Vol. LXVI, No. 5

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AMAZING® STORIES

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AMAZING® Stories

DeWEESE & TAYLOR, RUSCH, McDOWELL, BETHKE

Vol. LXVI, No. 5

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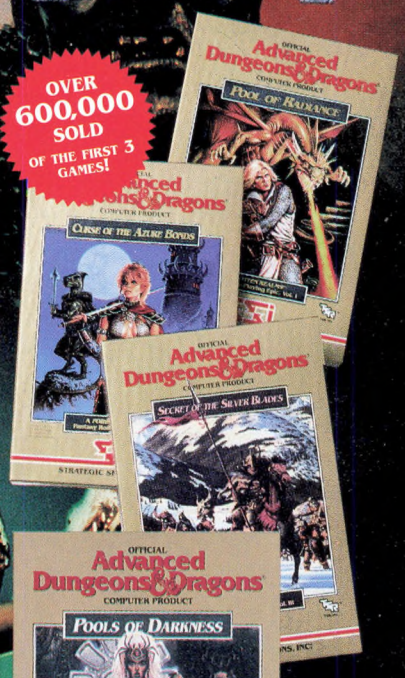

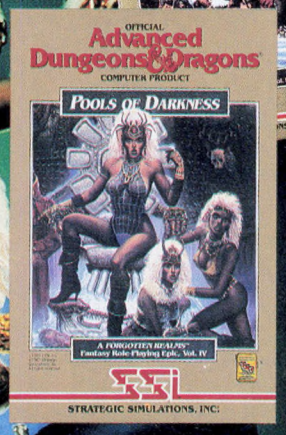

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Coming Retractions

Kim Mohan

I know this is going to be hard for you to believe, but things do go wrong around here once in a while.

Okay, the whole truth: Things go wrong around here several times a day. But, just as in anyone else's job or anyone else's life, most of those things are little, and they're easy enough to get around.

The big things . . . well, those can be *real* problems, because sometimes there's no way to get around them without leaving evidence of the fact that plans didn't work out the way they were supposed to. I don't like it when something goes wrong, but I especially don't like it when there's no way to fix the problem without calling attention to it.

That's the situation we found ourselves in as the production deadline for this issue was looming. All of the stories we had scheduled to run in this magazine were ready to go, and everything was fitting neatly into place, except . . .

Except that the illustration for one of those stories had not come in yet, and with every passing day it looked more and more likely that the art wasn't going to be here on time. I needed a Plan B, and I didn't have one: This sort of thing had never happened before.

The solution was really quite obvious. Other stories that weren't scheduled for this issue did have artwork already in, so all I had to do was yank out one story and fill those pages with some of the other material. Nothing to it, except . . .

Except that those other *stories* weren't quite ready to be published, because I had not sent out copies of the finished pages for the authors of the stories to see. That's the step in the process known as "page proofs" —and *no* story in this magazine gets printed before the writer has had a chance to see page proofs.

So it was time to hustle. I found a couple of stories that would take up as many pages as the one that had to be lifted (now you know the great amount of consideration that sometimes goes into story selection), I cranked up the page-layout software, and I got those stories ready to show to the authors.

Then I sent out the page proofs, along with a letter that briefly explained the fix I was in, and I asked those two authors to get back to me as fast as they could with any last-minute changes they wanted to make.

Both writers came through in time, with the result that we were still able to finish production on this issue without a delay. And nobody but those two writers ever had to know how much of a hassle it was to fill up this magazine. Except . . .

Except that the story I had to pull was one of the pieces mentioned on the "Coming in September" page in last month's magazine. (No, I won't tell you which one it was, but if you have a copy of the August issue it's easy enough to figure out.) And that's what makes this problem into a big problem—there was no way we could cover our tracks, no way to unpublish what we had already committed to doing a month ago. All we can do is explain what happened and what we did to fix things as well as they could be fixed . . . which seemed like a good way to use this space.

So, what did happen with the missing artwork? Briefly and simply, it was a case of circumstances beyond everyone's control. The story will appear—with illustration—in the near future, and no one will be the worse for the experience. And there is an up side: I'm already that much ahead of the game on page proofs for the issue in which the story runs.

What are the two stories that plugged the hole? For the time being, at least, that'll be a secret shared only by us and the two authors who acted quickly to help us out. (*They* know who they are, and they also know how much their fast work was appreciated.) If you like doing detective work, and if it matters that much, you can probably figure it out or at least narrow it down.

Once in a great while, the magazine you get might not contain exactly what you expected to see. Even so, you can put a lot of faith in the "coming attractions" page. We're one hundred percent sure of what we list there . . . ninety percent of the time, anyway. ✦

Reflections

Robert Silverberg

I've been looking back over the results of the epic journey of the Voyager spaceships through the Solar System lately, and I've been reading a little science fiction, and the juxtaposition doesn't give me a good feeling about the reach and sweep of the science-fictional imagination.

What I see, on the one hand, is the sheer *strangeness* of the information about the moons and planets of our astronomical neighbors that the two Voyagers sent back during that phenomenal decade-long cruise to Jupiter, Saturn, Uranus, and Neptune. And what I see on the other hand is the downright *ordinariness* of the planets that science-fiction writers tend to concoct.

It's pretty dismaying to look at the Voyager pictures, and then to pick up a novel by my esteemed colleague X or Y or Z. What Voyager told us is that the Solar System is a damned weird place. What X and Y and Z seem to be telling us is that someday we'll be traveling to other planets *of other stars* which will be just about as dissimilar to our Earth as Chicago is to Brooklyn, no more, no less. Their characters get off the interstellar spaceliner—which is like a Boeing 747, only bigger—and step out into a spaceport which is very much like O'Hare Airport or Los Angeles International or John F. Kennedy—and then they hop into a taxi and onto a freeway and off they go to town. Where they check into the galactic equivalent of the Hilton and take a nice refreshing shower before setting out in search of their next dazzling adventure.

Whereas the Solar System, as reported to us by Voyager . . .

Just *consider* this stuff a moment.

Even before Voyager 1's 1979 visit, we knew how weird Jupiter is: a ferocious maelstrom of whirling gases, with an eerie red spot bigger than Earth on its flank and lightning crackling perpetually around it. Poul Anderson brought Jupiter vividly to life for us a generation ago in his classic story "Call Me Joe."

But who ever imagined that the moons of Jupiter would be anything like what they turned out to be?

Voyager showed us the surface of Io: not the expected pockmarking of craters, but a relatively smooth land of brilliant white patches alternating with mottled areas of red and yellow and orange. One of the Voyager scientists, seeing the first close-up pictures, said that Io looked like a pizza. The red areas were found to be sulfur dust. To everyone's amazement, volcanoes were active on this "dead, frozen" moon. There were lakes of what seemed to be lavalike sulfur, and sulfur geysers rising with tremendous force. Huge plumes of sulfur descended from them. Sulfur, it appeared, was the water of Io—great seas of it frozen on top but molten beneath, and bordered by white strips of sulfur-dioxide frost.

Then came Ganymede, which had craters aplenty, one next to another, but also areas of strange parallel grooved valleys, twenty or thirty miles long, as though it had been worked over with a giant rake. Callisto too had craters; one immense impact region had ripples reaching out for two thousand miles, signifying an ancient collision with some inconceivably huge meteorite. And startling Europa, photographed in amazing detail by Voyager 2: almost entirely smooth, a billiard ball in space, all its craters eradicated by, it is supposed, great heat coming from beneath its icy surface.

The two Voyagers flew past Saturn in November 1980 and August 1981, and new wonders emerged. We learned about Saturn's spooky rings, marked by unsuspected spokes and whorls, and held together by "shepherd" moonlets invisible to our best telescopes. We found that what we thought were gaps in the rings were occupied by more rings, little ones, intertwined and sometimes kinky or helical. Voyager showed us a moon of Saturn—Tethys—with a trench forty miles wide running practically from one end to the other, as though the little moon had cracked from within. Its neighbor Enceladus was crater-free, so smooth and white that it reflected light like a mirror. Mimas had a crater one hundred miles across, the scar of a collision four billion years ago that must have nearly blown the moon apart.

Onward then to Uranus, in 1986—new moons discovered, old ones offering new perplexities. Uranus turned out to have rings, similar to Saturn's but with significant differences.

The off-center magnetic field of Uranus provided mysteries also. The larger moons of Uranus showed signs of fierce volcanic activity, odd chevronlike grooves, unanticipated fracture patterns. Umbriel was covered by a paintlike coating of some currently inexplicable smooth substance. Miranda, a piece of improbably tormented terrain, appeared to have been shattered again and again and reassembled by gravitational force. Voyager 2 saw ice cliffs on Miranda higher than the walls of Arizona's Grand Canyon.

And, finally, Neptune in 1989; it turned out to have a ring too, but no shepherd moons, and violent weather with winds of 1500 miles an hour. Its moon Triton was colder than expected, the coldest body in the Solar System at -391 degrees Fahrenheit. Triton was sealed in ice as hard as stone, but volcanic activity was going on somewhere within, for signs of eruption could be seen—volcanoes hurling geysers of ice five miles high!

I was at Pasadena's Jet Propulsion Labs, along with many other science-fiction writers, for most of the Voyager excitement. Hours would pass without event: then some new picture of an alien moon would appear on the screen, and we would stare at it in confusion and wonder, and after a while would come word that the scientists in the back rooms at JPL were just as puzzled as we were. It was an experience to be repeated again and again: mystery upon mystery, startlement upon startlement.

How different it all is in the science-fiction novels. We talk glibly of "Earth-type" planets, so that we and our readers can enjoy the convenience of running around on "alien" worlds without any of the awkwardness of life-support gear. But all these "Earth-type" worlds are no more than little exotic pieces of Earth generalized up to planetary size. Arabia becomes a desert world; Antarctica becomes an ice-world; New York or Los Angeles or New Orleans become the models for "alien" cities. True invention—true strangeness—is a rare commodity indeed.

The Voyager photographs told us that our own little solar system is a place of amazing oddity. The many moons of the outer planets proved to be very little like our own moon and not at all as they were expected to be. In inventing alien planets, should we not try to be at least as resourceful? Think of Hal Clement's famous novel, *Mission of Gravity*—how many of our invented worlds show the fantastic ingenuity of that one, where gravity itself varied in intensity with latitude?

But perhaps it's not possible, not if want anyone to read our books. A little alienness goes a long way, it seems: make the landscape too strange and it steals the show from plot and character. And plot and character—especially plot—are the items that hold reader attention, however much we of the s-f world like to think they come to our work for the intellectual stimulation of confronting the unfamiliar. So the novels pour forth, set on galactic equivalents of Texas or California or New York. All the same, looking at the marvelous Voyager scenes, I feel a need to work harder at creating plausible strangeness. An alien landscape should be *alien*.

Of course, there's one built-in limitation that even the best of us has to struggle under. We're mere mortals, with finite powers of creation. All we can do is reassemble familiar patterns into somewhat less familiar ones, whereas the Universe, in bringing forth its wonders, suffers from no such restriction. I think it was the famous British astronomer Sir James Jeans who once said that the Universe is not only stranger than we imagine, it is stranger than we *can* imagine. If that's true—and I'm afraid that it is—then even the supreme inventive achievements of science fiction are doomed to seem prosaic and mundane when compared with the real wonders waiting for us out there. ✦

Letters

This month the Letters section is again filled with feedback on the first few issues of the new-format version of the magazine. But instead of lumping comments by categories (as we did in the August issue), we're just running a bunch of letters in succession, regardless of subject matter, as a way of easing into the form of presentation that we always planned for the Letters section.

As you'll see, some of these letters are followed by responses; when space permits and when a letter seems to call for a response or a rebuttal, we'll use a few lines for that purpose.

Keep those letters coming, so we can keep filling up at least a couple of pages every month with your reactions and observations. And remember: We'll send a free copy of that isue to anyone who has a letter published in a certain magazine —an incentive designed to get you to write, and an expression of our gratitude for your doing so.

—

I enjoyed the stories (in the June issue) both for their quality and diversity. Being a reader of the magazine prior to its merging with *Fantastic* some years back, I lean towards science fiction rather than fantasy. Even so, I liked the blend of both kinds of speculative fiction in the new version of the magazine as much as I did in the old (particularly when George Scithers and Darrell Schweitzer were involved with the digest).

While I am enthusiastic about the "Looking Forward" section, I would like to see it cut down to two excerpts, or keep it at three, but have it appear every other issue. This way, space can be devoted to an artist's gallery section (tried for a while a couple of years back, but all in black and white), something the new format is particularly suited for.

In any case, the two columns I would definitely like to see are author interviews and media reviews/retrospectives. These sections were the main attraction of the magazine when I started reading it, in addition to the well-rounded fiction.

Lastly, I would like to know if there is any way I can obtain the premiere large-size issue. Also, are any of the last few digests prior to the new format available for back-issue ordering?

Rolf Maurer
Stamford CT

Single copies of the new-format magazine (May, June, July, and August issues) are available by mail order for $5.00 each, which includes a charge for postage and handling; send a check or money order to the Lake Geneva address, and we'll try to fill every order within a couple days of receiving it.

We also have a supply of the last six digest-sized issues (May, July, September, and November 1990, plus January and March 1991). The mail-order price for one issue is $2.75, and each additional issue in the same order costs $2.25.

—

In future issues I would like to see the continuation of book reviews, and your "Looking Forward" section is a refreshing and innovative idea that I find very helpful. I wouldn't be particularly interested in interviews with authors or with their biographies, nor would I care for essays or reviews on movies, videos, or computer games. But whatever you eventually decide, I wish your new format success because I believe it is excellent.

My favorites from the June issue were "The 65 Million Year Sleep," "the button, and what you know," and "Hitmen—See Murderers." The one story I didn't like was "The Hand That Snaps the Lock Shut," but I realize that any particular story can't please everyone.

Irma Laszlo
Parma OH

These first two letters, which arrived here on the same day, are a perfect example of why everyone's feedback is valuable to us: the things Rolf doesn't like, Irma does, and vice versa. The challenge for us, then, is to assemble a magazine that satisfies both of them—which might not be as difficult as it appears at first glance. If your reactions continue to come in at a good clip, maybe we'll have enough input after the next two or three months to start making some changes in the content and presentation of AMAZING® Stories . . . if the consensus seems to be that some changes are warranted. Stay tuned.

—

The magazine has a good feel to it. I like the size, the paper quality, and the illustrations. I am particularly fond of the unjustified margins. I find stories much more readable when they are printed with a ragged right margin.

I do not like the previews of various novels, and I am very tired of book reviews. It just seems like *everybody* is doing book reviews these days.

What I would like to see is more involved author biographies and complete bibliographies (including fanzine publications). I would also like to see some in-depth discussion of some of the stories—not necessarily like critical articles found in scholarly literary journals (ugh!) —but some discussions generated by both the authors and the readers which helps explicate some of the more difficult concepts in some stories.

Paul E. Crumrine
Palm Harbor FL

—

The physical design is terrific. The layout and type are appealing and I especially like the texture and thickness of the covers. These magazines will keep well—which is good, since I intend to save them.

I enjoy seeing so little advertising, though I don't suppose that will last. I'm

also looking forward to a "letters to the editor" section. On the other hand, I hope future issues don't include interviews, biographies (apart from "About the Authors" which is perfect), or articles about science, math, films or computer/video games. AMAZING Stories is for *stories*—that's why I'm buying it.

As for the stories in the second issue, I did not like "Victoria." Those twenty pages could have been much better spent. I found the story unenjoyable, almost boring.

Three or four of the later stories are what make this issue worth keeping. Foremost is "After the War." Maybe it just caught me at the right time, but I don't believe any other SF/fantasy story has ever made me cry before. Also worth keeping are "the button, and what you know" (don't avoid all poetry!), "Hitmen—See Murderers," and possibly "Erasure."

To answer your big question: yes, if I had it to do all again, I would repurchase this issue just on the strength of the best three or four stories. There is certainly room for improvement, but I think you're off to a good start.

Chrys Hearth
Miller Place NY

—

The cover of the June issue was lots of fun. How Gernsback would have enjoyed it. But why isn't the date on the cover? Are you trying to increase the amount of time the issue is staying on the newsstands? If so, why not put the date on the cover?

The "About the Authors" page is dismal. It has an advanced case of the cutes that is repelling. I myself would disperse the comments among the stories themselves, as *F&SF* and *Asimov's* do.

Editor's column: do you have anything to say? For instance, where is the field going? If you don't, then it seems foolish to use two pages just for the sake of a column. Nor do I think that it is a good idea to try to stir up the letters column by "thought provoking" editorials as a policy. This gives the impression that the fiction is just so much filler.

Things you aren't doing: how about an annual readers award? To do this, an annual index would be needed. I think this should be included even if you don't decide to sponsor an annual award.

Greg Koster
Tacoma WA

Greg basically has it right: We don't put a date on the cover in order to make it easier for store owners to keep issues on sale for longer than a month, if they have the shelf space and the desire to do so. Obviously, the stories in a certain issue don't become obsolete as soon as the next issue is published. Especially at this point in the magazine's evolution, when we're attracting a large number of readers who haven't seen it before, we think it's in everyone's best interest to keep the older issues visible for as long as possible.

