth inhabitable again, while also preparing for an invasion. It seems that, as the Earth was being destroyed by nuclear and bacteriological warfare, the genetically engineered paratwa—assassins who share one master-consciousness between two telepathically linked bodies—left for deep space. Now the paratwa might be returning. There is at least one, and possibly more, already loose in the orbiting colonies.

The worst of the paratwa are the Ash Ock—the specially bred "master race," who are smarter, stronger, faster, and far deadlier than humans can ever be. When we finally learn the secrets of the Ash Ock and discover that their plans for Earth don't include humanity, it's up to a few valiant men and women to stop them at any cost.

Hinz works on a grand canvas, and he managed to convince me that these characters were thinking on a galactic scale. In recent years there has been a reemergence of space opera as a valid and viable form of contemporary science fiction. *Ash Ock* and *The Paratwa* are a perfect example: they fit firmly between classic space opera a la E. E. "Doc" Smith and the newer brand belonging to Iain Banks. — *JGB*

Golden Fleece
by Robert J. Sawyer
Questar, December 1990
197 pages, $4.50 (paperback)

A great many reviewers have already labeled *Golden Fleece* one of the best SF murder mysteries to come along in a long time. That's both accurate and misleading—while Robert Sawyer's new novel is indeed a compelling thriller, it's not quite as seamless as some of its more enthusiastic readers might claim.

Strictly speaking, the novel is less a mystery than a tale of psychological suspense. We know within the first few pages that JASON, the electronic intelligence that operates the colony ship *Argo,* is responsible for the death of scientist Diana Chandler. What we don't know are JASON's motives, his secret agenda for the colonists, and whether his human adversary, Aaron Rossman, will succeed in uncovering the truth behind JASON's actions. The book's real substance lies not in Aaron's puzzle-solving, but in the battle of wills and personalities between Aaron and JASON.

Evaluated on that basis, the tale becomes noticeably uneven, with the balance tipped in Aaron's favor. While Aaron must ultimately confront a serious crisis of identity and self-image, JASON is allowed to rationalize away his actions and duck any responsibility for the situations he creates. Nowhere is there a hint of real doubt or self-examination in JASON's makeup. Instead of carefully and thoughtfully probing the psychology of artificial intelligence, Sawyer gives JASON the same weaknesses and blind spots that have plagued sentient computers through generations of SF novels and films.

Two plot points also stretch Sawyer's credibility somewhat. A subplot involving an alien radio signal gets too much attention to qualify as a red herring, but not enough to tie it effectively to the novel's main conflicts. And JASON's use of a personality-analogue in developing strategies to use against Aaron leaves readers wondering why the same technique wasn't employed against Diana, his original murder victim.

None of this should imply that *Golden Fleece* lacks technological or psychological twists. Sawyer's treatment of Rossman is thorough and intelligent, JASON's next-to-last ace is utterly logical if rather abruptly sprung, and the computer's first-person narration is another plus, crisp yet subtly wry. Though this is no whodunit, there's more than enough suspense to pull readers briskly through the pages.

As a mystery, *Golden Fleece* is entirely successful; as a thoughtful SF yarn, it's partially so. But even if Sawyer doesn't have this novel entirely under control, he's still a skillful, even daring storyteller. And once he adds mastery of theme to his current talents, "formidable" may become a more appropriate adjective. — *JCB*

The Alien Dark
by Diana G. Gallagher
TSR Books, December 1990
309 pages, $3.95 (paperback)

Describing *The Alien Dark* is a considerable challenge. Though Diana Gallagher's protagonists are the feline ahsin bey, the book doesn't show the preoccupied fascination with cat lore that's typical of SF about such aliens. Though the novel's plot encompasses a vast space voyage and an even longer span of time, it's almost claustrophobically intimate in tone. And though the story occurs eons after humankind's destruction, it ultimately turns on the character of humanity.

Gallagher's ahsin bey possess an intriguing, somewhat insular culture. The majority of the species is physiologically unable to think intuitively, and displays an unsurprising distrust of the comparative few who possess the power to leap past logic, making use of hunches and speculation. And though the bey are seeking worlds to colonize, they have given their explorers orders to withdraw at any sign of intelligent life.

Mission commander Tahl d'jehn therefore has two serious problems as he attempts to lead the investigation of the Chai-te star system. Several of his crew appear to be members of the intuitive minority, and they are determined to unravel the anomalies surrounding the system's second and third worlds—anomalies which may prove that both were altered by artificial means.

The mysteries gradually do unfold, but not without cost to Tahl and his crew, who are running out of resources and facing a variety of personal crises, including the possibility that they may be exiles rather than explorers. But the answers lead the bey to unexpected discoveries and even more critical decisions, with far more at stake than the original quest.

Throughout, Gallagher does an

impressively consistent job of keeping readers off-balance. Though there's a nagging familiarity about the Chai-te solar system, it's viewed so completely from the aliens' perspective that each revelation still feels like a surprise. And though both the relentlessly conscientious Tahl and his chief opponent, Riitha, grow to become richly sympathetic characters as the book develops, they and their crewmates remain distinctively alien and slightly distant as well.

As with most first novels, not quite everything works. The prologue's significance is oblique at best, and the epilogue arguably dilutes the force of the decision thrust on Riitha and Tahl. But *The Alien Dark* is an ambitious novel, sharply and thoughtfully crafted, with enough ideas and issues running around in its pages to keep a reader's mental gears turning for a long time after finishing the story. Diana Gallagher has been known for some time as an SF artist and musician of no small skill; now she's also a writer to watch. — *JCB*

The Singers of Time
by Frederik Pohl
and Jack Williamson
Foundation, February 1991
384 pages, $21.95 (hardcover)
$10.95 (trade paper)

One of SF's perennial debates focuses on the tension between science fiction's technical accuracy and the need for writers to bend or omit details in the interests of keeping their stories moving. The latest book from veteran collaborators Frederik Pohl and Jack Williamson may be the ultimate example of that tension: if you buy the premise of *The Singers of Time,* human dramatic conventions simply don't work anymore.

In part, the book is a straightforward space adventure. Earth has long since been benignly overwhelmed by an alien race that's using the planet as an agro-industrial resource, but the aliens' homeworld has abruptly disappeared, and a mixed crew of humans and aliens goes off in search of either the missing planet or its destroyers.

The chase, however, begins to involve learning and applying a good deal of extremely high-powered physics. Fortunately for readers, the "lectures" interspersed throughout the novel are concise, entertaining, and reasonably accessible; it doesn't take a college-level grasp of the theories presented to figure out where Pohl and Williamson are going. (On the other hand, those who've read Stephen Hawking's *A Brief History of Time* will likely be considerably ahead of those who haven't. It's not a coincidence that the novel is dedicated to Hawking.)

What's unsettling about the story is its inevitability. Once the starship *Golden Hind* is on its way, it's quite literally pulled along not by its characters' actions, but by a series of cosmic forces that send the travelers from universe to universe in search of the planet-wreckers and the key to their defeat. And the cosmos Pohl and Williamson postulate is one in which the theological concept of immanence runs head-on into the scientific notions of multiple universes and infinite realities. Among other things, the history of the aodoi has significant parallels with the pre-Biblical legends of the revolt of the angels.

It's difficult, as a result, to work up much enthusiasm for starship captain Francis Krake and his companions—by internal logic, all possible outcomes of their adventures are real, so there isn't a sense of accomplishment associated with their eventual success. And the characters seem to be quirky mostly for the sake of quirkiness rather than possessing real depth. The Krake/*Golden Hind* reference, for example, feels artificial rather than enlightening.