—

If possible, please do something different with the subscription cards. It's annoying to leave the whole thing in and impossible to get it out. The loose insert used with the old format is good.

There are a couple things from the old format that I hope will be continued or brought back. The first is the reviews of films, both old and new. The second, which would be better with the full-page color format, is "On Exhibit," which showed several pieces of art by a selected artist.

I liked the covers better with the old format, although it isn't a problem with the format itself. It appears as though the increase in cover space has led the artists to try to make the art too busy. I preferred the covers of the old style more; they were focused on one or two items, with the background deemphasized. (Note: The cover of the third issue is much better than the first two.)

Kevin J. Kutter
Richmond MN

On the subscription cards: We fasten that piece of stock to the spine of the magazine, instead of leaving it loose (what's known as a blow-in), because our printer's equipment doesn't have the capability to do a blow-in during the binding process. The edge of the card stock is perforated pretty close to the spine, so you can remove the cards without a lot of muss and fuss . . . but you won't be able to easily get rid of the strip of paper that remains on the other side of the perforation (this seems to be what Kevin means by "the whole thing"). However, that strip of card stock is thin enough so that it shouldn't interfere with your being able to read what's on the pages on either side of it.

—

What do I think of the new Amazing? I don't like it! I like the old "little" format better. I could put it in my brief case and take it to work.

The covers don't relate to the story content. When you show a spacesuited person finding *Amazing* among the garbage of another planet, aren't you saying that *Amazing* readers are litterbugs?

There is a tone to the book reviewers that suggests to me that they don't like science fiction, and would rather be doing something else.

Even the stories suddenly seem to be off-beam. I can't quite define it, bit it's there. I've been reading the "little" sf mags since about 1955, so I speak from experience. Maybe the slick format is playing a number on my subconscious; I don't know. A year ago, I thought *Amazing* was fine, but now I doubt I'll renew.

Jeff Imig
Normal IL

—

Congratulations on a great new format from a long time reader. My first issue of *Amazing* was December 1959 and I became a subscriber in 1960. I've kept up the subscription except for the two periods when the magazine went totally reprint and I've collected a fair number of back issues. There can be no argument that *Amazing* has never looked better than it has the past two issues.

The fiction that I've read is of good quality. One special kudo: thanks for publishing Paul Di Filippo. His "Kid Charlemagne" was one of the best stories published in *Amazing* during the 1980s and he will be an important writer in the 90s.

One puzzlement in the May issue: Robert Silverberg gives a history of the magazine in his column but skips over the 10-year reign of Ted White. Some of the finest fiction in the history of the magazine was published during his years. But White's contribution was more than excellent fiction. He was the most successful editor in *Amazing*'s long history in giving the magazine a personality. From the opening editorial through every story introduction, to the choice of features and stories to the answers to the letters (and participation in lively squabbles) there was a distinctive voice to the magazine.

A final suggestion or two: for features I always greatly enjoyed articles on science fiction itself. Cele Goldsmith published many pioneering historical articles by Sam Moskowitz. Ted White (in sister publication *Fantastic*) published a series by Alexei and Cory Panshin. I would recommend this avenue over the science article route.

My very best wishes to a magazine I've read most of my life.

Richard A. Moore
Alexandria VA

DEATH LINK

Gene DeWeese
and
L. A. Taylor

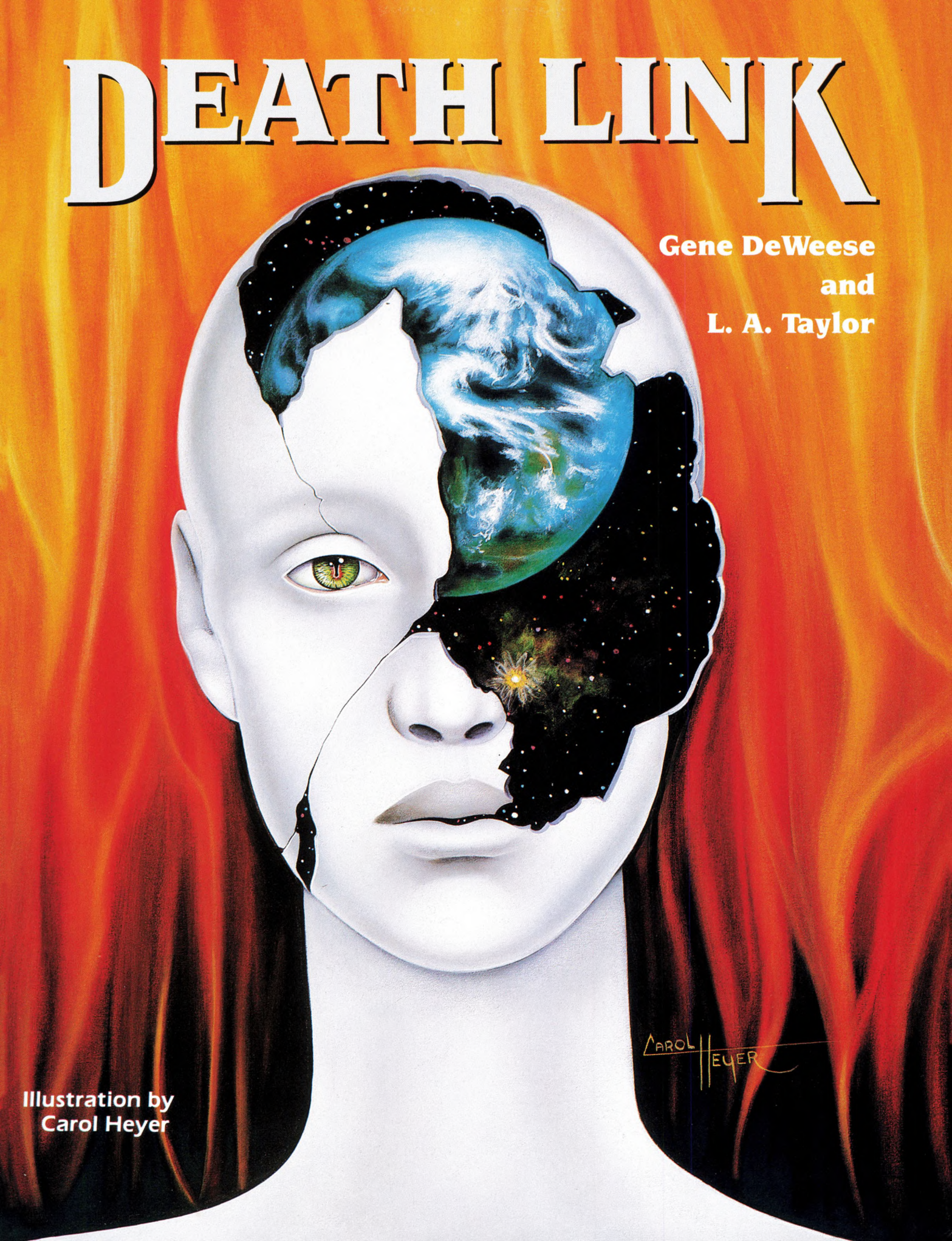

Illustration by
Carol Heyer

In the middle of discussing the best way to celebrate the twentieth anniversary of Project First Contact's success, Jonathon Katril felt his grandmother die.

He glimpsed startled concern on the project director's blocky face in the instant before the image of her bedroom swept over him with the force of a full-range holosim, replacing the clean, utilitarian lines of the office around him. The pain that had squeezed the last bright fragment of life from his grandmother's failing heart twisted at his own chest, replaced a moment later with the aura of contentment and affection that had always seemed to surround her, since Katril's first visit to her as a child. The small, purposely old-fashioned house in the little Indiana town where his mother had been born was a haven he'd yearned toward often as the years—well over forty of them now—had drifted past.

"Jonathon?"

All gone, he thought. All of that gone.

"Jonathon?"

Director Arlen had left his seat and crouched beside him, looking into his face.

"Sorry." Katril tried to push aside the images still shimmering around him. The sunlit room wavered. "It's Jessie, Walt. My grandmother? I've told you about her—" His throat tightened.

Arlen stood up. "She's dead?"

Katril nodded, the motion making the other, now fading reality shift unsettlingly. "Yes. I—" He tried to think of something sensible to say. "I'll have to find out when the Remembering is. Day after tomorrow, most likely. If I—?"

Arlen sighed faintly as he returned to his bare desk and sat down behind it. "Of course, you'll go. No question."

"I'll talk to her brother while I'm there," Katril said. "William. He always has something to say about the Project. Maybe he'll have some ideas for the celebration."

The Director smiled briefly. "That's fine, Jonathon. You don't have to justify taking a few days off for your grandmother's Remembering." He sobered. "Still, if her brother does have some ideas . . . "

The discussion limped on. Two decades ago, the supersensitive antennas arrayed on Lunar Farside had first picked up the electromagnetic signals that established the existence of the first—and so far only—advanced technology on a world other than earth. What was it like, Katril wondered, for the technician who went yawning into the laboratory to look over the night's records, when he saw the faint tracings of the as yet undeciphered signal those other people had sent across so many trillions of kilometers? He imagined the man's hair rising, the cool rush of surprise down his spine, followed by a rush of elation. The man had reported clearly enough, but he'd been all but incoherent by the time the newsmen got to him, Katril remembered that.

"Sorensen will have to have a part," he said.

"Soren—oh, the technician?" Arlen frowned, scribbling the name. "Certainly. I wonder where he is these days? Shouldn't be hard to find."

"Some of the theorists—"

Arlen grimaced. "I hope we can keep the nuts out."

Katril set his teeth. The director was not one of those who believed the signals had come because the changes wrought by the Time of Images had made mankind fit to receive them. Arlen saw the Awakening, so called by the believers, the "theorists," as simply the spontaneous breaking down of the civilization-imposed barriers that had for millennia kept individual minds isolated from each other and from the world around them. To him, born into a world already Awakened, it was nothing more than the restoration of the kind of empathic links that many lower animals had never lost, and it was only natural that the sudden, almost universal return of this phenomenon should put an equally sudden end to most of the problems—the lies, the hates, the hurt feelings, the misunderstandings—that had been caused by the isolation in the first place. To him, the significance attached by the believers to the Project's subsequent success was nothing more than mystical nonsense.

"You think we need them?" Arlen looked up, eyebrows raised, sensing Katril's discomfort.

"They do have something to say about the Project," Katril said slowly, "and we should probably include as many points of view as possible in the celebration, so no one will feel left out."

Arlen tapped his teeth with the end of his scribbler. "We'll think about it," he said.

Katril felt his seatmate on the overland glancing at him curiously. Not feeling up to light conversation, he buried his nose in the papers he had brought to study on his way to Jessie's Remembering.

"You seem nostalgic," the woman said after awhile. "Are you going to a Remembering?"

She'd felt his sorrow: at times, even the most ordinary sensitivity could be inconvenient, Jonathon thought. He glanced at her. She seemed pleasant enough, plump and middle-aged. He nodded. "My grandmother."

"I'm sorry," the woman said.

"She lived well."

"Her memory stays," his seatmate commented.

"Yes." Katril went back to his papers. After a moment her light shock told him how rude he had been. "Thank you," he added, with a smile to take the edge off his bad manners.

The death link with his grandmother had been intense in him, but even stronger, he was sure, in his mother and her uncle. His seatmate was right: Jessie would live, in a sense, for as long as anyone who had known her lived. She had lived well, and died well, and her Remembering would be an event to treasure.

"Jonathon!" His mother, grey-haired herself, her blue-green eyes not as bright as they once had been, hugged him as he set down his totebag in the front hall of Jessie's house. "I was beginning to think you wouldn't get here."

"You know I wouldn't miss Jessie's Remembering," he chided softly, returning the hug. "Did anyone think to tell Uncle Arnold?"

"Arnold? Oh, dear!" His mother turned to the buzzing group in the living room. "Did anyone call Arnold?" she asked at large.

"I called as soon as I felt her go. He's coming." Arnold's son Stephen, who had developed a bulge around the waist since Katril had last seen him, stood up to offer a hand. Katril wrung the hand and was pounded on the back. Stephen had felt the death link, though his father was one of those lonely few who, for no reason anyone knew, were still unable to either touch or be touched. Other cousins—Thelma, Claire, Jason—got up to greet Jonathon.

By afternoon, everyone had arrived: aunts, uncles, cousins, an assortment of children some of whom Katril had trouble even assigning to a given parent, some good friends, and of course Will, who technically speaking had not arrived, since he had lived with his sister for several years. At a common urge, more than a signal, they all moved into the back yard.

Like all Rememberings, this was more a nostalgic picnic than anything else. The table was laden with snacks and juices, the air filled with Jessie's smiling presence—or the memory of her presence, which came to the same thing. During one of the soft-edged silences that occasionally settled over the group—Claire had just been talking about the dancing lessons Jessie had given her nearly three decades ago—Will leaned back, surveyed the group, and chuckled.

"You know what?" he said, shaking his white head. "We look like a regular Norman Rockwell painting, the bunch of us."

"Who's Norman Rockwell?" one of the children asked, saving Katril the embarrassment of having to ask for himself.

"An artist. An illustrator, I should say. A hundred and fifty years ago or so, he was real popular. Dead before Jessie and I were born, of course, but his stuff was still popular in the nineties, when we were growing up. Wholesome, they used to call it."

Most of the adults were now eyeing Will curiously as he leaned back in the shade of the evergreen palm Katril remembered helping to plant, back in grade school. "He painted things the way people wished they were, not the way they really were. At least, not the way they were back then." The old man chuckled again. "Last thing anyone would have thought of then, but maybe he was just ahead of his time."

"How so, Will?" Uncle Arnold asked.

Will frowned. When he spoke, a faint touch of bitterness edged the first few words. "Just that old Rockwell lived before the Time of Images, but the stuff he painted showed what life's been like since. Not the way people dress or the kind of places most of us live in now, but the spirit." He shook his head. "He got that down pat, all right. Must have been a real trick for somebody living back then. I remember thinking the man must've been one of two things, a naive idiot or a total cynic who just cranked out what people wanted to buy. Playing on hope."

Playing on hope? Katril thought. What could that mean? Someone else asked. Will and the few others old enough to remember before the Time of Images traded glances and laughed.

"Go look in the museums." Will sipped at his lemonade. "Read the old books. They'll tell you how it was. Everyone lied, even when they didn't mean to, so no one could tell if they were hearing the truth or not. Even folks married for years lied to each other, with the best of intentions. I guess that's why they had to sign papers and make promises just to live together. Even when people *did* tell the truth, like as not nobody believed them. Maybe that was worse."

Katril looked at the faces of his family. Every eye but his own was focused on his great-uncle, a man nearly a century old. The faces were smooth with bewilderment. Will glanced around, met Katril's eye, and smiled crookedly.

"Even countries," Will went on. "It was the same with countries. Why do you think they pointed all those missiles at each other? They weren't crazy, like you young folks think. Just scared. A miracle the whole world didn't just go up in smoke, 'stead of just getting warmer."

A few of the younger relatives muttered to each other, sounding distressed.

"Ah, don't worry," Will said affectionately. "Nothing like that can happen now, not since the Images."

Katril remembered riding his bike, pedaling like mad, downhill—senseless, but he'd only been ten years old. Just as he hit level ground a neighbor's puppy had run out in front of him. He could still feel the pressure of the brakes as he squeezed with all his strength, still feel the bump as the front wheel went right over the puppy's neck.

He shuddered. The floppy-eared beagle had been killed instantly. No one had seen him hit it. No one had heard the cut-off yelp. He could have ridden away. Who would have known? For one moment, he'd even considered leaving the soft little body for someone else to find.

One fidgeting moment. Guilt had stopped him before he could even stand on the pedal to start off. Yes, telling the neighbor what he'd done had been painful, but it had been nothing compared to the anguish of that moment, when it seemed as if the dog's pain and the owner's grief had turned back on him and multiplied a thousandfold.

No, nobody—Uncle Arnold, maybe, but people like him were fortunately few—no normal person could have ridden away on that bike. Not since the Time of Images. Even here, in the calm, affectionate aura that lingered after his grandmother, Katril could feel the surprise, the puzzlement, of those around him. Not what they thought. What they felt. Real flesh-and-blood people, feeling things, knowing what the next man felt, not cardboard cutouts like Uncle Arnold. Katril glanced sideways at his uncle. Suppose everybody were like him? That's what Will was talking about, wasn't it? What a world full of Uncle Arnolds had been like?

While he'd been musing, someone had asked Will a question.

"Oh, yes, like it was yesterday," the old man said. "I was sixteen, Jess was seventeen. We didn't get along that well with our folks—ran around with kids they didn't approve of." Some of the teenagers murmured in recognition.

Will grinned. "Oh, you kids think you know just what I'm talking about, but you don't. Your folks don't have to worry whether you'll kill yourselves with drugs, or get pregnant or sick or start stealing out of your neighbor's houses, and them never the wiser until it's too late. They might not *like* your friends, but they trust you, and you trust them. I know it sounds crazy, but for Jess and me it wasn't that way." Now some of the elderly relatives were nodding agreement.