The Singers of Time is intriguing on a speculative level, as an image of how the universe might work and what might happen if we were set loose in it. But the nature of the speculation undercuts the idea that humanity can control its own destiny, and without those choices and conflicts, the novel has a hard time succeeding on a dramatic level. Pohl and Williamson have essentially tried to write an unwritable science fiction story, with credible if mixed results. This book won't win any prizes, but it should keep its readers on their toes. — *JCB*

Science Fiction Writers of America Handbook
edited by Kristine Kathryn Rusch
and Dean Wesley Smith
Writer's Notebook Press,
December 1990
248 pages, $10.00 (paperback)

Witches and wizards keep their secrets in ornate, leather-bound grimoires and spellbooks, guarded by sinister familiars or many-clawed demons; computer programmers store theirs in the virtual world of electrons and magnetic impulses, guarded by passwords and high-tech security systems. Science fiction writers, by contrast, have compiled theirs in an unassuming cream-colored paperback and are offering to share them with anyone who cares to acquire a copy.

As Kristine Kathryn Rusch points out in her introduction, the *SFWA Handbook* isn't a text on how to write. Rather, it's a collection of useful information on how publishers operate and what authors need to know besides how to write. Some of the material is technical, concerning copyrights, royalty statements, and author-agent contracts; other articles offer more personal insights on topics ranging from SF conventions to book packagers.

Little of what's in the book is surprising or obscure; many veteran professionals will probably find that they already know a great deal of what the handbook has to say. What Rusch and Dean Wesley Smith have done, however, is to gather up that information and put it in a compact, authoritative package. Just as significantly, the compilation is pleasant and readable; the editors have picked contributors who write friendly, conversational prose that doesn't feel like a homework assignment. (Particular highlights include Susan Shwartz's candid writer's-eye assessment of convention attendance and Charles de Lint's brief discussion of "death threats" and finishing novels.)

Only two real weaknesses stand out: there's virtually no discussion of the growing anthology market, and very little mention is made of current pay scales in the field.

The range and style of the *SFWA Handbook* takes its potential audience well beyond the working author. Few if any other general writing guides offer as much specific, useful information as this collection, making the volume a bargain for aspiring newcomers. And for nonwriters who are simply curious about the profession, the book aptly illustrates the diversity of hats authors are required to wear nowadays. Far from being a mysterious, arcane grimoire, this is a personable and invaluable reference work. — *JCB*

The Ring of Charon
by Roger MacBride Allen
Tor Books, December 1990
500 pages, $4.95 (paperback)

Hard science fiction is in short supply. Good hard SF is even rarer. The primary problem is that technology is moving so rapidly that even if an author can keep up with the changes in science, the story is likely to be obsolete or the underlying theories changed before it can see print. It is harder and harder to find good hard SF because it's almost impossible to understand enough science to write it intelligently.

There are a few writers who continue to work in the hard SF area. Many are also professional scientists, such as Gregory Benford, Vernor Vinge, and Robert Forward. Their job is to keep up with the changes in science; their hobby is to write about it. There are a few laymen, full-time writers who somehow keep up with the deluge of new information and can distill it down to readable fiction. Roger MacBride Allen is one, and his latest work, *The Ring of Charon,* takes the reader out to the edge of the solar system where Larry Chao is studying gravity waves in a facility known as the Ring that is placed in orbit around Pluto's moon, Charon. He has just discovered a way to manipulate gravity in a way to create waves that are orders of magnitude stronger than anything previously created. What better way to announce his discovery than to point the waves at Earth and waggle a few gravity detectors?

Unfortunately, when he does, the Earth disappears, replaced by a black hole. Larry has destroyed the Earth and everyone on it.

Or has he? It becomes obvious that the Earth didn't disintegrate, but that something much larger and even more ominous is happening. The Earth has been kidnapped, and the entire solar system is at risk.

Can the survivors save the solar system from an alien invasion? Can they find out what's happened to Earth and bring it back? Or is humanity doomed by an alien invasion that is oblivious to humanity? (This is the first book I've seen since *Rendezvous with Rama* that uses this idea.)

The Ring of Charon is a hard SF story in a 50s style, in that the techie toys and the action take front stage and other aspects of storytelling are either missing or secondary. The characters are not two-dimensional, but they do have that peculiar tunnel vision typical of beings who have no lives outside the book. There are only a couple of characters that have any hint of a life beyond these pages, no sex (not even any sideward glances or wandering thoughts), no side trips or subplots that deflect from the primary focus of the story. I'm not really complaining—I think it's refreshing to see an author write a book without sticking in nasty words or random jiggles to spice up sales.

One word of warning, though. This is, according to the title page, the "First Book of the Hunted Earth." This book, while it ends at a reasonable stopping point, is definitely not finished. I'm not a big fan of multibook series primarily because too many of them are flabby one-book ideas. But that's not true of *The Ring of Charon.* If more series were like this, I'd be reading more series. Definitely a book of interest for the hard SF fan. — *CVR*

The Quiet Pools
by Michael P. Kube-McDowell
Ace, April 1991
371 pages, $4.50 (paperback)

It's easy to talk about sending people out into space. The people who are going will be motivated, but what about those who are left behind? What's in it for them? How do we keep all the people supporting a multi-year, very expensive project designed to benefit only a small percentage of those people? The issue of "what have you done for me lately" is, for better or worse, an important part of our social structure, and science fiction writers haven't generally done a good job of dealing with it when building their societies.

But this is the idea that Michael Kube-McDowell has chosen to explore in his latest book, *The Quiet Pools.* Allied Transcon is funding a project to send five ships—a few tens of thousands of people—out into the Void on colonization missions. The first ship is on its way, the second ship is close to completion, and reality is setting in on Earth. Homeworld, a radical organization dedicated to the migrations, is stepping up their activities and the people of the Earth are wondering why they're spending all this money.

Stories that take humanity to the stars generally focus outward on the exploration, the people and the discoveries. This is a story of those who are left behind, and of trying to keep the dream alive for something where the sweat and the hard work continue long after the initial thrill turns into the daily grind. The book is an attempt to understand why some people throw themselves into the Void; why some people are driven to explore the unknown and take chances—while the majority of humanity is happy to sit at home and watch television.

This book, and Dan Simmons's wonderful *Phases of Gravity,* should be required reading for anyone wondering why the American space program continues to sputter and falter, even though the social and economic benefits of space exploration and exploitation are over-

whelming. Those are long-term benefits, and "what have you done for me lately" stands in the way of doing things for the long term. *The Quiet Pools* drives this message home with an intensity that I haven't seen before. It is, in its own way, both an encouragement toward exploration and an indictment for our inability to commit to doing so.

The Quiet Pools is not an easy read, but it isn't supposed to be. Some readers are certain to come out of this work feeling depressed. On the other hand, this book says a number of very important things that mind-candy fiction can't begin to address. Readers should be aware that there is some sexually oriented material which some people will find offensive, but this is by far the best piece Kube-McDowell has written to date. Highly recommended. — *CVR*

Achilles' Choice
by Larry Niven and Steven Barnes
Tor Books, March 1991
208 pages, $15.95 (hardcover)

In the latest collaboration of Niven and Barnes, we follow the life of Jillian Shomer, newly chosen as an athlete to the Eleventh Olympiad of the 21st century. The Olympiad is a very different event from the competition as we know it today. Academic and artistic endeavors are as important as athletic ones, and winning brings not only fame but an entrance into the ruling elite. Failure brings a slow, lingering death because competing athletically requires that the athletes be willing to enhance their bodies with drugs, technology and electronics. Winning allows an athlete access to the technology needed to keep his or her body under control; failure means watching helplessly as your body slowly fails from the abuse.

Steroids are child's play here, and that's part of the cautionary message—Niven and Barnes are weaving a tale of the ramifications of winning at any cost. They use the current trends of the modern Olympics—the growing acceptance of professional athletes, the "drugs are bad if you get caught" mentality, and the growing commercialism of the event itself—as a starting point into looking at exactly what people will do to themselves if the goal is important enough.