"Then the Images came." He shuddered. "Fire. Whole cities burning. And what cities! So clean, so beautiful—you can't imagine! For a few minutes one night, or day, the whole of the human race saw the same things, felt the same heat. We used to have legends of purification by fire. The Images were the real thing—" Will broke off, eyes clenched shut, shaking his head. "And we *were* purified; something inside us was released, like an old crust of deceit and treachery got burned away . . . though nothing really burned . . . so hard to describe."

Will stopped and looked at all the faces turned toward him. "Sorry," he said, lowering his head. "I guess I still get carried away, thinking about what was and what is." He made a little pleading gesture with both hands. "You can't imagine how *easy* it was to be a hypocrite in those days. Politicians and preachers and business leaders, they all lied. How was anybody supposed to make a rational life?" He sighed heavily. "I lived sixteen years that way and seventy-nine this way, and believe me, this way is better."

Everyone stirred. By unspoken consent, the group broke into several smaller clusters. Katril got into a conversation with his young cousin Michael, a fellow astronomer working now in Australia.

He shrugged in answer to Michael's question about what he thought of the new sunspot studies. "Haven't been following them, to tell you the truth," he said. "The Project pretty well ties up my time."

"How's that going?" Michael asked. "Any progress on the translations?"

Jonathon made a so-so gesture with one hand. "No breakthroughs, or you'd have heard. The best brains in the world are on the problem—all we need now is a little luck, or an inspired guess." Michael grinned in agreement. "Of course," Jonathon added, "when our message gets to them, they may have as much trouble with it as we've had with theirs, obvious as we think we've made it. Can't help that, though. Tell me about the sunspots—what's up?"

"Well, you know the cycle has been shortening over the last century," his cousin said. "And lately the peaks have been getting more intense. The one coming up should be the strongest yet. . . ."

Shop talk. Grandmother Jessie would have approved.

The anniversary plans for the Project continued developing over the next few months. Fairly early, Director Arlen agreed to a new history of the Project—one of Will's suggestions—to be published in viewdisk on the anniversary of the first signal reception. Katril had taken on the planning of the disk, with the help of a professional historian. Katril's impulse was to put in every detail, but clearly that wasn't possible: Project First Contact had been started nearly sixty years ago, long before the first signals were received, an outgrowth of the SETI projects of the end of the previous century. He spent more time than he liked rooting old pictures out of the Project files, trying to track down the experts who had worked on one aspect or another of the Project, translating scientific shorthand into something a layman could understand, and discussing what should be emphasized and what was less important. All the while, plans for the anniversary ceremonies were going forward.

A huge star map was being laid out in the piazza in front of the Institute for Extraterrestrial Communication, with stainless steel pegs in black concrete to represent each star, except one: the one from which they believed the signals had come would be a bright brass sunburst in the middle of the piazza, and around that bright sunburst the ceremonies would be centered. Katril was responsible for the accuracy of the map, as well. It reminded him of a project he'd had when he was thirteen or fourteen, trying to paste small luminous stars to the ceiling of his bedroom to represent the heavens. He never had managed to get all the stars in the right places. The piazza filled him with anxiety, which the contractor tried daily to allay.

On his knees, laying out a grid for the placement of studs in a new section of concrete, Katril felt a sudden wave of despair so intense it was several moments before he realized it wasn't his own. Looking up, he saw Walt Arlen running toward him. Apprehensive, he hauled himself to his feet.

"What is it?" he asked, when the Director stopped and said nothing.

Arlen shut his eyes.

"Walt?" A death, Jonathon thought. Someone's died.

The director opened his eyes and stared toward the center of the piazza, where the brass star had been installed a few days before. He licked his lips. "It's gone nova," he said hoarsely. "The star has gone nova."

"Star? What star? Not—"

Arlen nodded. For an instant Katril had no feeling, as if his mind and body had gone numb, overwhelmed by the magnitude of Arlen's words. "But it couldn't! All the theories about novas—"

"Are only theories! This is fact! Our star—" Arlen shook his head, almost sobbing. "I'm telling you, it exploded! They're all dead!"

For the first time in Katril's life a scream formed in his throat. With a desperate swallow, he trapped it there. Across the piazza, all the workmen had stopped and were looking toward him.

Katril glanced down at the chart he still held. The image of the brass sunburst filled his mind. *He* had chosen that symbol. *He* had—

No. That was senseless. Why feel guilty? He hadn't caused the nova. The nova had happened years ago, long before he was even born.

Katril felt his hand go under Director Arlen's arm to urge him toward the entrance of the Institute. Fifteen

years of messages, he thought, looking over his shoulder at the contractor now irresolutely walking his way. He waved the man off.

Fifteen years of messages, creeping out from Earth at the speed of light, toward a world already dead. Dead before the first simple signals whose reception he'd just spent half a year planning to commemorate had shown up on record tape. Dead before its existence had first been confirmed by thousands of hours of observations and at least as many hours of computer time. Dead before the Institute was founded, dead all the while humanity's own messages were being planned, formed and sent.

The Project had been senseless. No, meaningless. All the labor, all that hope—

Katril swallowed to ease the tightness in his throat. "Can it be kept a secret until after the celebration?" he wondered aloud, somehow already standing in front of a closed elevator door with Arlen beside him. Where was he going? Oh, up to his office.

"How?"

Katril shrugged.

"We'll have to plan how to break the news," Arlen said, seeming to be back on his feet. "I'll ask the observatories to say nothing for the time being, but tomorrow or by the next day we'll probably be able to see the nova with the naked eye." He shook his head. "Even if we *could* keep it secret . . ."

Katril was silent, recalling his grandmother's Remembering, as he still did several times a week. What if he were like Uncle Arnold, and no one had told him Jessie had died, and he just kept writing letters to her, and still nobody told him? He shuddered. Uncle Arnold wasn't evil, just blocked. He would feel pain, feel anger as strong as anyone's, the moment he learned the truth. Just as the rest of humanity would feel pain when they learned of the nova—and anger, if they learned that someone had tried to keep the truth from them, to hide the fact that the bright new light was the one star whose people they had listened to for so long. "You're right, of course," he said finally.

"We'll have to change our plans," Arlen said. "But what will we do? That history—it's already started manufacture. The ceremonies—they'll have to be rewritten—what on earth can we say?"

"We'll have a worldwide Remembering," Katril said firmly. "That's the only possible plan. We'll announce it with the news of the nova—set a time. . . ."

He left the director at his office and went into his own. That brass star. Katril pressed his mouth shut against a sob. Nova.

Something had happened deep within the star's core, days before the destruction, or weeks or millennia. Had there been any warning to the beings on the planet that had circled it so trustingly? With a shiver, Katril remembered his conversation with his cousin six months before. Even now, with all their rapid progress, no one fully understood the interior workings of Earth's own sun, let alone those billions of others. Look at Michael's puzzlement over the changes in the sunspot cycle. No one even knew, definitely, how the fierce heat from a star's center reached the surface. And the neutrino flux—there were dozens of theories to explain why, except for a three-year spurt thirty years earlier, it was below the predicted level by more than an order of magnitude, but not one of them could be stated as fact.

What about that neutrino spurt? He didn't want to think about it.

As for that other star, nearly eighty light-years away . . .

Will's soft words at the Remembering sprang at him. *Sixteen years the old way,* the old man had said. *And seventy-nine this way.*

The numbers clicked into place in Katril's astronomer's mind, sending it reeling: numbers that would surely click into place in Michael's mind, in the director's, in the mind of virtually everyone who heard them.

Walt Arlen opened the office door. "What?" he said, not a question.

Katril blinked at him.

"You think I can't feel you? You're like a . . . a . . . I don't know what, a jitter—"

"Sit down." Katril turned to his computer and punched up the data he thought he had remembered. Yes. "Seventy-nine point six nine," he said. "What does that mean to you?"

"The distance to"—Arlen broke off and took a deep breath—"to the nova."

"In light-*years*, Walt! With a possible error of one-hundredth of one percent," Katril said, entering more numbers into the terminal and getting the answer he had expected. "The true value is seventy-nine point six eight three."

"What?" Arlen dropped into a chair. "What are you talking about?"

"You don't see the connection?"

Arlen stared. "No. No, I don't."

Katril sighed heavily. "I can't blame you, I guess. I only saw it now because I was thinking about the Remembering for my grandmother. But you would have, sooner or later, and so would almost everyone." He pulled in a breath and went on.

"The Time of the Images, one short moment experienced everywhere on Earth, *everywhere*, was exactly seventy-nine point six eight three years ago today. And this morning the light from the nova reached us."

Arlen's eyes widened. The color drained from his face. "Heat and flame," he whispered. "A white light bathing everything, so bright it hurt beyond endurance. Despair. Cities dying in firestorms. Yes."

Katril nodded. "A death link. The death link of an entire world, transmitted instantaneously, just as the death link of a single person is transmitted instantaneously. So strong that it touched something in *us*, a completely different race on a planet trillions and trillions of kilometers away. So strong it jarred something loose in our minds, something we'd encrusted with deception for as long as people can remember." An echo of his great uncle: everyone lied, Will had said, without giving it so much as a second thought. "It *awakened* us. *That* is why everything changed then. *That* is why we are suddenly able to

trust, suddenly able to live with each other, why we are suddenly able to find a way to stop destroying this world."

"They saved us." Arlen's voice was hollow as he slumped into a chair. "The believers were right all along, only they had it backwards. We didn't receive the signals because we were Awakened. We were Awakened because there was a world out there to send the signals —because that world died. For us."

Katril could only nod silently. Arlen's distress was like a beacon to Katril's mind.

"We have to keep this to ourselves!" The director burst out. "We have to! Knowing that a whole world died is bad enough! But to be told that its death—the deaths of billions of intelligent beings—is the only reason *we* are still alive . . . I don't think the human race could take it. I don't think *I* can take it. How can we burden the world with this?"

Katril shook his head. The sight of the beagle puppy, surprised in death, came back to him. "Alone, no one could," he said. "That's why we *have* to announce it. Because others will surely think of the same connection. Holding it to ourselves would be slipping back into the old ways, before the Time of—before that world died. It's far too late for that."

Arlen hunched lower in his chair, his anxiety still jangling between them. He nodded to himself. Probably thinking not only of that world's death but of the death of the Project, his life's work, thinking how it would now be dismantled, at least scaled down while they waited, helplessly, for another signal to appear. Thinking, as Katril himself had been thinking, how futile their efforts had been.

In the silence, Katril looked out at the sunny piazza beyond his window, at the brass sunburst at its center. *Did they know their world was about to end?* he wondered darkly. Could that even be why the signals were sent when they were, only decades before the end? A farewell? A warning? Or something more? Surely they could not have guessed what their deaths would achieve on a world they had never seen, probably didn't even know existed. And yet, if they themselves had been Awakened . . .

Dear God! His thoughts froze on the brink of a precipice. He tried to pull back, but he could not. He could not unthink the thought that had come so naturally, so easily.

If those who had died to Awaken us had themselves been Awakened, who had died to Awaken them?

How far back did it go? Through how many cindered worlds had the message passed? How many links made up this chain of death?

Arlen looked up, his body stiffening as this new turmoil in Katril's mind overwhelmed the director's own anxiety.

"Jonathon, what—"

"They weren't the first," Katril whispered numbly.

The color drained from Arlen's face. "No! That's insane! You can't know—"

But he did. Against all logic, he knew. And *they* had known. It was no coincidence that the messages had begun barely twenty years before the end. And now Earth would know.

Katril became aware of his palms pressed together, of sweat prickling between them. *How much time do we have?* he wondered. How soon would it be humanity's turn to forge the next link, to reach across the vast silence of space to touch yet another race?

Katril stood up, pulled in a deep, calming breath. What time they had, he vowed, they would use, and use fully. There was a chance—at least a chance—that theirs would be a different kind of link. Humanity, knowing what it had been given by those distant billions in the instant of their death, might be able to do what they had not: transmute that chain of death into a chain of life, Awaken another world without first dying itself. With science —with the entire world—free of its infighting, free to work as it had never worked before, with the Project itself leading the way, it was possible.

It had to be possible.

As if in answer, the sun, the inconstant sun, glinted off a distant plane, sending a shard of light raking across his eyes: a challenge.

"Come on, Walt," he said, offering the still-shaken director his hand and tugging him to his feet. "We have a busy few decades ahead of us." ✹

The Storming Bone

Ian McDowell

Illustration by Peter Botsis

This is the story of how I killed my mother's husband and how she helped me do it, after she was dead.

Notice I said "mother's husband" and not "father." My real da, and uncle, too, to his pious shame, is Arthur Pendragon, High King of all the Brits and higher holy hypocrite. He only figures in this story by his absence; the tale of him and me's not done yet, and won't be, I fear, until we're both provender for worms.

No, I speak of Lot Mac Conag, King of the Orkneys and thwarted would-be king of more than that, the father of my brother and lord of the house where I was born. I've a terrible memory for faces, but his I'll carry to the grave. I've only to shut my eyes to again see that high, pale brow, pursed mouth, long ascetic nose and perpetually startled

eyes, all giving him a look of sanctimonious hauteur mingled with righteous indignation, like a prelate who's just been buggered by a Jute.

Mother's face lurks in that darkness, too, her Breton features flat and swarthy as any Pict's, all wide cheekbones and black commanding eyes. If I can't remember a time when Lot was young, Queen Morgawse never seemed to get older than twenty. But then, you expect that in a sorceress. And, if her husband was craftier than he appeared, she was more unstable. Born of an Armorican princess and unwanted by her father (Uther cast aside offspring like old shoes), she'd been raised in the proper Latin household of her uncle, Ambrosius Aurelanius. The two strains, Roman and Breton, did not mix well in her.

Believe me, I should know; I suffered the discomfort of her attempts to raise me in the Quadrium et Trivium *and* the old ways of earth and fire and blood. Poor Morgawse should have been either a Roman matron or a Druid queen, not the wife of a petty island warlord with thwarted designs upon her father's throne.

I've called Lot craftier than he looked, a weasel-sly man with a fine eye for the main chance, but such craft does not always pay off. Uther, my maternal and paternal grandfather, had been the first Brit High King since the Romans came, and Lot's marriage to my mother should have made Orkney's sour lord the next in that royal line. So much for high hopes; a man everyone thought a common soldier proved to be another of Uther's forgotten bastards. When Arthur turned up to catch the falling crown, all of Lot's royal ambitions proved worth less than a crofter's fart.

That draught would have been bitter enough, but the very man who'd so thwarted Lot, his wife's brother, also turned out to be the incestuous father of Orkney's youngest son. My da, I mean. Our family history does tend to sound like something out of a complicated bawdy joke, doesn't it?

Enough preamble; direct narrative's the thing. I'll begin *in media res,* with wind and rain and music from a bone.

I stared out past the tower's crenelated edge, at the muddy courtyard and crumbling curtain wall, the squat hump of bare earth and rock that rose, then sloped down to the steeper slope of the cliff, and beyond that, the sea, all grey-green swells rolling up into ivory streaks of foam. There were no clouds in the iron sky, rusting now at its lower border, where the sun was corroding onto the waves. No wind, either.

I lifted the flute to my lips. It was not very impressive, just a hollow cylinder with two holes drilled near one end and runes scrawled across its lacquered surface. Actually, they only looked scrawled; I'd copied them very carefully from an old black stone in Mother's sanctum.

The bone the flute had been carved from was not immediately identifiable as human, but it was; a radius, to be precise. Two days before, it had been safely sheathed in the fat right arm of Wilf, a household slave who'd pilfered the larder once too often. It had taken me a long time to slice and boil and scrape the fleshy matter from his severed forearm, then whittle it down into its present shape.

Now, to see if it worked. I put it to my lips and blew, changing the sound by covering and uncovering the holes and worming my tongue into the hollow where marrow used to be. The notes came clear and muffled, dull and sharp, as I learned to shape them.

No wind started yet, but the stillness felt strained and transient, like a man holding his breath. I blew three sharp notes and three soft ones. They hung in the air, trilling echoes spreading out like ripples in a pool. Out past the sloughing waves, a spot appeared on the horizon, an ink drop in a puddle of spilled wine. It spread through the ruddy smear of the sunset, darkening the stain.

A mottled tern came wheeling up over the lee, coasting on the sudden gust that broke like a wave around the cliff's sheer face. Then I felt it too, gentler at my higher elevation, like a woman running her fingers through my hair. Salt stung my eyes and I could smell all the miles of ocean that lay between me and the churning blackness where the sea-rim met the sky.

"Careful," said Queen Morgawse as she joined me at the parapet's worn edge, the breeze pressing her red linen gown against her tall slim body and catching her unbound hair, spreading it like black wings around the olive triangle of her face. She reached out and plucked the bone flute from my hand. "A wrong note might summon more storm and sea than you'd easily put down again. Carelessness could make another Atlantis of your homeland."

Some homeland, I thought, turning towards the tower's leeward wide and looking out across the peaty hills. Her patronizing tone irritated me; I wasn't a child, to be scolded against burning myself on the oven. "Jesus, Mother," I said in a voice of bruised innocence. "I'm not such a fool as that."