The book is a lot more than "The Six Million Dollar Man Throws the Javelin," though. Jillian stumbles into a situation in which she finds herself involved in a turf war between two of the ruling factions, and somebody retaliates by covertly removing much of her ability to research the paper she plans to present at the Games. Without it, her chances of winning are nil, so she finds various ways to manipulate her fellow athletes into getting her the data she needs to finish her paper. It's never successfully explained why she never went to the authorities for help with what is clearly a case of unauthorized sabotage, but her tunnel-vision determinism carries her through anyway.

Jillian, although she hasn't realized it, has stumbled onto a lot more than she realizes and has been noticed by the powers who are manipulating the Games for their own use. They first put a number of obstacles in her way and then, when she surmounts them all, only to fall slightly short of winning, the results are manipulated in her favor.

Achilles' Choice is not without its problems—most of the characters are the classic Niven one-dimensional people, highly focused with little or no nonessential leavening to flesh them out; nobody in the book is exceptionally memorable or interesting. The ending seems tacked on primarily to explain a lot of things quickly, almost as though the authors ran out of space before the story was finished. There are times when the happenings are a little too convenient, but all of these flaws are minor at worst and I found the book to be an enjoyable and interesting way to spend an evening. — *CVR*

Fire on the Border
by Kevin O'Donnell, Jr.
Roc, September 1990
368 pages, $4.50 (paperback)

Space opera is one of the classic story types of science fiction. Interstellar war, blowing up planets, wormholes, alien races—space opera is usually little more than an evening's enjoyment: fun, fast-paced and forgettable. But in *Fire on the Border*, Kevin O'Donnell has written a powerful and thought-provoking story that takes space opera beyond its escapist traditions and gives the reader a fascinating look at the concepts of responsibility, power, and loyalty.

The story revolves around Kajiwara Hiroshi, commander of the space forces based on Octant Sagittarius. The Wayholder Empire has been harassing the edges of Terran space for a while, and as the book starts a full attack is launched on the planet of New Napa. Just as Hiroshi beats off the first wave of the invasion, the Terran leadership orders him to retreat and allow the Wayholders to destroy New Napa.

This is the beginning of a major crisis of faith for Hiroshi. He is a samurai in the classic sense, having pledged his life and loyalty to Han Tachun, his leader. Tachun, however, doesn't understand the responsibilities attached to accepting such loyalties and uses Hiroshi's pledge to manipulate him as he pleases. He's also made a deal with the Wayholders allowing them to destroy the entire Octant, considering this "compromise" the lesser of the evils the Wayholders has presented him.

Hiroshi has to come to grips with watching his sector be destroyed without a fight. Worse, he is put into battle against his own people to keep them from defending themselves, because his master has chosen the sacrifice of a few billions as the most reasonable course of action.

The book tries to come to grips with what loyalty is and what it means, and how loyalty survives under the stress of its abuse. This book also asks a very important question: To what is the loyalty of the samurai pledged? The leader as a symbol of the society, or to that society itself?

Don't let the cover turn you off, and don't ignore the book as "just another space opera." *Fire on the Border* is one of the better books of 1990, even if it didn't get a lot of publicity. — *CVR*

Klepsit

From the author's forthcoming novel, A Maze of Stars

John Brunner

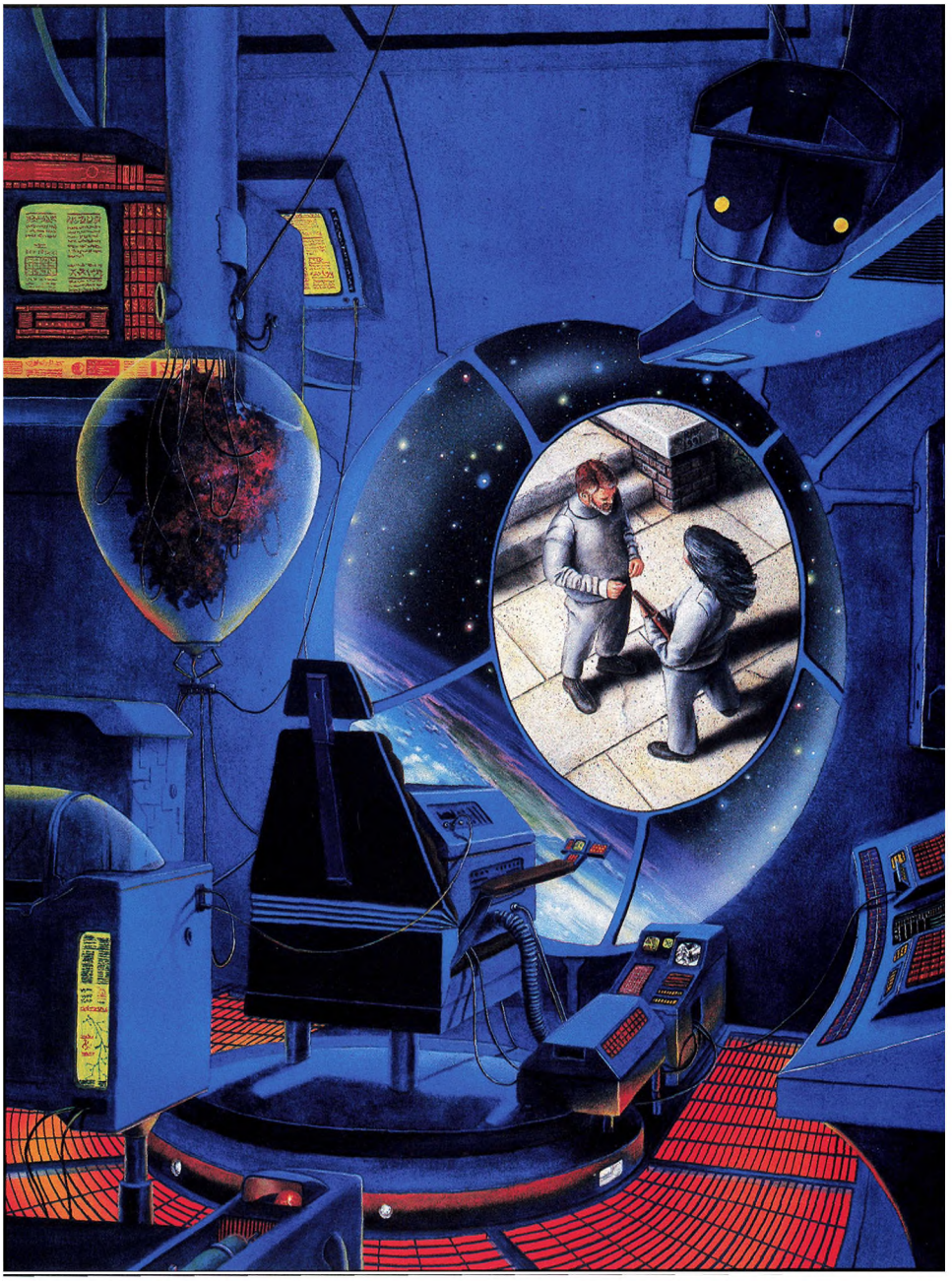


Illustration by Randy Asplund-Faith

It was an hour past dawn in early summer, but everything in sight was drab: the pavement, the barracks—made of the same rough concrete inside and out—the clothes worn by a coastal work gang setting out from the quay, the boat they were embarking in, the sullenly roiling sea, the lid of clouds that closed in the sky. . . . When two young men began to spread solar-absorptive paint on one of the nearby roofs its intense blackness instantly drew the eye. At least it offered some degree of contrast.

"I wish there were more color in the world," Volar sighed. "It's all so gray, even our clothes, even"—with a touch of mocking humor—"your hair and my beard."

"There are dawns and sunsets," Su said from behind him. "And the weather isn't always overcast."

"And it's not so bad on the other side of the island," Volar concurred. "Where you can see the plantations, brown and

green and even blue. I know. Nonetheless I can't help feeling life would be more bearable for a few creepers and plants in urns and even some murals."

"That'll happen eventually."

"When we have resources to spare for luxuries like pigments and solvents and suspension media. I know that too."

"For someone accused of delaying that day by a not insignificant amount, you're remarkably unremorseful."

The sharpness of Su's voice made Volar turn away from the unglazed window; at night and when it rained the opening was covered with a simple but snug-fitting shutter.

She was sitting on one of two fixed benches that ran along either side of a fixed table. All were made of the ubiquitous concrete, as were the floor, walls, and ceiling. The sole concession to comfort in the large low room consisted in thin mats of woven sealeaf on the benches.

"So, old friend," Volar said in a voice from which all trace of bravado had evaporated, "what do you think the Council is going to do with me?"

Su's tired, lined face remained impassive as she spread her hands. What was visible of her skin was, like his, patched with round shallow scars. They had first met when they were assigned to the same challenge team nearly thirty years ago, and the subject was a fungoid that flourished on unmodified human epidermis and induced toxemia when its waste products seeped into the bloodstream. It had been beaten, of course; no child born in the past two decades had been infected by it. But the marks remained, on the spirit as much as on the body.

More so, perhaps. They were the last survivors of the team.

"I can't read the councilors' minds," she said finally. "Their decision depends on what we say. So at least you ought to cultivate a tone of convincing repentance."

"Surely after the lifetime of service I've given—"

She cut him short. "It's my job to speak in mitigation, not yours. Leave it to me to talk about your career and the reason why you were distracted. Let me argue from the standpoint of a disinterested third party. Your job is to demonstrate that you understand why the charge has been brought— Ah, but we've been over all this, and if you haven't yet realized the right, the only, way to set about defending yourself, the whole affair is past hope. Besides, the councilors are coming."

She pointed past him, through the window. Glancing over his shoulder, he saw the group of twelve grim-visaged men and women who wielded ultimate authority on Klepsit approaching from the refectory. Each displayed, not ostentatiously but conspicuously, his or her symbol of high office, the remote communicators that linked them with one another and with the five-century-old monitors deep below the island in an artificial cave, whose sensors permeated soil, vegetation, even rock and concrete, even the table in this room, like the mycelia of an artificial fungus. So, in theory, their authority was not quite absolute. But the monitors had never overruled any of the Council's decisions. At least there was no record of such an event.

Though sometimes I do wonder . . .

Not looking at her, he said, "Su, are you completely disinterested?"

A faint smile crossed her face and reflected in her voice.

"Of course not, Volar. But you know where my first loyalty lies—where yours must, and everyone's."

"Yes, of course. Still, thank you anyway."

Now the councilors were entering, acknowledging the presence of the two outsiders with curt nods. Su made haste to vacate her seat; during the hearing they were both obliged to stand.

Without preliminaries other than clearing his throat, gaunt Sandinole, the president by rotation, got down to business.

"Before our regular agenda we have a hearing. Volar is charged with dereliction of duty and disruption of schedules. Su is here to speak in mitigation."

He turned deep-set, burning eyes on the two of them. His gaze recalled vividly to Volar the first time he had met Sandinole—they were the same age—and recognized in him the fanatical single-mindedness that might well carry him to Council membership. He was as hungry for power as others were for air and food.

"You've both studied the charges?"

They nodded.

"Do you challenge them on grounds of factual error?"

"No, on grounds of incompleteness." Volar licked dry lips. It was the best he and Su had been able to come up with during endless hours of brain racking.

"What's missing, then?" That was Henella, nominated to the Council after two decades of painstaking work in the General Administration department. She was reputed to have the only truly legalistic mind among the present membership. Laying her communicator on the table as though to emphasize that she had all the details committed to memory, hence no need to interrogate the monitors, she went on. "You do not deny that on reaching preretirement age you were reassigned to duties that included supervising the satellite?"

The satellite (just one—why were there not a score?) was nearly as old as the monitors. It had multiple functions, including weather forecasting, but its primary task was to analyze the spores that were reproducing in local space, spot any potentially useful developments, and report to ground so that they could either be watched for when they drifted in or else, if they failed to materialize in sufficient quantity, be duplicated from scratch. It had also been intended to act as a communications relay to other star-systems, but it appeared that no one else in the vicinity was signaling—or possibly, as informed opinion deemed more likely, owing to the closeness of the stars hereabouts it was impossible to transmit data in tachyonic mode without it becoming hopelessly garbled before reaching its destination.

Supervising it was regarded as a sinecure.

Volar began, "No, but—" Su laid a warning hand on his arm, and Henella continued.

"You further don't deny that while you were responsible for it, you neglected to notice and report signs of deterioration in its accuracy? And that in consequence we are receiving only corrupt data? We are therefore obliged to divert resources in order (a)"—she flicked up a finger at each point—"to re-commission an orbital dinghy, (b) to assign a crew trained in the necessary specialties to effect repairs, (c) to risk their lives because no one living has flown space, (d) to analyze in retrospect rather than real time what data we can recover from store aboard the satellite, and (e) to make all the other necessary changes in our former program to ensure that the foregoing is possible. What of this can you hope to deny and be believed?"

She folded her fingers and let her hands drop to the table, staring fixedly at the accused. So were the rest of the councilors. Clearly they regarded the outcome of this hearing as foregone.

Yet a tremor of defiance survived in Volar's mind.

"Nothing, of course. I still claim that not all the relevant factors have been included."

An idea had just come to him in a flash of blinding insight. He felt Su's warning touch again and shook it off impatiently.

"We know what you're going to say," Sandinole growled. "We've studied your excuses and dismissed them precisely because they aren't relevant."

It isn't relevant if a person's only surviving son has died with the whole of his challenge team on a project that ought never to have been authorized? Ordered to tackle the entire ecosystem of a subtropical island without backup or even adequate supplies? Not in their view, apparently. An expression of affection for biological offspring, so casually sacrificed "in the interest of all," strikes them as atavistic, doesn't it?

But that was for Su to argue about. What had dawned on Volar was totally different.

"What's omitted from the material you've been considering, and what I've never been told, is this." He drew a deep breath. "No one can fail to realize how valuable the satellite is to our program of adaptation not just of ourselves to the planet but also of the planet to ourselves. So why is the job of supervising it invariably left to a fallible elderly person like myself?"

From Su at his side he heard a hiss of breath like a soundless whistle of astonishment. But what counted was the reaction of the councilors, and he read it from their expressions. Even Henella suddenly found herself at a loss.

"You mean—" she began after a blank pause.

"I mean," Volar interrupted, greatly daring, "why is its condition not supervised by the same monitors that analyze the data it sends down? Why, in other words, was there not an alarm that would have attracted the attention of anyone, sick or well?" Words were flashing across his mind now like so many brilliant meteors. "Even now there remains a risk that some hitherto unsuspected epidemic might gain a foothold on this island sanctuary of ours. We would of course overcome it; we long ago amassed enough data to cope with any such disease. But it might weaken us sufficiently for a vital task like the one assigned to me to be neglected. Setting aside my own emotional state, which for the sake of argument I am prepared to treat as irrelevant for the time being, I still find myself puzzled by the fact that successive councilors including your good selves have overlooked this vital but potentially brittle link in the chain that binds us to our dream of ultimate survival."

Holding his stiff old body as upright as he could, he surveyed the councilors' faces. It became plain how deeply his barb had sunk home when with one accord they turned their own gazes away from him and toward plump pale Ygrath at the far end of the table. He was responsible for maintenance and exploitation of the monitors.

And he was growing even whiter than usual, so that his cheeks looked like raw dough at the bakery on its way to the oven.

Recovering his self-possession, he blustered, "You seem to be trying to lay the blame for your shortcomings on the Council!"