"Don't swear by the carpenter, Mordred. You're no Christian yet, I hope."

I was in no mood to argue theology. "Throwing his name about doesn't mean I worship him." Sitting on the crenel, I dangled my feet in empty air. "I don't worship much of anything, really. Except you and King Lot, of course."

"Don't bait me," she snapped, annoyed for once by my guying flattery. "You hated Lot even when you thought he was your father."

For no good reason, this was getting nasty. Good; I hadn't been in the mood for a magic lesson, anyway. "I loved him as much as you ever did," I said sweetly.

I might have regretted that remark if she hadn't pretended to ignore it. "You were pleased to worship something once, you know," she continued lightly. "It's a fine thing you weren't playing with storms then; when your worship stopped, you'd have gladly drowned all Orkney like a bag of unwanted kittens."

With her customary skill at salting old wounds, she was referring to the turbulent day when Arthur discovered who he and I were, only to recoil from that knowl-

edge and from me. Not that I'd ever loved him as much as she liked to claim.

"Playing, is it?" I said, drumming my heels against the tower face. "I'm only practicing what you taught me. And what you're talking about is over and done with, isn't it, so why don't you just bloody well leave off?"

Not looking at her, I wasn't conscious of the change until she walked up behind me and gently gripped my shoulders, then bent to kiss the nape of my neck. Not this again, I thought, my neck hairs bristling. Now that I was all grown up, I reminded her too much of the one man she'd wanted and couldn't have, at least not more than once.

"Yes," she said, in the husky, yearning voice she was too wont to use on me these days. "It's long past. You're a man, now, and can be trusted with the art. And with much else, besides."

On the horizon, the storm I'd summoned was breaking up, the black clouds dissipating without my music to sustain them. Mother's fingers stroked the back of my neck. Even if I hadn't been pissed at the mention of Arthur, I'd still have sought refuge in the continued fight.

"Oh, fine," I snapped, slipping from the crenel, shaking off her insistent hands, and stalking to the opposite parapet, to look again at the clean sea and feel its salt upon my face. "Toss me another bone; that one's gnawed clean. Magic's a game for women and disillusioned clerics. I can do well enough without it."

She seized me by the upper arm and turned me around with that damnable peasant strength of hers, waving the bone flute so close to my face I thought she'd rap my nose with it. "It's a game that can shape the world. Would you cast *that* aside?"

"Yes," I replied, emphasizing my point by taking the bone from her hand and tossing it over the tower's edge. "As readily as that. Soldiers shape the world, mother. Poets and rhetoricians, too, sometimes. Alexander, Aristotle, Homer—they did well enough without your carrion music."

She briefly smiled—I think she was pleased that I could still throw her precious classicism back at her. Then came the stern, matronly look that sat so uneasily upon her earthy Breton face. "This is no age for rhetoricians or for poets; you know that. Soldiers, yes. The age breeds them the way dung breeds flies. Go to my brother and be one, then. He'd not refuse your service, no matter his protested shame."

She turned away, her anger mounting. "Right, then. Forget my 'toys'; leave me to this cold island and its colder lord. Gawain is Arthur's man already, never coming home except to collect the royal taxes. Now that he's got them, he'll be leaving again, tomorrow or the day after. Go back with him. Have your fine squadron of a hundred horse and forget about me. I'll languish here, a Queen of peat and driftwood, while my sons chop up Saxons for pious Arthur and his carpenter god. Go on with you, then. I don't care."

My guts felt all twisted up, and once again I almost hated her for having such a tight grip on my feelings, and hated myself for allowing her to tear them this way. I started to accuse her of being maudlin, but my hand was reaching out, acting on its own, and she was hugging me, her arms locked tighter around my ribs than those of a drowning sailor clutching a floating spar. I steadied myself against her fierce, unexpected sobs and wondered what to say.

"She's getting worse," I said as I cut low at Gawain's legs, a trick I'd learned from the commander of Lot's Jutland mercenaries. He parried with difficulty, and the shock ran up my lead-weighted wooden practice sword. "Her moods vary by the minute," I continued when I'd caught my breath. "She sobs at trifles now."

Gawain spat in the cold dust of the inner courtyard and leaned on his oaken blade. He looked up at mother's slab-sided tower, almost as if he expected her to be watching from the roof. "Losing you isn't a trifle, boyo, and that's what she's scared of. Ignore her tears and get on with your life. It's all you can do."

Too tired to have another go at him, I dropped my sword and sat on the cold ground. "I wish I could. She changes so bloody fast—haughty one minute, weepy the next. I spend half my time wanting to put the boot to her, half feeling like a total shit for wanting to. We're not getting on at all."

I didn't tell him of how she sometimes touched me, or worse, of the feelings stirred in me by that touch. Despite his family background, Gawain was no one to understand how love gets twisted up.

My burly half-brother pulled off his padded leather helmet and squatted beside me, shaking coppery bangs out of his deceptively mild brown eyes. There were lines around those eyes, I noticed. That shouldn't have been surprising, for I had just turned eighteen and Gawain was a decade and a half older than me, making him almost Arthur's age. Still, it was a shock to realize that my growing up meant my brother was getting old.

"It's not her that's the problem," he said, drawing idly in the dirt with the point of his wooden sword. "It's you. You need to leave this place. Come back to Camelot with me."

I laughed. "What a thought; Arthur welcoming me with open arms."

"Maybe not, but he'd have you. He's not what he was. It's the prospect of his wedding, I think. He's been a happy man since he met her."

I tried to imagine what sort of woman Arthur might marry. A pious little would-be nun, maybe, considering his obsession with expunging his past sins. "Oh, yes, marriage is a balm, isn't it? Think of Mother and King Lot."

Gawain rested his chin upon his dusty knees. "That's different. There was never any love there."

True enough. Not for the first time, I tried to picture Morgawse and Lot in bed together, performing the act they must have performed at least once, only to recoil from the thought. "I hate him, you know."

Gawain looked at me hard. "Arthur?"

"No. There's nothing left for him. Lot. I hate the shriveled old turd. When I was a boy, I often wanted him dead. I'm sorry he's your father."

Gawain stood up. "Let's not talk family here." Shrugging off his padded leather gambeson, he clapped for a serf, who came trotting up with clean, white surtunics for us both. A red dragon wriggled across the front of Gawain's, the symbol of Arthur's united Britain. "Fetch horses," he commanded.

Later, we rode the broken strand beyond the lee, where our hooded otter-fur cloaks barely protected us from the salt wind that knifed in across the breakers. Above us, the sheer black palisades of the cliff tumbled upwards into a grey sky, all scudding pale cloud and paler, wheeling birds. Pulling ahead, I reined my dappled mare towards the base of the cliff, where a stack of storm-chiseled basalt was undergoing the centuries-long process of becoming a separate pinnacle of rock. A hundred feet above us, it was still attached to the bluff, but here, at sea level, there was a gap of at least a dozen yards between it and the cliff's face, forming a natural arch. This had been our secret place when we were boys.

"Don't hate Father," Gawain said as he joined me in the damp shade. "He's not a bad man, just full of disappointment."

"Full of more than that, I think," I said, relaxing in the saddle and removing my hood, for its inwardly turned fur was making my ears itch. "You don't live with the man."

"And you don't have to," he said, slipping fluidly from the saddle and standing beside his roan gelding, one hand on the uneasy horse's flank while the other caressed the huge column of glistening rock. "That doesn't change what I said. Orkney's to blame, not him. These islands were fine enough for our pirate ancestors, kicked out of Ireland for robbing their neighbors instead of the Brits, but they're no place to build a kingdom. Our cattle die and more and more of our folk slip off to the mainland each year. By the time I'm into my patrimony, I'll be lord of a few hardy crofters and maybe a dozen sheep. Father had his chance for more, once, and lost it. Now Orkney dwindles, and him with it. It's hard to be a good man when everything is slipping away."

"Including your son," I said with some of the same acid I'd used in arguing with Mother.

"I saw an out, and took it. You can, too. What's the word—pragmatist? Be a pragmatist. It's the only way to live." There may have been a tinge of sorrow in his voice.

I didn't dismount, though my legs needed stretching. "Mother never had that choice."

Gawain looked at me, his face gone hard. "She made all her choices a long time ago. Now she's stuck with them. Leave her to her boredom and folly. It's not good for you to remain here, now that you're a man. She sees too much of Arthur in you."

I was glad of the dim light, for my face was burning. So . . . simple, stout Gawain didn't understand such things? Well, I was younger then, and people could still surprise me. Suddenly, I needed sunlight, and no one near me. Muttering something, I don't know what, I spurred my mare out onto the misty beach. Gawain followed on foot, shouting, but the wind caught his words and carried them away.

Later, calm and inside of myself again, I turned back towards the palace. The wind was even fiercer there, as I rode over the plank bridge that spanned the great ditch and crossed under the stone and timber gatehouse, Lot's addition to the earthwork erected by his father. Dismounting, I let a serf take my horse and entered the inner courtyard, which was surrounded on three sides by the horseshoe-shaped great hall and on the forth by a timber palisade. Mother's tower, where she spent so much of her time these days, was joined to that palisade, but I was too close to that square, sandstone building to see if she was watching from its creneled roof.

Someone shouted Gawain's name. I looked about, expecting to see him coming up behind me, but he wasn't there. Instead, I saw King Lot approaching from the opposite direction, striding bowleggedly through a flock of hooting geese, his purple robe hiked up almost to his knees in a vain attempt to keep its ermine trim free of the mud and shit of the courtyard. I wanted to laugh out loud at the sight of his sticklike calves and pale, scabby ankles, but the look in his eyes stopped me. Yes, he could rule me like that, with a frosty, fishy glance. I often meant to stare defiantly into his seemingly weak face, only to see the soft, pop-eyed cod mask slip away and reveal the hungry pike beneath.

His vision was not as sharp as it once had been. "Ach, it's you," he said with bland distaste. "I took you for my son."

"I'm sorry to disappoint you," I said as coolly as I could. "Sometimes it seems my only talent."

He ignored the sarcasm. "Where's Gawain?"

"Out riding." I started to step past him.

"And my wife?"

Now why did he ask that? I shrugged and pointed at her tower. "Where she always is, I suppose."

"Yes, where she always is," he muttered. "I think it time I changed that. Go now and tell her there will be no supper there for her tonight. She must sit at table like a proper Queen." He swayed a bit, and I caught the ale on his breath. It was unusual for him to be drunk this early in the day, but not unheard of.

I bit back my anger at being asked to deliver messages like a servant. "What's the occasion?"

His look turned even more sour. "Gawain sails for Camelot tomorrow morning. It's bad enough he'll have half my treasury in his strongbox; I'll not have him telling his master Arthur that the royal house of Orkney is in disarray. Tonight, my wife will share my table and my bed."

I tried to keep my face calm, not pausing to wonder why I should have trouble doing so. Why was he demanding his conjugal rights now?

"What's the matter, Gertruda got her period?" Gertruda was the captured Saxon serf who was his most frequent bedmate.

A flood of color rushed through the gullies of his face. "She died this morning," he said with unaccustomed softness.

Out riding, I hadn't heard the news. I didn't ask how it happened; serfs wore out all the time. "I'm sorry."

I must not have sounded it, for his face quickly hardened again. "I doubt that, but you would be wise to curb your insolence. I'm in no mood."

Any pity I might have felt didn't last long, and the contempt came slinking back in. "Of course, My Lord. Anything you wish."

He still blocked my way. "These are hard times, Mordred. Hoofed plague rages among my livestock, driving my herders to the mainland. I've a mad and spiteful wife who'd think Byzantium too mean a kingdom, yet who prefers a cot in an empty tower to the royal bed and who once was randy enough to roger her own brother. My true son devotes his life to that pious usurper, coming home only to collect the imperial taxes. On top of this, I'm saddled with the upkeep of an incestuous bastard with an insolent mouth. This last problem would seem the easiest to solve."

He prodded my sternum with a grubby-nailed finger. "My own father would simply have had you killed. In these more civilized times, exile is still a happy possibility. So, rather than compounding my daily quota of irritation, why don't you go fetch your dear mother down to dinner?"

With that, he turned unsteadily upon his heel and stalked stiffly away. Honking, the flock of geese changed direction and flowed like a river about me, until a sway-back dog chased a piglet through their ranks, scattering them. I stood there, hating him, hating myself. The wind stirred about me, lifting dust and feathers, then settled, beaten back by a sudden soft drizzle of rain. Walking to the wall, I hit it, several times, hard enough to drive splinters into my bloody knuckles.

I wished I hadn't thrown the bone flute away, wished I had it with me now, so that I could scramble atop the wall and call the waves until they folded over the entire island and scoured it clean, bearing palace, people and peaty hillsides all down to the cold bosom of the sea.

The dried head of one of Lot's ancestors dangled on a leather cord from the ceiling of mother's chamber, grinning and swaying in the bar of sunlight that shone in through the single narrow window. Every time I looked at it I could taste cedar oil, a memory of the time when I was eight years old and Gawain had dared me to kiss its lipless mouth.

Mother reached out and gave it an idle spin. "If you were Lot's son, you could make strong magic with our smiling friend here, did you know that?" I did, of course, but didn't interrupt her pedantry. "The flesh and bone of one's own kin makes for powerful raw material, and there's plenty of it in the royal cairn. It's too bad I could never interest your brother in the art. What have you done to your hand?"

I was wrapping a strip of linen around my damaged knuckles. "Gawain caught me there with a practice sword." Better change the subject. "I just heard Gertruda died. Did you kill her?"

"What a tedious question." She sat on a three-legged stool and frowned. "That's not for what the draught was intended, no. It was that damned eternal sniffle of hers. You wouldn't expect a northern girl to be so susceptible to head colds."

"Well, you ended her sneezing, but the other results aren't so happy. Lot now expects you to share his bed tonight."

She smiled absent-mindedly, not at all the reaction I'd expected. "Perhaps I'll do that."

I felt obscurely disappointed. "He also requests your presence at dinner. Gawain is leaving in the morning, and Lot thinks we should appear a happy family."

She rose and stretched. "But of course. Now, whatever should I wear?" Unpinning her simple grey linen gown, she let it fall to her ankles and stepped out of it. Her breasts hardly sagged, though her stomach drooped slightly and bore the signs of childbirth. When she turned around I could see her buttocks were still as firm and flat as a boy's. Coughing, I regained enough control to turn away.

"Now how can you help me find something to wear if you stand there staring at the wall?" she said coyly. Cursing under my breath, I fled, leaving her with no audience but the dangling, grinning head.

I met Gawain at the entrance to the great hall and drew him aside. "Look, I'm sorry I left you behind like that today. You were right. I can't stay here. I'll sail with you in the morning."

His gaze was unreadable, but his embrace seemed warm enough. "Lugh and Jesus be praised. You're good to be out of this, boyo. Think of the times we'll have together."

I nodded without enthusiasm. "Too bad we can't leave now. Be ready for a turbulent night. Gertruda's died, and now Lot's taken it into his head to want Mother in his bed again. She took the news incredibly well, but I doubt her humor will last."

He shrugged. "Then follow my lead and retire early. There's no need for us to be part of any unpleasantness. Shall we go in? It's cold here, and I'm hungry."

I doubt he found the supper very satisfactory, consisting as it did of seaweed boiled in milk, several salted dogfish, and a few scraps of mutton in jellied hamhocks. It was clear that the meal's niggardliness was intended as a statement, for Lot leaned back in his chair and grinned.

"I'm sorry that I cannot afford a more generous feast, Gawain. What with your uncle's gouging taxes, I'm lucky to be able to provide what you see before you."

Gawain looked embarrassed. I knew he disliked collecting Arthur's levies almost as much as Lot disliked paying them, if that was possible. "Don't worry, Father," he said mildly. "I'm used to campaign rations, so this is luxury indeed."

But Lot was not in a conciliatory mood. "Nonsense. The Saxons have kept within their borders for the past ten years. You've been lounging at Camelot, where I hear Arthur's men live like Romans, stuffing themselves on snails, liquamen, and dormice. Tell me, has he installed a vomitorium yet, or do you just puke it all up in

the corner before staggering back to the table to gorge yourselves some more?"

Gawain stiffened. "I don't have to listen to this."

Flickering light from the great hearth played across Lot's bald patch as he bent to pick up a joint of mutton he'd carelessly dropped on the floor. "Ach, but in your father's house you do. Isn't that right, Mordred?"

Mother's entrance prevented me from having to answer. For some reason, she'd decided to be resplendent in a blood-colored linen gown with an ornate collar of raven feathers.

"Ah, dear wife," said Lot. "I was afraid you would be unable to join us. Unfortunately, there's not much left. I was explaining to our son how your sanctimonious brother is depleting the royal treasury."

Ignoring him, she bent to kiss Gawain on the cheek, then me upon the mouth. Lot didn't seem to notice, but Gawain did.

"Hello, Mother," he said, giving her a hard look. "Sorry to be rude, but I must retire early. Father's spoiling for a fight, and I don't much fancy giving him one."