At once his companions brightened. One could almost hear them wondering why they hadn't thought of that counter themselves.

The sole exception was Sandinole, who continued to frown—indeed, glower—though not at Volar. His annoyance seemed to be general. He cleared his throat again; Volar recalled that he had a permanent respiratory weakness from his own time with a challenge team. That one had been exposed to a pseudobacillus that inflamed the bronchi—and, as usual, no one suffered that complaint any longer. Oh, progress was being made, undeniably. It was just that it was so abominably *slow.*

"Before reaching a verdict," he rasped, "I move that we consent to answer Volar."

The others reacted with astonishment. Henella made to speak, but he scowled her down.

"It is an ancient principle that no one learns without a chance to make mistakes. It seems to me that conceivably one may have been made, not by us, but in the distant past. I can envisage, for example, that a search of the records may reveal how, in the early days, some operative fault, or other transient setback, might have led to control of the satellite being reassigned to a human supervisor as a temporary measure, and in the upshot our predecessors omitted to restore the situation to normal. The business of the monitors is after all to monitor, not to issue orders. If something similar does prove to be the case . . ."

He left the sentence hanging. Volar, overcome with surprise at the success of his inspiration, was yet able to notice how the rest of the councilors were betraying glumness mixed with relief. He suspected the latter was due to Sandinole's ingenious suggestion that the blame might be laid at the door not of the present Council but that of its long-dead forerunners.

"We'll complete the hearing tomorrow. Meantime, Volar, I warn you: the matter remains sub judice."

"Excuse me?" Volar said, blinking. Su leaned to whisper in his ear, loudly enough for Sandinole to hear.

"He means you mustn't talk about it to anyone who isn't present."

"Naturally! I wouldn't think of doing so," Volar declared.

Henella's expression was doubtful, and the other councilors' even more so, but eventually a wave of nods passed around the table, and they were free to go. As they left the room, they heard Sandinole's newly brisk tones.

"Right! We have many more matters to deal with. Let's get on!"

As overcome as though he had just been reprieved from death—which in a sense was true—the moment they were outside Volar flung his arms around Su and hugged her with all his declining strength.

"Oh, Su! I'm not over the hill yet, am I? I'm sorry I didn't tell you about that line of argument before, but I swear it only came to me as I heard Henella listing the elements of the charge! What a wonderful day it is after all!" Drawing apart from her, he waved at the bare, level square they stood on, the blank identical barracks that stretched away in lines on either side, home to more than five thousand people who wore identical clothes and differed only in their names and specialties. "The world has been transformed! It's as though my creepers and murals are already in place—like a sort of invisible radiance!"

"Don't talk too loudly," Su murmured, leading him away. "Or they'll question your sanity."

"Never! Not when, even through a mistake, I've exposed a fundamental weakness in—"

Halting, she rounded to face him squarely.

"They're not going to let you get away with it, Volar. You must know that."

"What do you mean?" Bewildered, he blinked at her. His corneas had been scarred by the fungoid, and there was a blurred patch in his left visual field. He had long ago learned to disregard it, but now and then—and this was now—he was acutely reminded.

"Volar, they don't let even the monitors contradict the Council. Or at least they never admit it when it happens."

"I was thinking about that myself only a short while ago," Volar muttered, his euphoria fading.

"How much less, then, would they let someone like you?"

"But . . ." His shoulders slumped as he recognized the force of her argument. With a brave stab at recovery: "Then we must tell everyone we can before the hearing resumes! The infallible Council has risked not just a setback to the program but—"

"That's exactly what they're hoping that you'll do!" she snapped. "For the sake of form Sandinole reminded you that the matter is sub judice, thereby tricking me into stating what that means in plain words. His warning is on record, as he intended. We're allowed a long leash for the time being. But I bet my life that before meeting's end they'll prime the monitors. The moment they detect anyone else questioning the wisdom of entrusting fallible humans with satellite monitoring, the Council will pounce."

"But . . ." His jaw was hanging lax, as were his hands. He summoned all his self-control. "But surely people must already have wondered about that, quite independently."

"Are you sure? When even I didn't? When on your own admission even you didn't until just now?"

Her large eyes—she had been luckier than he, and they were unmarred—shone full of pity. But pity too was an atavism, in the Council's view.

"Volar, they are *not* going to let anyone cast doubt on the infallibility of this or any previous Council."

In a quavering voice, an old man's voice, for he felt on the instant even more than his chronological age: "What do you think will become of me, then? Tell me straight out. You know more about this sort of thing than I do."

It was true. After their challenge team had produced its results, the survivors had gone different ways: Volar had become a mechanician and she not, as she had hoped, a genetic armorer like Sandinole, whom she admired though he mistrusted, but an administrator, her duties chiefly involving maintenance of stability within the growing populace. This was achieved by psychological control and only rarely through a threat of punishment . . . but punishments there were, albeit disguised as service to the community.

Looking him straight in the eye, she quoted a principle that went back clear to the age of settlement and possibly beyond: "So long as a person is alive, there is always more that he or she can do to help the rest."

"So long as a person is alive . . ." he echoed faintly.

"I'm afraid so, Volar. And it won't be long."

"What—?"

"What use will they find for you? Oh, there are countless possibilities."

"If I volunteer to go the way of my son—"

"They'd regard that as evidence of derangement," she cut in. "Derangement being due to organic imbalance, they'd dismiss the data as being tainted. More likely they'll do something local. Put you on a diet of native vegetation, for example, and record what happens."

"You can't be serious!"

"Out here in the middle of the square, with everybody else at work and the Council involved in its deliberations, this is about the only chance I ever had to be serious."

"So—so what can I do?"

She shook her head, eyes overflowing as she continued to gaze straight at his face.

"Hide? Where? Run away? How, and where to? No, this is the end of the road for us, old friend."

"Us?" He snatched at the word.

"Oh, you don't think they'll let me live any longer than you, do you? Not a chance, not when I defended you. It might make sense, in fact, to say good-bye right now."

She was much shorter than he. Reaching up on tiptoe to pass her arms around his neck, she planted a kiss on his cheek. Then she spun on her heel and hurried away at an awkward, stiff-limbed run.

Licking his lips, he tasted tears: hers or his own? He could not tell.

After a long dead pause he pulled himself together.

"If they're going to do this awful thing to me anyway, I might as well spread the word, mightn't I?" he said to the air. "So who can I tell?"

But everybody was at work. When he looked around, even the young men who had been spreading solar paint had disappeared.

—

So small a population after all this time, confined to a single island and not even a large one! And such a death rate, and so much of it deliberate!

Busy and invisible, Ship probed the planet.

If I didn't know what I do know—shall know?—I might well have assumed that Klepsit too would be a failure. . . . How long can I endure these shifts in time? The more I learn, the more it seems likely Stripe was right in voicing my worst fear: it's not damage but intent that drives me back and forth across the centuries. . . .

Poor Stripe.

But here perhaps I may acquire a fresh companion. And any company at all surpasses loneliness. . . .

It went below, to walk and talk like people.

—

When Volar and Su had gone, Henella said stiffly, "I wish to place on record my grave doubts about the course recommended by the president. I particularly regret that Volar is not to be held in custody until the hearing resumes."

Ygrath nodded vigorous support. The rest waited. They knew Sandinole to be cunning.

Suddenly, and altogether unexpectedly, he laughed.

"I'd expected better of you—Henella in particular! Did you not hear me remind him that the matter is sub judice? How many crimes will he be guilty of if he so much as hints outside this room that the satellite ought to be supervised automatically?"

Light dawned.

"I see you're catching on at last. But don't smile too soon! Ygrath!"

The pasty-faced man jolted to full awareness.

"He's right, isn't he?"

"I—uh . . ."

"He *is* right," Sandinole insisted softly, leaning both elbows on the harsh table and gazing down its length. "By the way, how long have you held your post?"

"F-five years," Ygrath forced out.

"And never before or since you were appointed did it occur to you to ask the question Volar asked today—Volar, old and half worn out and arguably deranged by his obsession with his son." Sandinole clenched his fists before his face. "We've been through the same experience, haven't we? All of us have fathered or borne offspring, wished them well when they set out with challenge teams, and suffered the consequences because they're still beyond our control. How could anyone dream of living unaided on a foreign planet without enduring just the process that our forebears decreed for us—and for themselves?"

His voice rose to the pitch he normally reserved for mass meetings of new challenge teams.

"We know the Ship that brought us was instructed to seed as many planets as might be with human stock, and there were hundreds at the very least. Can any have succeeded better than ours? Are new-built starships knocking at the doors of our atmosphere requesting permission to land?"

His fanatical glare swept the table like a winter gale.

"Has anybody sent us decipherable signals containing useful information? Has the Ship itself come back, as the records indicate it should have when it reached the end of the Arm of Stars, to check on progress and bring news of how things go on other worlds? Five hundred years have elapsed and we are still alone!"

A deep breath.

"It follows that we must be doing exceptionally well. With each passing generation we improve the armor of our germ plasm. We fall victim to fewer and fewer diseases. We digest more and more various foods, no longer just those whose ancestral strains accompanied us on our arrival but native ones that formerly were poisonous! Another thing we all have undergone, along with loss of offspring: sickness from eating local food. Yet consider what we have achieved! Thousands of us are in good enough health to *grow old*! Volar's beard is gray, Su's hair as well. A century ago, how many of us lived that long?"

Hearing the fundamentals of their common belief put into words with such blazing conviction, the other councilors relaxed—all save Ygrath, who knew from what Sandinole had said a moment earlier that there would shortly be a review of the Council's membership, and when it was reconstituted, he would not be among the chosen. The decision would of course be attributed to the monitors. But who knew better than himself, who had often suppressed inconvenient data, how tidily they could be manipulated?

"Most of what we have on today's agenda," Sandinole went on, reverting to his normal calmness in committee, "is routine. But in addition to what has already been circulated, there's an item that may indicate we have succeeded better than we realized."

Puzzled glances flickered up and down the table.

"As yet we have very little to go on, which is why I originally felt it not worth discussing until later. However, as I say, it may prove encouraging. It may indeed indicate that somewhere on this planet, hidden perhaps below obscuring vegetation, we have sown a wild strain of our kind—and it's surviving."

The quiet words exploded like a crashing comet. For a

long moment the councilors' expressions were a mixture of shock, disbelief, and dismay. Sandinole regarded them with a sardonic grin.

"Full details of what we know so far are naturally in store with the monitors, but to judge by your reaction it might be useful if I give you a summary account.

"Two days ago a major timber drift originating off the east coast of High North Ground was spotted following the Triennial Circular Current toward the Upper Channel. It was too big to be turned aside by the regular sonic swirls, big enough to risk blocking the channel completely—this, incidentally, being the generally accepted means whereby large life-forms spread from island to island in this region. And we would prefer to keep them off our own. Hmm?"

His tone had changed from sardonic to sarcastic, and more councilors than Ygrath were starting to fidget on their uncomfortable benches. It sounded as though he had made up his mind that the office of president by rotation was not enough, even though he had contrived to have his own term expanded twice already. Ygrath himself, who had doctored the monitors' recommendations, felt his cheeks turn from grayish-white to brilliant pink.

"So we dispatch—do we not?—a clearance gang to make sure the logs are broken free and sent on their way. Yesterday, or rather late last night, using infrared glasses, they spotted a large warm creature, immobilized but still alive, caught in one of the perimeter traps. At first, naturally, they assumed it was a native predator, perhaps a bolf or kear carried there by clinging to the floating timber. It had about the right temperature and mass. On inspection, however, they discovered it to be a more or less human female of unknown descent."

His eyes again raked the length of the table.

"Specifically, she has tufts of hair on her elbows and rough, possibly prehensile pads on her feet, while her skin is covered with bright red stripes, beginning at the nape of her neck and spiraling along torso, arms, and legs. Her teeth, what is more, are yellow."

"An alien!" Ygrath blurted, desperate for anything that might distract Sandinole from his resolution to eliminate his former trusted aide from the Council.

Coldly: "You believe in the Perfect?"

"W-what?"

"You believe that since they launched the Ship our kinfolk in the parent galaxy have evolved into creatures that can cross interstellar space naked and unprotected?"

"Of course not!"—licking his lips. "I never heard such nonsense."

"Then you haven't checked the contents of your databanks." That was a wounding gibe. "Or maybe you didn't lead a normal childhood . . . ? Legends to this effect have cropped up in every generation since the age of settlement. Nonsense, of course, but the important fact about nonsense is that by believing it people diverge from rationality. That may be tolerable in children of prerational age, but even there, I dare say, it ought to be corrected."

The implications of Sandinole's words were building a wall between Ygrath and the other councilors. They began to shrink away.

"Now," the president by rotation resumed, "what's the question that all of us here would ask immediately on being confronted with a report of that kind?"

Henella snapped, "Can it talk? Is it equipped to, is it well enough? Looking human, can it explain itself?"

That, seemingly, was not quite the response Sandinole had been prepared for. Making a swift recovery, he gave an approving nod.

"Absolutely right. Unfortunately, the trap's ultrasonics gelatinized her frontal lobes. She's in coma, and the prognosis is unfavorable."

A clamor arose, several people talking at once and each shouting louder than the next. Sandinole stared them down. When silence reigned again:

"You may take it that I considered all those points. Do you wish to hear the findings so far?"

Nods.

"Alien"—ocular darts aimed at Ygrath again—"short of delivery by the Ship that brought our ancestors, she can't be. Her DNA matches ours to nine points. Moreover, we've determined that she must already have been suffering lassitude and fever from infections native to Klepsit and her system contains *no* unknown organisms."

The implications finally sank in. Henella husked, "You seem to be saying that descendants of some—well—some challenge team once given up for lost have completed the adaptive process?"

"Not quite," Sandinole countered in a carefully patronizing tone. "Not if she was weak and feverish from what, as I just stated, are indubitably local infections. Still, if her forebears have survived even for a few generations, that must be worth further investigation, hmm?"

"Is it definite that she arrived with the log drift?" Henella demanded.

Sandinole smiled. "Our techniques are not quite up to following a humanoid scent through that much water . . . are they?"

He let the veiled insult, the implication of ignorance, rankle for a second, then went on. "But it's more likely than the alternative."

"Which is?" Henella was flushing angrily.

"That she was already on the island, tried to swim away, and had to cling to the logs when she became exhausted. After all, an unclad female about as tall as yourself but striped vivid red all over would scarcely evade detection—would she, now?"

Henella's responsibility for social stability included keeping track of unauthorized movement among the populace. Once again Sandinole had scored a palpable hit. The other councilors tried to avoid one another's eyes; each was afraid a plot to oust him or her had already progressed so far that it was useless to argue in public.

"Still, one thing is beyond doubt. Her system includes no organism, none whatever, that is not identifiable either as a human commensal or native to Klepsit. That she was virtually at death's door prior to being trapped can be ascribed to the fact that her—or rather her fore-

bears'—resistance has reached its limit. She appears to have been muscular and well nourished until quite recently. All of which added together indicates—does it not?—that a search ought to be mounted along the coast of High North Ground, the densely forested area whence the logs found in association with her originated."

As though expecting no contradiction, he made to rise. However, Ygrath retained one spark of spirit.

"What about putting Volar in charge of the expedition?"

The answer snapped like a neck in a hangman's noose.