"Run along then, dear," she said as she sat down. "I'm sure the rest of us will do well enough without you. We can quarrel with the king by ourselves, can't we, Mordred?"

"He won't be doing it after tonight," said Gawain testily. "He's coming back to Camelot with me."

Mother didn't make a sound, just sat very straight and began to radiate a chill. I'm not speaking metaphorically; the air around her grew palpably colder. Well, at least this sorcerous hauteur was better than the weeping I'd seen this morning.

For his part, Lot only grunted and picked a piece of gristle from his beard. "And why shouldn't he, then? If my high and mighty brother-in-law can command the loyalty of *my* son, it's about time he commanded it of his own. May you both prosper in his service, and rot in Hell with him when the Saxons finally rise up to chop you down. The worms and ravens will be grateful, I'm quite sure."

Mother hissed like a snake, and her face went uncustomarily pale, but she still said nothing coherent, just sat there, radiating cold. Lot clapped for one of the serfs, a paunchy, balding lout with a rheumy eye and an old brand on his cheek.

"Ho, Sergius, fetch out the heart-of-wine. Our dear little Mordred has decided to soldier with the Brits. Let's drink his health and wish him a glorious career."

Trying to avoid Mother's freezing face, I watched Gawain rise stiffly to his feet. "Forgive me for not staying for the toast, but I'm tired and want my bed."

Lot waved dismissively. "Away with you, then. But your brother must stay and drink. I want him to have pleasant memories of my table." He was clearly enjoying this, and it wasn't hard to figure out why. Anything that upset his wife was likely to please King Lot.

Gawain nodded meaningfully to me as he left. I would have liked to follow him, but somehow Mother's presence stopped me. As much as I did not want to remain there with her, I did not want to leave her alone with Lot, either.

Heart-of-wine is potent stuff, being the fiery liquid left unfrozen in a wine cask that's been buried in a snowdrift for a few days. Lot had already consumed a bucketful of barley ale. Before much longer, he was lolling in his chair, his mouth open and his sweaty red face looking as though it were about to collapse in upon itself at any minute, like a wet, ruddy, half-deflated bladder. Occasionally, he would stir, his head nodding forward and then snapping back with spastic regularity, like some sort of broken-necked doll.

I could no longer avoid Mother's gaze. The frozen mask had cracked and melted at some point. Now, her cheeks were flushed and a tear trailed from the corner of one eye.

"I don't blame you for leaving," she said at last. "There's no home for you here, is there?"

"Now, Mother, don't say that."

She shook her head. "It's true. I shouldn't cry. We lose things all our lives. This had to come."

I bowed my head. "I'm sorry."

She drained her cup and stared emotionlessly at her husband. "He can sleep here, I think. Will you help me up to bed, Mordred?"

"Your tower?" Obscurely, I hoped she'd chosen to defy Lot's wishes in that regard. After all, she'd done so often enough before.

She rose, a bit unsteadily, for she had drunk deep of the heart-of-wine, too. (Me, I'd barely touched it.) "No. I think I relish the chance to sleep in the royal bed alone. It is more comfortable than the cot in my tower. Will you help me on the stairs?"

I stood and trudged wearily to her. She gripped me about the waist and rested her head upon my shoulder. As I guided her towards the stairs, she began to whistle an old Breton cradle song. It was dark on the upper landing, and no serfs appeared with burning tallow to light our way. She seemed to enjoy our stumbling passage, and she interrupted her whistling to giggle and press herself more tightly against me. I was tempted to shove her into the wall, but refrained.

Four candles blazed in the royal bedroom, burned down almost to their holders. Mother stepped away from me and stood in the center of the chamber, no longer swaying. She reached up and untied her hair, swept it forward over her face like a veil, then back again.

"Stay with me these few hours before your departure, Mordred. There's not much night left, and I'm lonely."

I turned to go. "No, Mother, I can't do that. I'll say good-bye to you in the morning." I'd almost reached the door when a gust of air blew it shut. The candles did not gutter.

She reached out and took my forearms from behind, and I allowed myself to be turned around to face her again. "Remember how you lay with me, when you were small and sick with fever? I feel a fever now, and it's not of the body. Please lie with me again."

I looked at some point on the wall behind her, knowing better than to meet her eyes. "Don't think I don't know what you're asking of me. Stop it now. Just stop."

She reached out, took my chin, and tilted my head till my gaze met hers. "I'm going to die on this island, Mor-

dred. You won't be coming back. Leave me with something, then. Some memory of you, and of your father. Don't deny me that." Then she kissed me. And I let her do it.

I was surprised when she stepped back, a cool Roman smile on the lips that had just touched mine. "See? That wasn't so bad. It's family tradition, after all. I couldn't have him more than once, but he gave me you. Do you hate him? What better way to strike back? At Lot, too, for that matter. Let's try it again."

With that, she unpinned the brooch that fastened her gown at the shoulder. It fell about her feet. Taking my hand, she drew me close again. I felt her nipples against my chest, even through the coarse weave of my tunic. When her teeth closed on my lower lip, I actually became aroused. At that, her tongue wormed its way into mouth and she gripped my buttocks and pulled me into a tighter embrace.

That was the worst of it, that I could feel my arousal, pressing against her through the skirt of my tunic. I think, I hope, I pray (but to whom?) that I would have shoved her away from me, just the same. Maybe. The choice wasn't mine to make, for the door flew open and Lot stepped into the room.

There was spittle in his beard and his eyes were red and gummy, but his brain was awake and raging. In one hand he held a long white object, twisty like a unicorn's horn. It was an old gift from some former Saxon ally, the tooth of a narwhale.

"Bitch. Whore. I'm going to kill you."

I'd stepped away from her, not heeding his threat, just wanting to be somewhere else. She faced him, her gown still gathered about her ankles, somehow regal despite her awkward nakedness.

"Go away, you paltry little man. Before I say a word that will enter your brain and burn there like a drop of molten lead. Go!"

She hissed the last word like an angry swan and he did indeed step back, for he could never stand up to her when she was raging. She might have faced him down, but she made a crucial error. Rather than relying on her magic, or even her mere presence, she took a step towards him. Comically, horribly, her feet tangled in her gown and she stumbled to her knees. He laughed, a dry barking sound, and, taking two steps forward, struck her full in the face with the thick end of the narwhale staff.

Her head snapped back and her arms flailed the air and there was blood coming from her mouth. Jamming the tip of the staff into her midriff, he leaned into it, shoving her backwards as it went into her. Pinned against the floor with her heels beneath her backside, she flailed wildly and drummed her head against the boards. Then she was still and there was blood all over everything.

I'd stood there, paralyzed, watching it all, suddenly aware that my breeches were soiled. My mother had been murdered before my eyes and my only reaction had been to piss myself.

Maybe before I die I'll do another thing that will shame me as much as that.

Pointlessly, now, the paralysis was gone, and I ran at him, screaming. He wasn't even able to bring up the staff; I smashed into him and we fell across her body and struggled there, both of us rolling about in her blood. My hands were about his throat when the palace guards pulled us apart.

Not much after that is clear. The room was full of guards and serfs—I couldn't see Lot for the forest of popeyed, candlelit faces. Somewhere, though, I could hear him making hoarse rasping sounds that might have been words. I made for the noise, but Gawain stood in my way. I tried to push past him, only to find myself being half dragged down the hallway, screaming, by my brother. His lips were moving, and though I couldn't hear anything, some part of me made out that he was saying "Jesus Jesus Jesus Jesus," over and over and over.

He practically threw me into my own room, shut the door behind us, and stood there with his back against it. I threw myself against him, but it was in vain, and at last I sank to my knees at his feet, sobbing.

"It's all right, boyo," he said tonelessly, stupidly, like a man dazed. "There's nothing we can do for her." Squatting clumsily beside me, he held me and we wept together. Some time later, I remember us standing, facing each other, his face very white, with lines in it like gullies, making him look much older. "Tomorrow we'll be away from this," he kept saying.

I walked to the wall and hit it, hard, several times. He didn't try to stop me. The pain helped, but not enough. So I smashed my forehead against the plaster, with enough force that a chip cracked off to reveal the timber underneath. On my brow's third impact with the wall, my legs crumbled and I slid to the floor. I don't think I'd actually managed to stun myself, but I was all used up and could only swoon. After that, merciful nothing for a time.

Maybe not so merciful. In the blackness, I was aware of Mother beside me in my bed, bloody and naked and dead, whispering something in my ear. She whispered it over and over and over again. *Do this,* she said, *if you want to be rid of him and me.* The words were still echoing in my head when I woke up.

Sunlight came in through the window. There was a fresh bandage on my head, and someone had taken my bloody clothing away and wiped me clean. Lot was standing in the doorway, with Gawain between him and me.

At last, the King of Orkney spoke. I heard weariness and a hangover in his voice, but no real emotion.

"It's done with. She's in the cairn now and there's no help for it. She was mad and now she's at peace. Hate me, if you like, for killing her. I don't care what you think."

I looked at him and didn't feel anything.

"Your ship has sailed," he continued. "There will be another soon. Avoid my sight until then." With that, he turned and left.

Gawain knelt beside me. "Look," he said, stumbling over his words. "I know it must be hard for you. Just re-

member, soon you'll be someplace away from here and clean."

I sat up, which hurt. He gently pushed me back. "There's something I must do before I go," I said.

"No." He said it softly, his face very close to mine. "Swear you won't. He'll have his Jutes with him at all times until you're gone. If you try to kill him, you'll die. I've lost my mother, Mordred. I don't want to lose my brother, too."

"Bastard," I said. I meant him as much as Lot.

"Swear you won't." His grip on my forearm was painful.

"All right, I swear. Now let go of me."

He did. I shut my eyes. Eventually, he left, shutting the door behind him. I lay there for some time, sleeping and waking. Food was brought to me, and water. After a while, my head didn't hurt so much, and I could move with less difficulty.

Somewhere, I was almost grateful that Lot had killed her. Rage at him was a clean, cool thing, not like the feelings she'd stirred up. I immersed myself in it quietly, sensing it slip over me like the water at the bottom of a well. Gawain visited me sometime after the next sunrise, but we didn't say much to each other. Then I was alone again.

I hoped I'd be strong enough to do what I needed to do before the next ship came.

The sun had set just beneath the lee and the air was full of chittering bats. I stood before the royal cairn, a high, steep-sided mound, overgrown with brown moss and roofed in peat, with stone slabs and heavy timbers projecting here and there like exposed ribs. A hundred yards or so behind me, I could hear the changing of the guard on the palace's landward palisade. If they saw me, no one hailed.

With a leather sack in one hand and an expensive wax candle in the other, I approached the mound. Gnarled faces leered at me from the driftwood posts erected in a circle around the mound. Stepping past those carved sentinels, I put down my burdens and crouched in front of the block of square red sandstone that effectively plugged the entrance.

Grunting with the strain, and splitting a seam in the crotch of my breeches, I finally managed to heave it aside. A dry, dead smell wafted up at me and by the light of the candle I could see a low passage slanting away into the darkness.

Picking up the candle and the sack, I crawled inside. The passage's floor was rough and wet and there was no room to stand erect. I was conscious of the great weight of stone and wood and earth above me, and my stomach clenched like a fist.

The interior of the cairn was a long chamber, perhaps fifty feet in length, at least thirty feet wide, and a good eight feet high. Standing, I looked about. The stones were roughly fitted and dripped moisture. Hordes of spindly, pale crickets fled the candlelight, leaping and skittering across the uneven floor. Slugs were everywhere, even gleaming like gelid stars from the dark timbers above my head. Skulls grinned from shadowed niches set halfway between the floor and dripping ceiling, while more complete remains were carefully laid out on low slabs that lined the four walls like granite cots. All except the nearest slab bore bare, desiccated bones and strips of rotten cloth.

A blanket of fine white ermine covered her from foot to chin. Small, round spiders and more crickets rustled in the pale fur and crawled across her bloodless face, to disappear in her still luxurious hair. Her eyes had fallen in, and her black lips were drawn back to expose grey gums. When I moved the blanket to uncover her right arm, the air became much fouler, and I had to bite down on the clove of garlic I'd brought with me for that purpose.

Gripping her hand, which felt like a leather glove filled with cold lard and dry sticks, I took a heavy skinning knife out of my sack and began to saw away at the crook of her arm. Slicing through the muscles and tendons, I cut around to the elbow. Then, putting the knife down, I produced a small hatchet and chopped away at the ligaments and bone until I was able to wrench the forearm free.

More sawing and chopping removed the hand. Shoving the point of the knife into the exposed cross-section of the wrist, I slid the blade down between the ulna and the radius, separating the two bones. This last took some effort. I was soon drenched in sweat and, despite the garlic, choking on the filthy air.

Still, I was able to make myself do a fairly complete job of it, whittling most of the soapy flesh away from the radius in long strips before wrapping it in calfskin and putting it back into the sack with the hatchet and the skinning knife. Gingerly, I tucked the right hand, the ulna, and the larger strips of sinew back under the concealing blanket, doing my best not to look at her drawn, dead face. After memorizing the location of the exit, I blew out the candle and scrambled hurriedly back up into the outer air.

Later, in the top room of her tower, I boiled the remaining flesh away from the bone in a small kettle, carved off the knobby end joints, shoved out the remaining marrow, widened the hollow with an auger, and drilled the necessary holes. Further carving and then the lacquering took me well into the next afternoon. I welcomed the exhaustion, for it made it easier not to think.

The monolith stood several leagues from the palace, a good hour's ride down the coast and then another twenty minutes' canter up the rising ground inland. There were no nearby traces of the Picts, or whatever other ancient people had reared it; the gorse- and bracken-carpeted hills rolled away from me on all sides, bare of everything but clumps of bluebell and horned poppy and the occasional limestone outcropping. I'd come here often as a boy, to pretend I was lord of the peaty wasteland, the crown of the monolith the highest turret of my palace.

One side of the roughly squarish, ten-foot-high pillar of red sandstone had been sculpted into the crude likeness of a frowning visage, which nature had decorated

with the scars of wind and rain and pockmarks of greenish lichen. An old, dead god of the harvest or the sea, maybe, though he faced the wrong direction for the latter.

Standing on tiptoe to grip the furrowed brow and using the open mouth for a foothold, I hauled myself atop the monolith and sat cross-legged on its rough, flat crown. Facing away from its stony inland gaze, I looked out towards the invisible ocean and untied the lambskin pouch that hung at my belt. When I gently emptied the bone flute out onto my lap, the fresh lacquer gleamed in the still sunlight, while the etched symbols seemed to crawl across its surface like a column of marching ants.

I ran my finger over the polished bone. It was so easy to think of it as something like porcelain or wood, something that had never been sheathed in soft flesh and smooth skin and delicate black hairs. Damn you, you crazy bitch, I thought, that I should think of you this way after you are dead. Lifting the bone flute to my mouth, I ran my lips across its smooth surface in something like a kiss, then blew into it, producing a single shrill note.

It was audible for a long time, and when it faded it seemed to take all other sounds with it—the rustle of the wind-stirred bracken, the cries of the wheeling birds, the snorting of my tethered mare, the dull moan of the distant, unseen sea. No clouds rolled across the sun, but the clear brightness faded, giving way to the kind of daylight one sees through dirty glass. The air about me grew cold and heavy and very still, like the waters of a deep pond.

I blew again, repeatedly, varying the notes, building them, weaving them into a textured pattern. The tune was muffled and distant, something heard beyond the next hill or inside a seashell or at the bottom of a well.

Ripples spread through the pond that was the air around me, expanding outward, then crashing in upon themselves, reverberating, swirling into currents and cross-currents. My mare raised her head and nickered and dug her hooves into the turf. The stubby grass began to bristle and hiss and whisper. With a suddenness that drove my breath back down into my chest, clouds erupted like boils upon the colorless ligament of the sky, coalescing patterns of scudding shadow across the far hillsides. A dozen yards away, a flock of rock pigeons exploded from the short heather and disappeared inland, fleeing the dark turbulence that came beating in from the direction of the sea. The first rumble of thunder was low and distant, but it echoed in the ground beneath my feet.

I stopped trying to form a tune and simply blew shrilly into the bone, but the notes continued, shaping and building upon themselves. Rearing, my horse tore free of the shrub to which I'd tethered her. She paced back and forth for a moment, almost as if she was dancing to the music, rolling her eyes and whinnying; then she wheeled and galloped for the crest of the rise behind me. I didn't even turn my head to watch her go.

The air was full of salt and I could hear the rising cacophony of surf upon the distant rocks. Night seemed to have fallen on the seaward horizon; the sky above the ridge was dark and heaving and folded in upon itself like tumbled layers of billowing wet black cloth. If it looked this bad from here, the view from the palace ramparts was sure to make the sentries piss their breeches. I hoped Lot was on the battlements or looking out a window, anyplace where he could see the approaching storm.

Bracing my feet against the wind, I stood, holding the flute high above my head. The air blew through it and it continued playing, a crazy wild music, fit for the Last Judgment or Ragnarok or the Hunt of the Hounds of Arawn. I shut my eyes and listened and felt the raw tension of the chaos straining to erupt around me.

Thunder crashed deafeningly close and it was as if a bucket of water had been dashed in my face. There was no transition at all, no preliminary sprinkle; the rain was suddenly falling everywhere in great unbound sheaves, buffeting me, pressing my instantly sopping clothing against my body and threatening to rip my cloak from my back. As the wind increased, the water came sweeping along in near-vertical gusts, carrying with it clods of peat and loamy clay torn from the hills and ridges that lay between me and the surging, unseen ocean. Before I could be hurled off, I half slid, half fell down to the monolith's landward side, where I huddled in the new-made mud and pressed myself against its carven face.

The flute played on by itself, quivering in my clenched fist like a live thing. Impossibly, its tune remained audible above the din; indeed, I could feel it trilling in my bones. Suddenly, I wondered about everything I'd done in the last two days, about what I'd ever intended to accomplish. I thought of great waves surging over the rocks at Brough's Head, of torrents of intermingled water, earth and air smashing into the palace's frail stone, of the palace serfs and the guards and of Gawain, all the people who did not deserve to be smashed or drowned. I'd called up a rage greater than my own, a fury that dwarfed mine and left me powerless to control it. There was no catharsis in this, only crippling fear. If the tempest kept on increasing in strength, it would indeed scour the island clean. Perhaps that had been my crazed intention, but now I found myself quite unready for the reality.

Frantically, I thrust the flute down into the soft mud between my knees, but its song continued, now apparently originating just above my head. I looked up at the carved face on the monolith. Its features, in the chaotic light, seemed to have sharpened, become more feminine, with Mother's high cheekbones and imperious brow. And its lips were pursed as if it was whistling.

Screaming "No, stay dead!" I lifted the flute from the mud and smashed it into the graven face, again and again, until I was pummeling the stone with a bloody fist full of shards of polished bone, some of which were driven deep into my palm. "I don't want your vengeance anymore, not if it kills me, too!"

The wind roared and beat against the monolith with enough force to make it rock and sway. There was one final crash of thunder, so loud I thought the sky was coming down, and then a silence so sudden and deep I was sure I was deaf, maybe even dead.

After a timeless interval, I rose unsteadily and looked about me. Bare earth showed through where grass and peat and heather had been torn from the battered hillsides, and for as far as I could see, the remaining vegetation was sodden and beaten flat. The sky was still black and low, but it was beginning to be pierced here and there by shafts of ruddy light. There was no trace of rain, and the silent wind was gentle as a caress.

Sometime later, I walked beside the sea, which rolled in upon the strand like a whipped dog creeping back into its kennel. The sand and shingle and even the cliffs were strewn with clumps of glistening weed, with driftwood and dead fish everywhere, while great rocks that had once lain beneath the swells were now scattered beyond the tide line like pebbles tossed by an idle child. I walked aimlessly to and fro and watched the waves and then walked some more, until I finally set my sopping, muddy feet in the direction of the palace.

Long before I got there, a dot rounded the bluff and swelled into an approaching rider. It was Gawain, astride a very nervous gelding. His wet hair hung in his eyes, his harness was in disarray, and his clothes were as soaked as mine, if not so filthy.

He reined and looked at me. "You're alive, at least," he said with weary relief.

"I am," I answered, still not quite believing it.

"Father's dead."

Three syllables, spoken softly and without apparent emotion.

I did not, I think, feel joy, but something that had been wound very tight now loosened within me. *You got him, you bitch,* I thought, *you got him after you were dead. Though you had to use me.*

I sat on a weedy rock and looked at my damaged hand. Eventually, the question came.

"How?"

Gawain shifted in his saddle but did not dismount. He didn't look at me, either, but out at the sullen waves. "He'd been drinking constantly. It got worse after you disappeared from the palace. Then the storm came."

He did look at me then, but I couldn't read his face. Magic was the world I'd shared with Mother; would he acknowledge its existence?

No. "He began to rave. He said he could hear Mother in the storm, calling to him, mocking him. Everybody went down into the cellar, but not him. He ran out into the courtyard, shouting for her forgiveness. I followed, but got out just in time to see the Queen's tower come tumbling down on top of him. I doubt they've dug out him yet."

I patted his horse, trying to think of what to say. "You're King now."

He shook his head. "Not me. Not here. The Picts can have these islands again for all of me."

"Back to Camelot, then?" As if he'd ever really left.

"Yes. Maybe soon. If the ship rode out the storm."

I found myself hoping it had. Someplace clean, and away from all this, he'd said. Good. Maybe marriage had changed Arthur after all. Even if it hadn't, there was nowhere else to go.

We looked at each other. At length, he reached down and pulled me up behind him. There was nothing for it but to ride back, along the ravaged shore. ✦

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Thomas and the Wise Men

Illustration by Jael

Kristine Kathryn Rusch

The room glowed golden, with soft overhead lights casting shadows in the corners and candelabras lined like a row of soldiers down the center of the table. Thomas folded the story Jessica had made him bring and tucked it in the breast pocket of his tuxedo.

Near the flocked Christmas tree, a choral group from northern Maine sang carols a capella. Earlier the five-star general told an anecdote about Christmas in 'Nam, and both the president and first lady had laughed uproariously. Then the secretary of the interior, his voice droning, explained the difficulties his staff had obtaining the White House Christmas tree. Thomas was no longer nervous, and he no longer

felt tongue-tied. For a while he worried about why he had managed to get a seat so close to the head of the table; he had thought that, even as the honored literary guest, he would be sitting with the undersecretaries twenty chairs away.

"You haven't said much, Mr. Cavendish," the first lady said. She was a heavyset woman who looked matronly, not elegant, in her blue silk evening gown. "Are you saving yourself for the Christmas story?"

Jessica put her hand on his. Her fingers were cold. "He never really makes light conversation."

"Damned waste of time, I used to say." The president sipped loudly from his wine glass. "Now it seems like all I do. Light conversation in these rigged social affairs. Politics, you know. Makes it look as if we're doing something when we're really not."

The president's words cheered Thomas. He was glad he put the prepared speech away.

"We've all been wondering what sort of Christmas story you'll tell. The president and I have read all of your books and find them fascinating." The first lady set her fork across her china plate, leaving a half-eaten piece of roast beef. A waiter whisked the dish away in his white-gloved hands.

"Thank you," Thomas said. "Some people think my work is harsh."

"Nonsense!" The first lady smiled at him. Her eyes seemed warm. "Entertaining honesty is always refreshing in these troubled times."

Jessica tightened her grip on his hand. He glanced at her. She wore her silver-streaked brown hair in a chignon and wisps curled about her face. The room's glow made her look younger. She had been so worried about the evening. She had ordered his tuxedo herself when he told her he was going in faded blue jeans and a denim workshirt. *We might never be invited to sit with a president again, Thomas,* she said. *Let's play pretend. Instead of being the iconoclastic writer and his wife, let's be visiting royalty. Let's have a nice evening, one that we'll be proud of.* She had spent five hundred dollars on her chiffon gown, and she had never looked more beautiful.

"I was thinking," the first lady said, "that we would have your story just before dessert. We'd have a chance to digest the rest of the meal before the best course."

Thomas smiled and the dinner continued, through yet another entree, and two more tedious anecdotes, one told by the first lady herself. When the waiters appeared with the silver coffee pots and poured the aromatic liquid into fingernail-thin cups, the choral group sang its final number. They trooped out of the room, single file, their fifteen minutes of greatness gone.

A waiter set a stool on the expanse of blue carpet near the Christmas tree. The first lady tapped her spoon against her water glass for silence. "Mr. Thomas Cavendish has graciously agreed to tell us a Christmas story," she said. "And if you don't mind, Thomas, I think it might be appropriate if you sat near the tree and used the microphone, so that everyone can hear."

"I don't mind," he said, scooting his chair back and placing his linen napkin beside his steaming coffee cup. He walked around the table. People turned their chairs so that they could see him. He picked up the cordless microphone and sat on the stool, one foot on a rung, the other on the ground. He glanced at Jessica. Her dark eyes pleaded with him. *Let's pretend,* she seemed to be saying, but the written-out story would stay in his pocket. He wore a tuxedo; that was the only concession he would make.

He flicked on the microphone and held it a fist away from his lips. He had made so many speeches that the position seemed almost natural. "I haven't written fiction in a long time," he said. His voice filled the room. The guests slid their chairs back and clutched their coffee cups, expressions eager for a tale well told. "Fiction seems to me to be an awkward way to present an argument. Essays do that much better. They define a moral tone, set a stance in cold hard print for everyone to see. But sometimes, essays lack the emotion of a good story, and it is only with passion that we change things."

The president turned his wine glass over when the waiter offered to refill it, and pointed at his coffee cup without turning his attention from Thomas.

"So I'm going to tell you a story tonight. And, like all stories, it has a little truth mixed in with the fiction. I'm sure that most of you here over the age of sixty know that no aboveground nuclear tests took place in the month of December. Some truths have to be fudged for the fictional point. Other truths do not. I trust you will know the difference."

Jessica was shaking her head ever so slightly. Thomas looked away. "I'm going to tell you a story my wife doesn't like. It's a Christmas story, and it's called, 'Tommy and the Wise Men.'"

—

Every Christmas morning until 1951, Tommy's father read from the book of Matthew before the family opened its presents. The reading seemed a torture in the early years, a necessary ritual by the time Tommy turned eight. He could recite the words from memory:

> Now when Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, saying, "Where is he who has been born king of the Jews? For we have seen his star in the East, and have come to worship him." When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him; and assembling all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Christ was to be born. They told him "In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it is written by the prophet:
>
> 'And you, O Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who will govern my people Israel.'"
>
> Then Herod summoned the wise men secretly and ascertained from them what time the star appeared; and he sent them to Bethlehem, saying,

> "Go and search diligently for the child, and when you have found him bring me the word that I too may worship him." When they had heard the king they went their way; and lo, the star which they had seen in the East went before them, till it came to rest over the place where the child was. When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy; and going into the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother, and they fell down and worshipped him. Then, opening their treasures, they offered him gifts, gold and frankincense and myrrh. And being warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they departed to their own country by another way.

As the Christmas of 1951 loomed, it seemed that Tommy would have to recite those words, because his father had no furlough and would probably spend Christmas in that secret place the Army had flown him at the beginning of December. Tommy's mother was trying to make the holiday the best she could. She even began festivities a few days early. On December 23rd, she woke him an hour before dawn and put him, a blanket, and a picnic basket in their Rambler and drove across bumpy dirt roads to the butte on the north side of town. There they sat in the sand and the predawn cold with a dozen other families, eating his mother's fried chicken and potato salad, and sipping on steaming, hot coffee—Tommy's first.

The flash startled him. It covered the entire night sky with a whiteness so bright that, for a moment, he thought he could see through his own skin. Then the light faded, leaving flashing spots in his vision. Tommy set down his coffee—it was too bitter anyway—and was about to ask his mother if they had truly seen an A-bomb when the boom echoed across the land and shook the ground beneath them.

"That was magnificent," a man said, and then everyone applauded, like they did at the live band concerts held in the park on warm summer evenings. Tommy's mother gathered up their things. Tommy carried the blanket to the car, and slept all the way back to town.

—

Thomas paused. His audience was enrapt. Even the waiters watched him as they freshened cups of coffee, and a few of the staff lingered near the doorways, as if they were trying to hear him read. Only Jessica looked away. She was watching her hands, her face flushed.

"That night," Thomas continued . . .

—

Tommy lay in the scraggly grass that passed for the yard around his house. Before the sun set, he had thought he saw an extra light in the sky, but his eyes had ached all day from the flash and his mother suggested—politely, for she was always polite—that he might be seeing things. Tommy washed the dishes after supper, then assumed his spot in the yard, identifying the constellations until he saw a pulsing light in the east. The light grew and grew the more he watched it. Inside the house, the radio played scratchy Christmas carols, and his mother sang along, her voice breathy and frail. She lost track of time, and he lay there for hours, as the pulsing light grew brighter and stronger. Finally it sailed over his head in a sea of red and green sparks, leaving a trail of multicolored mist in its wake. The air whistled and the ground shook for the second time that day.

The radio clicked off. The door opened, adding more light to the yard. Tommy's mother stood in silhouette. "What was that?"

"Comet," Tommy said.

"Nonsense." Tommy's mother closed the door and the scratch of the radio began again, becoming a whine as she moved the dial, searching for news. A few other people stepped out of their houses and gazed down the road. Tommy got up, brushed the grass and dirt from his clothes, and started across the yard.

"John Thomas!" his mother cried through the window. "Where are you going?"

"Going to see where the comet landed."

"You'll do no such thing. Now come inside."

Tommy gazed down the road, as wistfully as his neighbors had, then stalked into the house. His mother sat on the edge of the light brown davenport, leaning against the radio as she spun its dial. Her hands shook slightly and she didn't look at him.

"Get cleaned up for bed," she said.

"Yes, ma'am." Tommy wondered for a moment if she would notice him go out the door again, then decided against it. He plucked a needle off the Christmas tree they had put up on the 21st and prepared for bed.

The next morning, a honking horn woke him out of a dream of white light and skeletons. His mother's bare feet slapped against the floor and the door banged as it opened. "Land o' Goshen," his mother cried, and Tommy couldn't tell if her voice was angry or pleased.

He rolled off the cot that passed for his bed and took his terrycloth robe from the chair next to his desk. He peered out the window, but could see nothing except desert and scrub. Their house stood at the edge of a new development. Beyond Tommy's window, the wilderness loomed, flat and rolling and brown, with the ghosts of mountains in the distance.

His mother's voice rose and fell, mixing with a man's voice, and then another, one that sounded so much like his father that Tommy yanked his bedroom door open and nearly knocked the tree over as he ran into the living room. The front door was ajar, revealing an Army jeep parked kittycorner on the lawn. His mother had her arm around a slender man in uniform—his father—and another man hauled a duffel out of the seat. His father's skin was red, but his eyes looked sickly. He ruffled Tommy's hair as his mother led them into the bedroom, and Tommy thought he saw raised lumps, like hives rising from his father's hands. The other man stood in the doorway until Tommy invited him to sit down.

His mother reappeared a moment later, her hair tou-

sled and her mouth set in a thin line. "Tommy, go back to bed."

"But Dad—"

"Needs to sleep too. You can talk to him when he gets up."

Tommy hurried down the hall and tried to peer into his parents' room, but the door was closed. His mother would hear it being opened—sound carried through the whole house—and she seemed so worried that Tommy was afraid his punishment would be worse than her normal scoldings. He closed his door, sat at the edge of the cot, and listened.

The other man was talking. He had a strange accent. "—was on a confidential mission yest'day morning just northeast of Las Vegas and by yest'day afternoon, your husband took sick. He saw the base doctor and they told him to rest for two weeks, so I got leave to bring him home, seeing it was only a few hours drive."

"You'll stay with us for Christmas?"

"I need to get back by tomorry night."

"Then we'll have Christmas dinner early," Tommy's mother said, and so it was decided.

—

Thomas stepped down from the stool, walked to his place at the table, picked up his water glass and took a sip. The liquid felt cool against his throat. Jessica's eyes were lined with tears. The president had leaned back in his chair, hands clasped over his stomach. His expression was alert. The entire room waited in silence for Thomas to continue. He took the water glass with him as he walked back to the stool.

—

That afternoon, Tommy tried to bounce a basketball in the yard. The attempt had failed before—the ball would hit a rock and veer off at an odd angle. He didn't really want to play, but he didn't want to be in the house either. His father moaned with pain, and his mother made baking soda compresses. The Army man drank coffee at the kitchen table and read newspapers, occasionally fiddling with the radio to see if he could find any interesting programming.

Tommy had chased the ball into a copse of dying trees his mother had planted when the manthing stepped out in front of him. "Manthing" was the word that came to Tommy's mind later, when he had a chance to reflect. What he saw then was a thin two-legged creature with almond-shaped, all-black eyes and a sensitive mouth. The manthing touched his face with long fingers and he felt, rather than heard, it sigh. *Safe.*

Two other manthings stepped out of the trees and joined him. They were carrying small sacks and they bowed deeply to him. *No light.*

The concepts came as images, not words, and with those images, fragments of other thoughts, other places. Tommy was too young to question the fantastic; he accepted that these manthings were different and that they were somehow connected with the light he had seen in the east.

"There's shade in my house," he said, and led them inside.

The Army man had left the kitchen. Papers rustled in the living room, accompanied by the drone of an announcer's voice. Tommy moved next to the icebox and took glasses from the cupboard to offer them water after their long walk.

One of the manthings raised its head and appeared to sniff the air. *Sickness.* It moved forward, down the hall, followed by the other two. Tommy ran behind them. The Army man was hidden by his newspaper; he saw nothing. But Tommy's mother screamed when the manthing opened the door to the bedroom. The manthing gently moved her aside and gazed at Tommy's father, who shivered on the bed. One of the other manthings handed the first a sack. The manthing opened the sack.

"What are you doing?" Tommy's mother yelled and tried to shove them away, but the manthings blocked her. They took out a clear globe that smelled of incense —a scent Tommy wouldn't identify until sixteen years later. Tommy's mother started screaming for the Army man, but by the time he arrived, the manthing had already spread a clear liquid on Tommy's father's skin.