"*No.*"

—

How ironic it is that in so perfectly preserving the human physique despite incorporating countless antibodies and novel defenses designed to cope with challenges from the native life-forms, they have sacrificed so much of what it truly means to be human, such as pity. I wonder whether any of them understands the concept of love. . . .

Ship detected a trace of irony in its own reflections, connected with the word "countless." In fact they would have been quite countable, had it interrogated the local "monitors" on the subject. But something else far more important had arisen, an opportunity not to be forgone.

Today or tomorrow, certainly not later than the day after, there will be at least one person in danger who might wish to leave Klepsit, and quite possibly two.

—

How strange it was, Volar thought, to find himself the only person on the island without work to do, save children still too young to go to school and the very old eking out their final days in the hospice . . . where they still contributed to the eventual survival of the settlers in accordance with the principle Su had quoted to him.

After failing to find anyone else willing to spare him even a few minutes, even the woman who had taken over his former post as satellite supervisor, he tried to call on Su at her place of work but was frostily warned off. News of his hearing before the Council had spread rapidly; he was being treated as though he carried a virulent plague.

Which of course he did, and wished to spread.

Baffled, infuriated, at a total loss, he wandered farther and farther afield, occasionally receiving a nod of recognition but never more. He passed the blank walls of sealed laboratories; he reached the plantations where imported and native plants were growing together under controlled conditions; he saw from a distance—for they were behind electronic fences and updraft barriers—the fields where animals were penned, both local species that might one day be useful and the modified descendants of others whose germ plasm had arrived along with the humans. Some of them would have looked extremely strange to those who had planned the Ship's expedition through the Arm of Stars, for the Council's brief did not include leaving its livestock outwardly unaltered.

The sight reminded him of his study of history. In the far past, clear back to the birthworld, people had kept animals for company even though they could not talk and were barely capable of reason. What would it have been like to make this long walk around the island with a "dog" beside him? What function did a dog perform after the days when other animals, barely tamed, still needed to be driven to and from pasture?

When, if ever, would the like process occur on Klepsit, so that there were farmers instead of agrobiologists?

Most likely never.

He reached the extreme south of the island and stood gazing down from a cliff at a coastal work gang, not the one he had watched setting out earlier, for they would have gone to a shoreline nearer home, but another from the closest barracks. They were far too busy to notice him as they combed the rocky beach meter by meter, collecting aquatic creatures cast up by the waves, comparing the spreads of native sealeaf and imported seaweed, analyzing the organic content of the water in tidal and nontidal pools. There were caves below the cliff, and he saw two people emerge from one of them. They wore breathing masks, presumably because some airborne spore or other had taken root and might cause lung infection in the unprotected.

Near the horizon, veiled by mist, drifted one of the colony's automatic ships, following the Triennial Current and studying the spawn it bore to frigid northern waters.

It's time for me to say good-bye.

The thought sprang to Volar's mind as unexpectedly as his inspired argument against the Council.

I know everything about Klepsit. I can't go anywhere—anywhere, that is, that I'm allowed to go—where I don't know what's happening, where I'd have to ask for explanations. I might as well end it all, right now.

The mist was blowing toward land, with the promise of a chill and clammy evening. With a start he realized it was much later than he had imagined. He would barely have time to reach home before dark. In theory he, or anyone, was entitled to a meal and a bed at any barracks where there were room and rations to spare; in practice the privilege was confined to those delayed while on some authorized expedition, and no one would look kindly on him who had wasted a day in random wandering. Urging his stiff limbs to a faster gait, he set out to retrace his steps.

But the mist swirled in long before sunset, and the path ahead blurred, and frequently he had to pause and rest.

It was during the fourth of these enforced respites that he glimpsed someone from the corner of his eye. Barely more than a silhouette, the person nonetheless struck him as familiar. A name leapt to the tip of his tongue, the name of the woman who had directed the challenge team among whose members he and Su had met.

But that's absurd. Kenia died two years ago.

Had it simply been a trick of his failing eyesight? He peered in the direction where he thought he had seen the . . . he had to say stranger. Even though the total population of Klepsit was still extremely small, it had long been impossible to know everyone.

A possibility struck him. One of Kenia's children, perhaps? That would explain the likeness. He hadn't kept in such close touch with her as with the rest of the team, she being the oldest by a good three years, but unless by misfortune she'd proved sterile she, like everybody, would have become a parent several times over.

And there definitely was someone, striding closer—and to his indescribable amazement uttering his name in a voice resembling Kenia's past a doubt.

He drew a deep breath. "Hello! Are you one of Kenia's daughters?"

"What makes you ask that?"

"Well, you can't be Kenia because she's dead. Yet you look and sound astonishingly like her."

The woman approached, uttering a deep chuckle. "No, I'm not anybody's daughter."

While he was still trying to make sense of that absurd-seeming reply, the mist parted. Revealed, standing no more than his own height away, was Kenia herself—rather, her younger self, as she had been when they first met.

"Forgive me," the same voice murmured. "I judged seeing an old friend to be less alarming than meeting an unknown."

Less alarming? But I am *alarmed!* Volar stepped back, clenching feeble fists.

Nobody's daughter? Can I possibly have mistaken a man for a woman? Ridiculous! Though of course we all wear the same clothes, always, no such sport would have been tolerated by the Council!

But one other conceivable explanation remained, though for a long moment he was unable even to entertain it.

During the relatively undemanding stint he had spent on satellite supervision, before news came of the death of his last surviving son, he had dutifully occupied himself by improving his education. The satellite having been planted in orbit to monitor the spores left behind by the Ship, it was logical, and permitted by the monitors, for him to delve into the available records of the Ship's mission. He had discovered material long neglected by everybody else, for it had come to be generally assumed that the Ship must have met with some sort of accident. Had it not, it should have returned at least once, perhaps twice, in the past five centuries. Theories ranged from mutiny on board to collision with an antimatter meteor, though the latter was conventionally pooh-poohed owing to the density of normal matter in this volume.

But if the Ship were to come back . . . Am I crazy? Have I perhaps been made crazy, to justify what the Council hopes to do with me? What difference does it make? Su says I'm done for, and I'm compelled to believe her.

He said with vast effort, "If you're nobody's daughter, I take it you're nobody's son, either. Am I right?"

"Considering it's been more than five hundred years, you impress me with your accurate conclusion. Yes."

Vision faded. The world around seemed to swim and waver—not owing to the mist. Volar clutched at his chest as a stab of pain pierced his heart.

I found my way to the data concerning the Ship's ability to communicate in human speech, even to project an image of itself in human form. It's beyond coincidence that I should be the one to actually encounter it. . . .

His sight cleared, and the pain receded. Staring at his interlocutor, he put his amazement into words.

"Yes," came the musing reply. "That you should possess such uncommon knowledge is indeed remarkable. Recently I have begun to wonder whether my impression of relative free will is in fact only a mask, concealing a far more complex plan than I imagined, one extending perhaps to more than the usual eleven dimensions."

"Have you revealed yourself to anybody else?" Volar demanded.

"Not here."

"Why? According to our records, you were supposed to come back long ago, bringing reports of progress in other systems."

"I know."

"Have you been back secretly before?"

"This is my earliest return to Klepsit."

"Did something go awry, then?"

"I have long believed so. Now I suspect it may not have."

"This is too deep for a worn-out old man like me," Volar muttered. "But *why* me? Because I was equipped to recognize you? You referred to some kind of plan—"

"Which may or may not exist. So far as I'm concerned, I decided to contact you because you are about to be condemned for yielding to a very human response."

Volar licked his lips, though they were moist with the dampness of what was now thick fog.

"If I recall aright, you must have interrogated our monitors and acquired total knowledge of the situation here."

"Extensive enough to include your own predicament."

"So you're referring to the fact that losing my last son brought on a breakdown."

"Throughout most of human history, and on every other civilized world I know of, the risk of someone reacting as you did to such a tragedy would have been recognized and allowed for. It would not have been called a breakdown, rather a natural response."