The Army man grabbed a manthing by the arm and flung it against the wall. It crumpled, seemingly stunned for a moment, before it shook itself and rose to its feet. *Notsafe. Notsafe.* Tommy grabbed his mother's sleeve and she put her arms around him, clutching him against her. The Army man pulled a gun from his hip and herded the manthings into Tommy's room. The Army man spread his legs like John Wayne and clutched the gun, poised to shoot.

"Get help," he said to Tommy's mother.

Tommy's father had stopped shivering on the bed. Tommy wanted to go to him, but his mother was squeezing him too hard. "Come on, Tommy," she said, and led him to the Rambler.

They drove to the barracks outside of town, where Tommy and his family used to live until the base expanded and the families could take real homes. Tommy's mother left him in the Rambler when she hurried inside the main building. She emerged with a colonel who ran down the base, shouting. Tommy's mother got into the Rambler and drove back home, Tommy twisting backwards in his seat to watch five Army trucks filled with men follow the car. Dust rose like the mist of light he had seen the night before and he wondered at the images he had caught: the manthings pounding on strange, flat equipment, frightened because it no longer worked; the spiraling, spiraling, to the ground; and through it all, the A-bomb, glowing white and glorious against the predawn sky.

The Rambler stopped in front of the house, and no one noticed as Tommy got out and ran around to his window. He was amazed that the manthings were still inside. All they had to do was open the windows to escape. Perhaps they didn't know what a window was.

Thomas climbed on the sill and pushed the glass

open as the Army men filled his house with their clunky boots and oversized weapons. The manthings crawled out Tommy's window and disappeared in the desert, but not before they touched Tommy, filling him with their gratitude. The Army men followed and Tommy watched until the entire, strange parade was swallowed by dust.

—

Thomas paused. His audience stared at him. The five-star general's cheeks were flushed, but with wine or from the story, Thomas couldn't tell. "The story doesn't end here, of course," Thomas said. "Or perhaps it doesn't even end this way. Perhaps Tommy followed the Army men inside and watched as they took the manthings away. Or perhaps the manthings never appeared at all, although that's not likely since Tommy still has the globe that was once filled with incense. Tommy's father healed enough to read from the book of Matthew on Christmas morning, and the Army man stayed through a roast turkey dinner, complete with all the fixings. And Tommy remembered the light he saw, pulsing in the east, and wondered if the manthings were wise men, making a stop before searching for their king. He liked to think they escaped in the desert and once they found their king, were warned in a dream to return to their own country by another way."

One of the undersecretaries nodded, then caught himself. No one else moved. The microphone felt heavy in Thomas's hand. "Tommy realized later that the manthings were not wise. They were different and they had made mistakes. They flew over nuclear tests, probably to observe, and the electromagnetic pulse destroyed their computerized systems, causing them to crash, hours later. They approached humans whom they should have recognized as hostile, and they probably died, frightened and alone, on a dissection table somewhere not too far from here.

"And Tommy gained no wisdom from the event, either. Ten years later, he accused his father of tilting at windmills when his father spoke of suing the government for making him a guinea pig. Tommy's father. His dying father. A man who stood one mile away from ground zero in the Nevada desert because his country asked him to. A man who knew, somehow, that his cancer—and the cancer of all the men in his unit—had a very human cause. Tilting at windmills." Thomas laughed and the sound echoed through the microphone. "My mother continued tilting at that windmill, through rallies and speeches and lawsuits. Failing, ever failing, growing so bitter that she even lost her politeness in the end. And here I sit, tilting at my own windmill—their windmill—too late, perhaps, as a salve for a guilty conscience. Good leftwing liberal that I was, clubbed in Chicago in '68, writing for the *Village Voice* and the *Guardian* in the early years before the mainstream press adopted me, I never spoke of those times, or fought that fight. Those days were too mixed with fantasy for me, with confusing memories of three wise men and a star in the east.

"My wife over there clutches her coffee cup so hard that I'm afraid she'll break it. I have a nice sedate story written out in my pocket, a Christmas story that rivals Rudolph the Red-nosed Reindeer for sentimentality. But, as Jessica said to me when she handed me this tuxedo, we might never be invited to sit with a president again. And somewhere inside, I believe that words have resonance, and I speak my piece for my parents, and I make a plea for the others who have suffered, not so much to ease their plight, for most of them have died, but to prevent more wanton abuse of human life by people who govern others and to garner, perhaps, a little kindness for those who may visit us from far lands—not to trick them, deceive them and use them as Herod did, but to allow them the freedom and the opportunity to get to know us in peace."

Thomas lowered the microphone. His thumb found the ridged switch and flicked the mike off with a thunk that filled the silence. Applause started from somewhere near the back, and spread around the room as light and polite as his mother's voice had been when she had asked the Army man to dinner. The president looked away from him and the first lady signaled for dessert. The waiters emerged, carrying small chocolate sculptures on thin china plates, five to a tray.

And as the waiters set the desserts on the table, the light conversation began again, obscuring Thomas's words as effectively as dust kicked up by the boots of five truckloads of Army men.

Thomas rose, set the microphone down, and returned to his seat. No one looked at him. He sipped his cold coffee and decided that Jessica was right: they would never sit with a president again. Not for lack of an invitation, but because passion had no place in speeches made behind closed doors. If he were going to tilt at windmills, he had to do so in public like he used to. He smiled a little, to himself, and Jessica glanced at him, a question in her eyes. He covered her hand with his. When they got home, he would explain his decision. He didn't have to be warned in a dream. He had already decided to return to his own country by another way. ✦

Dealer

Michaelene Pendleton

Illustration by Pat Morrissey

LeBarron's jackals took their time beating the shit out of Brackett. They enjoyed it. They told him what they were going to do before they did it. Frank, the one with no front teeth, would hold him while the tall blond one with a Death From Above tattoo on one bicep worked on him for a while, then they would switch.

Death From Above was more imaginative. Frank concentrated on kidney punches and blows to the chest. Death From Above worked over Brackett's face, closing both eyes, breaking his nose, clapping both hands over his ears until they ran blood. He was especially good at groin punches that just missed Brackett's genitals. They didn't break any major bones, and they didn't mash his nuts. Brackett figured they were saving that for the next time.

The beating fell into a rhythm. Closed off in his head, Brackett orchestrated it to the Crusader's Chorus from *Alexander Nevsky*. That kept him disconnected from the pain. Until the music ran out.

After a while he stopped feeling any new pain. His body was one red haze of agony and nothing they did to him mattered any more. Death From Above must have recognized that. He called Frank

off. Holding Brackett upright with one muscular arm around Brackett's neck, he said, "Had enough, Dealer? Ready to cooperate now?"

Brackett managed to shape his split lips into "Screw you."

Death laughed. "Maybe later, sweetheart. You're not too pretty right now." He dropped Brackett to the cold concrete floor. "We'll be back. You don't deal with Rulon, we can keep this up for a long, long time. Think about it."

Brackett couldn't see much with his eyes swollen shut. He heard the door slam and the lock click over. The room, a basement storage unit in what was once the Hotel Utah, felt empty. One part of his mind, sitting way back trying to be divorced from the pain, urged him to try to find a way out. The rest of him just lay there and hurt.

Maybe what hurt most was losing the Kallinikov. He'd had a standing order for that piece for more than two years. It wasn't easy to find. Kallinikov's First Symphony was reasonably common, but the Second was a rarity. There weren't many copies of it even before Sweep Night, when the National Guard and army reserve units had confiscated all foreign music, books, clothes, cars, electronics, every item of foreign manufacture, everything on the proscribed lists that hadn't been voluntarily surrendered. These days, the Second was as valuable as the Mormon Tabernacle Choir's Easter chorale set to the *Feuerzauber* from *Die Walküre*. He had a buyer for that one, too, if he ever found it.

He'd finally tracked the Kallinikov to a chemistry professor at the U. They had met this morning at a restaurant on Foothill Drive, the prof looking guilty as hell, his nervousness so obvious that Brackett almost backed out of the deal. He watched the prof, potbellied and balding and twitching in the booth, ignoring the cup of what passed for coffee these days, and scanned all the other silent, eye-shaded customers for a long time before he decided the place was clean.

The buy went down quick. He passed the prof's table, caught the man's scared gaze, and jerked his head toward the men's restroom. Eight thousand in old bills to the professor and, in return, a digital audio tape tight-wound on a small spool wrapped in a thin baggie. Brackett stepped into a stall and, after checking the seal on the plastic, shoved the spool up his rectum. The charlies at the Sugarhouse checkpoint were fuzz-cheeked kids who seldom had the nerve to body-search.

It was more than four miles from Foothill to Sugarhouse, but Brackett walked it. Taking the bus made you a target, said you had money to waste. It was easier to slip into the crowds of the unemployed homeless that milled along the broad main thoroughfares, passing under the Buy American banners that stretched over the streets, three to a block and flapping in the wind that came from the west, carrying with it an acrid tang from the copper smelters at Magna. He wondered why they bothered hanging the banners; it wasn't as if you had any choice.

The crowds were thick today, soft spring air drawing them out of their shacks and dens, just roaming around in the sun before the soup kitchens opened at noon. Brackett smelled their unwashed stink, saw their drained and empty faces. The old anger, usually only a background noise, surfaced. It pounded through his head with the force of Stravinsky's percussion.

Patriots' Public Radio said that the unemployment rate was holding steady at twenty-three percent, but Brackett knew they lied. After the economic collapse that followed the nationalization of all industry and the forced divestiture of foreign holdings, the jobless rate had shot up to forty-seven percent. Yet Brackett saw more sad, hopeless men and women on the streets now than there had been eight years ago when Insulation became national policy. Unemployment had dropped some when all foreign nationals, including those married to Americans or naturalized citizens themselves, were deported; but as the country completed its withdrawal from world markets, the reality was that there were no jobs.

Brackett's anger was bone-deep. The worst of it was that he didn't see it reflected in the faces around him. They only milled and waited for their soup. The angry ones had already been gathered up.

Brackett used the *Largo* from the New World Symphony to keep his own anger off his face. Slouching along with the crowd, his ragged jeans and black windbreaker no cleaner than theirs, his brown hair just as shaggy, dirt lined in the creases of his knuckles, he melted into their sullen silence.

There was nothing wrong with his planning. He just ran out of luck.

"Jackals." The word whispered through the crowd and sliced through the Dvorak playing in Brackett's head. Instinctively, he hunched his shoulders, making himself shorter. An eddy formed, pressing people in on Brackett, no one willing to move.

The woman in front of Brackett, a stringy-haired blonde with a skinny baby on her hip, said, "Are they blues?"

Someone snarled, "Shit, no. Goddamn state maroons."

The woman whimpered and backed into Brackett. But there was no place to go. Farther back, where the word hadn't reached, the hungry mass surged forward, carrying them toward the checkpoint. Brackett kept his head down and shuffled along with everyone else.

The two jackals sat on the hood of a long, black Lincoln, strafing the checkpoint line with cold faces. They were shiny with polished silver buckles and buttons, their expressions hidden behind reflecting sunglasses. Their short-sleeved gray uniforms were sharp-creased and bloused into mirror-bright black jumpboots. The angle of their maroon berets claimed an arrogance that set them above run-of-the-mill checkpoint charlies.

Chainlink fencing funnelled the crowd into a Smith's grocery parking lot, clearing the streets for approved traffic. Brackett had no place to go but straight on. The jackals could have been looking for anybody, but the hair on Brackett's neck stood up and prickled. Without being able to see their eyes, he felt their attention rivet on him as the line moved forward. He jammed his

hands in his pockets so he wouldn't wipe the sweat that slid down his cheek.

The jackals watched him hand his ID card to the young charlie who, smug with his small handful of authority, took one look at the red striping that labeled Brackett as unemployable because of un-American activities and immediately ordered him into the stripsearch canvas tent.

Even though the lump in his rectum felt as big as a baseball, Brackett held himself calm and loose as three stripsearch charlies checked the labels on his clothing and shoes and watch. They went through his wallet and turned out the labels on his shorts and t-shirt, seeming disappointed to find Made in America tags on everything. They matched his Social Security number against his retinal pattern on the computer files. When it cleared, they let him put his clothes back on and stamped the date and time on his daily papers. Brackett released a tight-held breath and walked out of the tent right into the cold grins of the two gray jackals.

"Mr. LeBarron wants to see you," Death From Above said. They shoved him into the deep back seat of the Lincoln and drove to what Brackett still thought of as the Hotel Utah, even though it had been turned into an office building several years before Insulation. Frank slung the big car across 21st South and up the wide, mostly empty expanse of State Street while Death From Above hung one arm over the back of the front seat and watched Brackett with a silent, bare-toothed smile. Brackett saw himself reflected in duplicate from the sunglasses and tried to ignore the sudden fear that etched its way up his backbone. He reached for the music, but nothing came into his head.

Rulon LeBarron held no elected office, his name wasn't on any official letterhead, but neither the governor nor the state legislature made any moves that Rulon LeBarron wouldn't like. It was said that he was a jack Mormon, renegade from the teachings of the Saints, but even the LDS church left LeBarron alone. Of all the people Brackett didn't want to meet, Rulon LeBarron topped the list.

Frank parked the Lincoln in the red zone in front of the building. The two jackals marched Brackett through the landscaping of tulips and daffodils and into a foyer of wine carpet and dark furniture heavy with brass fittings. Men in business suits and secretaries in crisp white blouses looked away, suddenly busy elsewhere. With both elbows held in a grip that threatened to numb the nerves, Brackett had no choice but to grit his teeth and move where he was dragged.

LeBarron's suite took up the whole top floor, displacing what had once been a world-class restaurant. The view from the plate-glass windows encompassed the city from Emigration Canyon and the Uinta Mountains on the east to the islands in the shrinking Great Salt Lake. When the elevator disgorged Brackett and his guards, LeBarron was standing, hands laced behind his back, looking down on the golden statue of the angel Moroni with his trumpet topping the Temple that raised its semi-Gothic spires across the street to the west.

LeBarron let them wait in silence for a time before he turned, a smile on his ruddy, affable face. He was a big man, broad with authority, solid in his power. Despite the smile, his eyes were as dead as a snake's. He came around a teak desk the size of a dining table to stand in front of Brackett.

The jackals dropped Brackett's arms. LeBarron made a couple of sucking noises through his front teeth, then said, "I've been told you deal in contraband music, Mr. Brackett."

The fact that LeBarron knew his name scared Brackett more than anything so far. Brackett ignored the swirl in his gut and shook his head. He matched LeBarron's smile. "You've been misinformed. I'm just one of the great unwashed."

LeBarron's smooth forehead creased. "You're a smartass. I don't like smartasses." He nodded to Death From Above. The blond jackal stepped away from Brackett, then backhanded him across the mouth, snapping his head back. Brackett felt blood trickle from a split lip.

LeBarron said, "Let's try again. I know who you are. I know you make your living dealing proscribed music. I want to talk some business."

Brackett slowly raised one hand and wiped his chin. "I don't know what you think I can do for you. You've got me mixed up with someone else."

LeBarron exhaled a sharp breath. "I'm not going to waste much time with you, Mr. Brackett. Give me the tape you picked up this morning."

With his mouth gone suddenly dry, Brackett understood why the chemistry professor had been so nervous. "What tape?"

"Get it," LeBarron said.

Death From Above jerked Brackett's arms behind his back, up between his shoulder blades, and bent him double. Frank pulled a surgical glove from a pocket and slowly stretched the tight rubber over his right hand, grinning into Brackett's face. He dragged Brackett's pants and shorts down and dug for the tape.

Brackett tried to keep the rage and shame off his face and knew he had failed. "You son of a bitch."

Frank stripped the plastic baggie from the spool, dropping the baggie and glove into a trash can, then handed the tape to LeBarron. LeBarron juggled the tape in his palm. "Kallinikov, I believe? Russian." He shook his head sadly. "Garbage. But it does establish your profession beyond doubt. Now shall we talk business?"

Through clenched jaws, Brackett said, "Have I got a choice?"

LeBarron laughed, a jovial, friendly sound. "No, Mr. Brackett, you do not. Now that you understand that, our relationship will go much easier. You may put your pants back on."

LeBarron strode around the desk and sat in a high-backed chair. He plucked a cigar from a teak thermidor and let Brackett wait while he went through the ritual of smelling, clipping and lighting it. Exhaling a corona of sweet blue smoke, he said, "I was dining with a business acquaintance recently. In the course of our conversation, it came out that he is planning to purchase from you a certain piece of illicit music which you have recently acquired and haven't yet merchandised." He drew

again on the cigar. "The Ninth, by Von Karajan and the Berlin Philharmonic, I believe."

The bastard was playing with him and Brackett didn't like it. "So?"

"So, I want that piece, Mr. Brackett."

Brackett felt his blood slow down and get heavy in his veins. Dealing illegal music with Rulon LeBarron had the earmarks of a suicide run. He'd geared himself up to face jail, but he wasn't ready for this. Several different responses flitted through his mind, none of them much use. LeBarron had him, and had the power to do just about anything he chose. Brackett gave in. "All right. What format do you want for your copy?"