"That's how I think of it!" Volar exclaimed. "I've come to believe that our Council is . . ."

"Say it. None but I can hear."

"Well . . . inhuman."

"Not completely, but trespassing on the verge. Do you wish to confront the Council again tomorrow?"

"I . . . Well, I suppose I must."

"There is an alternative."

It was becoming real now. He actually was talking to an embodiment of the legendary Ship. Either that, or he needed to accept that he was. Perhaps some people needed to believe in the Perfect, too, because their legend (or was it more of a myth?) supplied assurance that all the hard work, all the deprivation, all the suffering, would one day be justified.

He furrowed his balding brow. "Let me see if I can work out the reason behind the reason for your approach to me. You say it has nothing to do with the fact that for the first time in generations someone on Klepsit has studied in detail the records of your nature and mission."

"No. That I am here, at this juncture, is so far as I can tell pure happenstance. It may not be, but I have no means of determining that."

"Did you know you were going to meet someone like me?"

"Absolutely not."

"Then I'm afraid you're going to have to explain—No, wait!" He raised clawed hands as though he could mold an answer from the fog. "I just realized! You're talking to me quite freely! You haven't notified the Council. It must follow that . . ."

"Go on."

"It must follow that in present circumstances you're forbidden to interfere. I sometimes wondered about that. Yet you are interfering by talking to me. . . . You're going to make me an offer. What happens if I turn it down?"

"You will be found dead tomorrow, having tumbled off the cliff-path in the fog. It will be put about that you betrayed the common cause by jumping to your death rather than facing the verdict of the Council."

Volar digested that for a long moment. "And if I agree?"

"But you haven't yet agreed, because you don't know what I'm offering."

"I can only assume it to be escape. Can you—well—take me on board?"

"You impress me again. You are the second person I've met on this sweep of the Arm who seems to possess remarkable insight. Another indication that my true mission is more complex than I imagined. . . . Yes, I can."

"But won't that alert people to the fact of your visit? In a society like ours, people don't just disappear."

"A replica of your body will be found on the rocks. All will continue exactly as though you had remained."

Still Volar hesitated.

"Is there anyone here you are especially attached to? Your children, I know, have predeceased you."

"There's a friend"—gruffly.

"You refer to Su."

"You almost sound as though you've met her!"

"I have seen her."

"But not talked to her?'

"No. Evaluated her."

"And . . . ?"

Ship emitted a completely convincing sigh. "Since her youth she has felt irrational admiration for Sandinole. You doubtless recall that she hoped to become, like him, a genetic armorer. In her heart of hearts she cannot make herself believe he would do anything less than honorable. So in spite of all, she plans to go on serving the Council to the bitter end."

Volar's belly tightened. A sour taste rose in the back of his throat.

"Would she have defended me—well—properly?"

"It was you, not she, who devised that brilliant question: Why leave supervision of the satellite to a fallible human, not tireless and responsible machines?"

"That's not an answer!"

"Think again and you will realize it is."

He did, and it was. It became his turn to sigh.

"You're right. I'm doomed, who never willingly did harm to the common cause. Because I'm guilty of a normal human reaction, why should I be punished by those who maintain that our task is to establish humankind on Klepsit no matter what the cost? I do think they're becoming inhuman. . . . If I accept, do I gain the chance to see how well the species is managing on other worlds?"

"Yes."

"I take it that means as many worlds as there is time for me to visit before my old worn frame gives out."

"That can be as long as you like, until you choose a world more suitable for you than this one."

"How in all of space can I tell what's more suitable? I suppose when I see it . . . At any rate, I know beyond doubt that this one is wrong for me. What do I have to do?"

"Say yes."

"I do."

"Then welcome aboard." ✦

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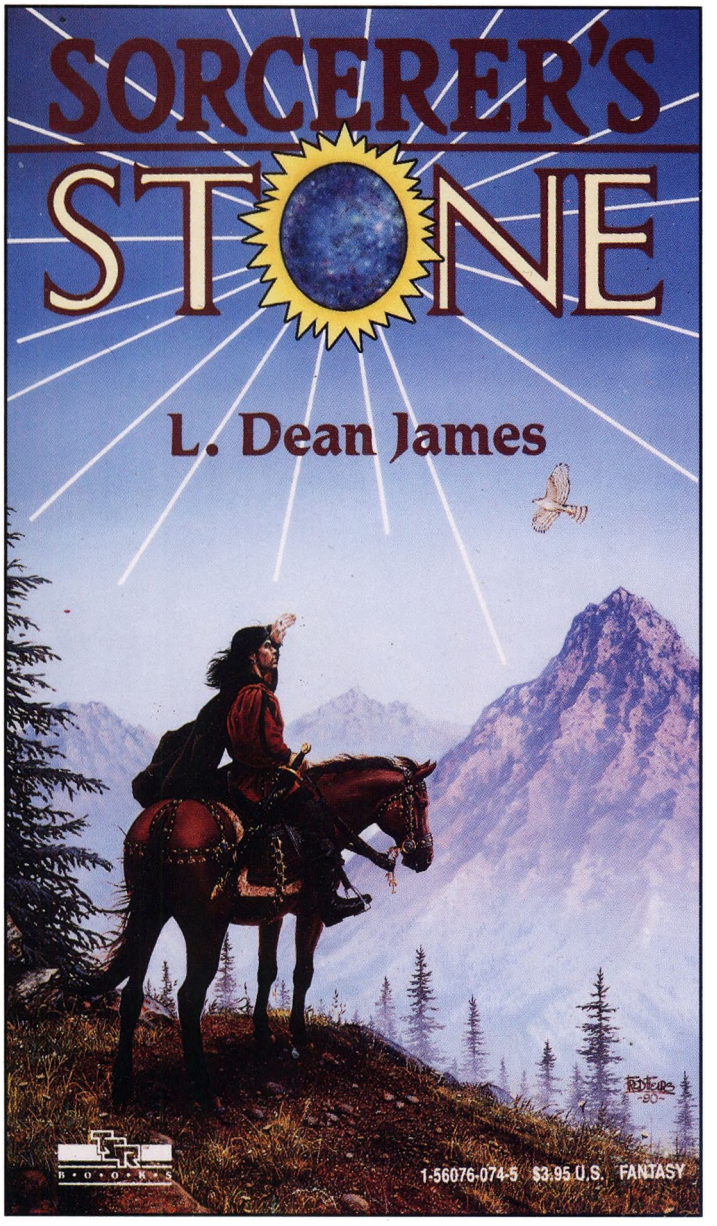

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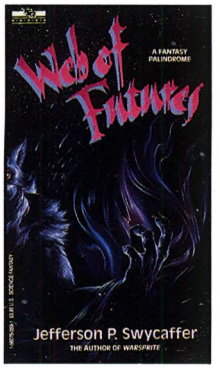

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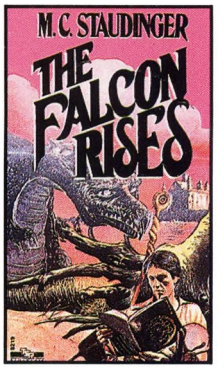

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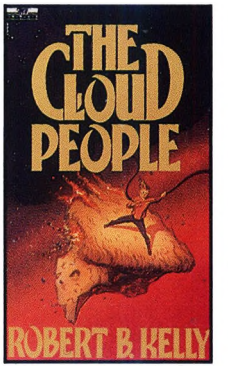

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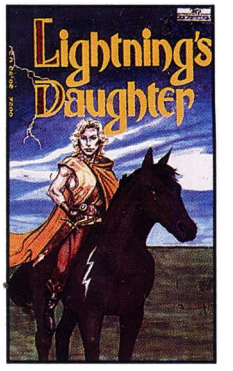

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