"I'm afraid you don't quite understand. I want the master and any copies you've already made. I want exclusive rights to that piece."

"I can't do that. I've already taken money from your 'acquaintance.'"

"But you haven't delivered it."

"Makes no difference. I gave him my word. We have an agreement."

"Break it, Mr. Brackett."

LeBarron's smooth assurance fired Brackett's resistance. "If I slide out of a deal, my reputation goes to hell. If customers can't trust me to deliver the product, my business suffers."

LeBarron chuckled. "Reversals happen to every businessman, Mr. Brackett. What you have to decide is if your business reputation is worth your life."

Death From Above slid his arm around Brackett's shoulders. His voice came soft in Brackett's ear. "Pay attention, sweetheart. This is where it gets interesting."

"I want that piece of music, Mr. Brackett, and I want the only copy."

Brackett shook his head. "I told you I can't do that."

Death From Above's arm tightened. "Bad mistake, Dealer."

Brackett didn't doubt for a minute that the blue-eyed jackal was telling him the hard truth. There wasn't much percentage in playing hero. He shrugged away from Death's embrace. "I could maybe make you an exclusive deal on a version by George Szell and the Cleveland—"

"Trash. Von Karajan defined Beethoven for all time. His interpretation of the double variations of the *Adagio* has never been rivaled. I won't settle for an inferior recording. But I will be generous. I'll double the price you asked for the Von Karajan. That should salve your conscience, Mr. Brackett."

At the smug repetition of his name, emphasis on the *mister,* Brackett felt his good sense snap. Raw anger seared along his nerves. "Do you really think you can buy me that cheap? You bastards took my job. You took my country. You took the rest of the world away from me. You took everything I believed in and twisted it, made it shit. Well, fuck you, *Mr.* LeBarron. This is one time you're going to be disappointed. You don't get the master. You don't get a copy. You don't get the Ninth." He set himself, stomach tight, waiting for the jackals to move on him again.

LeBarron's smile never wavered. "Defiance. People of your sort never learn. We'll talk again tomorrow. You may think differently then. Gentlemen, escort Mr. Brackett to the basement. Discuss the matter. See if you can persuade him to be more agreeable."

Now that the jackals' discussion was over for the time being, Brackett didn't feel agreeable. He just hurt.

After a time, the cold of the concrete floor got through the pain. Shivering hurt, so he forced himself to stand up. It took a while. Once he was up, it felt good to lean his battered face against the chill of the wall.

Helpless rage twisted his gut, hot enough to burn out the fear. Brackett wanted to kill someone—Rulon LeBarron or Death From Above, it didn't matter much which. Preferably both. He reached for the music and pulled in *Götterdämmerung.*

That smooth bastard could have his balls for breakfast before he'd give in.

Brackett broke after the third session. The music was gone, his head empty and echoing. Death From Above proved that the relatively mindless beating they began with was minor compared to the pain that could be inflicted by a truly original mind with access to psychogenic drugs and electric leads. Old methods, maybe, but effective. The most Brackett's pride could manage was to sway on his own two feet as he squinted through blood-encrusted eyelids at Rulon LeBarron and said, "The Ninth is yours."

They sat him in a chair in LeBarron's light-washed office. A warm rag rubbed gently at his face and he smelled a tropical flower perfume. A woman's voice said, "Jesus, you really worked him over. It's going to take a while to fix this."

LeBarron's rumble cut across her protest. "Don't worry about it, Lela. Just make him presentable from a distance. I want to get this business over with."

Nothing was making much sense to Brackett. He flinched as a needle slid into the soft skin inside his left elbow. When it pulled out, the pain was already flowing out with it. He floated, silly-happy with the relief.

Lela's breath was warm on his cheek. "Hold still, babe. Going to fix you right up." With one hand she held his head back and dropped an ice pack over his eyes and nose. She took the ice away and put a warm cloth in its place. After a few changes back and forth, Brackett found his eyes would open some.

Lela's face filled his vision. Big, dark eyes and hard-lined red lips. Olive skin stretched tight over fragile cheekbones. A lot of black hair and golden hoop earrings. Brackett found himself grinning foolishly at her while she dabbed at his face with a makeup sponge. She set a pair of heavy black plastic sunglasses on his broken nose. "There you go. Ready to face the world."

Things started to come back into focus. Death and Frank were standing behind his chair, Rulon LeBarron ensconced behind the desk with Lela sitting on one corner. LeBarron's easy affability was gone. He didn't need it any more. "Lela, you drive the car. I have another task for Frank. Take Mr. Brackett to his stash and bring back

the merchandise. Here's a list." He handed a piece of paper to Death From Above.

That got through. So the bastard was going to clean him out, take more than the Ninth. Something inside him still wanted to tell LeBarron to go to hell, but his flesh screamed at him to stay quiet. His body, at least, had learned Death's lessons.

When they'd finally let him piss this morning, there was more blood than urine in the weak stream that dribbled out. Something inside felt torn, a deep pain that didn't shout as loudly as the burns and lacerations on his skin, but muttered of serious damage somewhere inside.

Death From Above jerked him out of the chair. "Be nice, sweetheart. Make this easy."

LeBarron had turned back to the window, was again staring down on the statue of Moroni atop the Temple. His voice followed them from the room. "You're getting off easy. Remember that, Mr. Brackett. You could just as easily be a faceless body floating in the Jordan River."

Brackett's head cleared a bit during the ride down in the elevator. Whatever drug Lela had injected into his system let him ride over the pain, let him move almost normally in spite of the grinding ache in his lower back.

At the car, Death patted Lela's butt. "Want me to drive? This machine might be too big for you to handle."

"*Maricon,*" Lela muttered as she slid behind the wheel. She took the Lincoln smoothly through the streets.

Brackett slumped into the butter-smooth leather. His head was light enough to float through the top of the car. He felt his heart flutter, its rhythm missing the beat, steadying, then taking off again into a wild fugue. He tried for Vivaldi, but nothing came. The sounds refused to form in his mind.

Death sat wedged in one corner of the deep leather back seat, alert, the ever-present grin stretching his lips. Brackett ignored him as much as possible and gave directions to Lela: east on 4th, right onto 9th East, then south to Ramona, a quiet, tree-shaded street in the cleared zone, lined with modest brick houses surrounded by small yards planted with fuchsia and lilacs. Halfway down the block, Brackett said, "Stop here."

The curtain twitched in a side window as Brackett led them down the cement driveway to the rear entrance of his basement apartment. Brackett noticed but didn't expect any help from his landlord. The jackal's uniform guaranteed that Brackett had too much trouble coming down for anybody with half a brain to get involved. Like LeBarron, all Brackett wanted was to get this over with so he could work on finding a discreet doctor who could fix whatever was wrong inside him. If it was fixable. That fear crept to the surface of his mind as he unlocked the double deadbolts on his door.

The basement was black-dark. Death pushed Brackett inside and snapped, "Light."

Brackett flipped the wall switch.

"Holy shit," Death said.

There was one room with a door leading to a tiny bathroom. A hotplate on the counter beside a rust-stained sink sufficed for the little cooking Brackett bothered with. A bright Mexican blanket covered an iron bedstead. The slit windows were stuffed with styrofoam slabs and hung with black cloth. A metal chair was shoved under the sink. Wooden crates served as cupboards for the few shirts and levis Brackett owned. An industrial-sized humidifier hummed quietly in the middle of the room.

There wasn't room for much else. Tapes, CDs, old vinyl LPs, Technics DAT units, TEAC open-reel decks, a Pyramid mixer, equalizers, pre-amps, a couple of Marantz duplicators, a jumble of Bang & Olufson components, even a few outdated Sony and Sansui and Pioneer stereos covered every centimeter of wall space and were piled in the corners.

Death whistled softly. "You got enough shit here to go to jail for a few million years." He prowled the length of the shelves, drawing one finger along the catalogued titles. "And would you just look at this? Dealer, I'm impressed. You got quite a stash here."

"He ain't got no speakers," Lela said. "Why not?"

Having them poke through his equipment and the music he'd painstakingly collected over the years felt like rape. Brackett nodded at the Sennheiser HD-250s hanging on a pegboard. "Headphones. Quieter than speakers."

"He's the careful sort."

"Lot of good that did you," Lela said. "Too bad. What all you got here?" She peered at the titles under the neatly labeled heading *Rock.*

The pain was beginning to creep back at Brackett. "Take what you want and get out. Leave me alone."

The jackal quit grinning. "Afraid we can't do that, Dealer. Something Rulon didn't tell you." He reached up and tore the styrofoam from a window over the sink. Grabbing the chair, Death From Above used it to break out the glass. He dumped a metal wastebasket and set it in the sink. He reached into a pocket in the gray uniform and pulled out what looked like an orange sausage wrapped in seven-mil polyplastic. "You got proscribed, un-American material here, sweetheart. Rulon don't like that," he said, then ripped the plastic off the chub. Flicking open a Zippo, Death held the flame to the orange gel. It flared into white fire as he dropped it into the trash can.

Death handed Lela the paper LeBarron had given him. "See which ones of these he's got. Pull them out."

Lela read the list. "What about this other stuff? I sorta like some of them." She took a CD box from the shelf. "Pink Floyd. This is a good one."

Death grabbed her wrist, twisting. He caught the disk as it slipped from her grasp.

Lela's eyes slitted. "Bastard." She rubbed her wrist.

He held the box over the flaming trash can. "See, Dealer, Rulon thinks you're slime. You pervert everything decent America stands for with this foreign rot." Smoke was beginning to rise from the bottom edge of the box when Death drew his hand back. "That's what Rulon thinks."

Brackett stilled the sudden throb of hope. "What do you think?"

Death From Above looked at Brackett with serious blue eyes. Then the grin curled around his face. "Me? I don't think. I just arrange to get Rulon what he wants. It's Rulon's game. You, on the other hand, are one dumb sucker. You just haven't learned when to bend over. It's

a new order, sweetheart. If you're too stupid to figure that out, then we better get you out of the gene pool. You made the number one stupid mistake. You got involved with your product. Bad news, bad news." He tossed the CD into the trash can. Dark smoke billowed up from the can and ran out through the broken window.

"You miserable shit," Lela said.

Brackett jumped him, swinging. Death stepped into Brackett's rush. Two short punches, one to the sternum and one in the pit of his belly, put Brackett down, curled up, trying to suck air into his shocked lungs.

Death From Above used two fingers to pull another CD, holding it like he had a rat by the tail. "Prokofiev." He shook his head. "Trash." It sailed into the fire.

Brackett watched, swearing weakly when he could breathe again, as Death went down the line. "Rachmaninoff, Mussorgsky, Tchaikovsky, more Russian garbage. As differentiated from French garbage." A handful of DAT cassettes went into the fire. "Or Italian garbage. Or Polish garbage. And German garbage—which, according to Rulon, is not garbage." He shrugged. "It's all garbage to me. My, my, Dealer, you've been a busy little fellow. This looks like a lifetime's work."

Lela folded her arms around her purse, holding it to her breasts. "For Christ's sake, get on with it, you psychotic shit. Just do it. You don't have to enjoy it."

Death froze, a La Boheme LP in his hand. his teeth snapped together. his voice hissed out flat and deadly. "Your turn is coming, whore. I hear Rulon's getting tired of you. Guess who's second in line."

Lela backed up a step.

Brackett watched as Death grabbed a handful of cassettes under *Rock* and waved them before Lela's face. "This is the kind of crap you like, isn't it?" He slung them into the trash can and took several more. Turning the slim plastic boxes, he read, "Tommy, a Rock Opera by The Who. Bye-bye, Tommy." He flipped it over his shoulder.

"Stop it," Lela said.

Death From Above went back to the trashcan. "How about this one. U2, The Joshua Tree." He tossed it up and caught it just before it dropped into the flames. "You like this one? What'll you give me for it?"

"I won't give you shit."

From the sudden tension in her body, Brackett could tell she wanted it. He spat to clear the blood out of his mouth. "Give him what he wants. Give him anything. Once that tape is gone, it's gone forever."

Lela looked down at Brackett. She looked at Death grinning, then back at the shelf of music.

Brackett got to his knees, shutting out the pain that lanced through his back and darkened his vision. "He's going to burn them all. Gabriel, Police, Beatles, Collins, everything. Stop him and you can have them." Brackett pitched his voice low, talking to her like a lover. "The only copies left. You can have them all."

Death laughed. "Right. I am definitely going to burn them." He held the tape out to her. "You want this?"

Lela reached for the tape. Death From Above caught her wrist, pulling her close, wrapping both arms around her. "Of course, you've got to pay for it."

Lela jerked free of his embrace. "I'd rather screw a snake."

His face went cold. "That can be arranged. Might be fun to watch."

"You'll never know."

Death grabbed Lela, pinioning her arms. He covered her mouth with his, grinding a kiss onto her lips. Lela twisted her face away. He took her face in both hands and kissed her again. She bit him.

"Shit!" Death slapped her, a hard openhanded slap that knocked her back onto Brackett's bed. "You like that kind of game? Fine with me. Let's play."

Lela's hand came out of her purse gripping a short-barreled .357. She leveled the gun at Death's chest and pulled the trigger. The slug slammed the jackal crashing against the humidifier. Death folded over the humidifier, then slumped to the floor. Blood ran from under his body to puddle on the worn, yellow linoleum.

Lela dropped the gun on the bed. She looked at the body and put both hands over her mouth.

Brackett's ears rang from the blast. His mind was empty. A couple of the orange chubs had spilled out of Death's pocket. He picked one up, rolling it between his palms.

Lela sagged off the bed onto the floor. "Oh, shit."

The room stank of blood and urine and cordite.

The chub gave under Brackett's fingers, not liquid, not solid. He coughed to clear the rasp from his throat. "What is this stuff?"

Lela looked blankly at him. She closed her eyes, opened them, shrugged. "Plastic explosive. Death keeps a couple of boxes in the trunk. Kept a couple of boxes."

Brackett put the chub down very gently.

Lela managed a laugh. "Don't worry. It's stable. Won't explode without a detonator." She stretched out one foot and prodded Death's body. "Jesus, what am I going to do now?" Pinning Brackett with a dark gaze, she said, "For that matter, what are *you* going to do now, Dealer?"

The takeup reel in Brackett's brain started turning again. Death From Above wasn't just going to rip off his stash, the son of a bitch was destroying it. Deciding what was good and bad according to LeBarron's list. Destroying everything that didn't fit with LeBarron's narrow fucking range of approval. He looked at Death and was sorry he hadn't been the one who pulled the trigger.

There wasn't any music left in his head. Nothing to orchestrate the destruction of his life. His pulse fluttered, fast, slow, fast. His head pounded in time to the thump of pain growing in his body, shrieking that, beyond any doubt, the beatings had ripped something irreparable. Kidneys. Spleen. The diagnosis wasn't important. They said you always knew when you were dying.

And with the music gone, maybe it didn't matter. Or maybe it did.

Brackett got to his hands and knees and crawled to the jackal's body. Going through the pockets, he found several more chubs. "How do you detonate these?"

"Plain old blasting caps. There's some of them in the trunk, too. Be Prepared, that was Death's motto. Oh, Jesus, Dealer, we're dead."

"You're half right." Ignoring the wrench of abused muscles, Brackett turned Death over. He unbuckled the jackal's belt and began pulling at the pants. "Help me."

"Why?"

"Because I want his pants."

"You gotta take his boots off first," Lela said. Her fingers fumbled at the metal buckles. "Why do I have the feeling you're going to do something real stupid?"

There was a little blood on the front waistband, but the black belt hid it. The shirt was soaked with Death's blood, useless. The boots were too big, but laced tight, they would do. He set the maroon beret on his head.

Lela looked at Brackett, at the livid welts and yellow-green bruises that covered his torso. She shook her head. "His gray jacket is in the car. I'll get it."

While she was gone, Brackett rummaged through a pile of CDs she had pulled from the shelves. He found the Ninth, with the photo of von Karajan, face intent, both arms lifted, eyes looking beyond human limitation, raising the Berlin Symphony into a soaring act of inspired creation. The disk was still safely spindled inside the transparent plastic. Brackett took a small canvas bag, put the Ninth inside it, then added a Strauss tape and a Panasonic portable DAT deck with lightweight phones.

Lela returned just as he was scraping the last crumpled bills from their hiding place in the wall behind the huge, antique Akai open-reeler. He took the jacket and handed her the money. She took it, her eyes full of questions. "You want to get out of Salt Lake City?" he asked.

"It would be a real good idea, Dealer. Rulon is gonna be real pissed."

Brackett nodded, feeling the tang of old blood in his throat. he stretched his shoulders carefully. It hurt. The ache in his kidneys felt like something chewing at his flesh from the inside. "Don't worry about LeBarron. Show me how to use the blasting caps. Help me pack what's left of my stash in the Lincoln. There's over ten thousand dollars here. That and the car should get you to Seattle. I've got a phone number for you. Memorize it. If you give the music to the guy who answers, he'll get you into Canada."

"Drive from here to Seattle with a car full of contraband music. Uh-uh. I'm not stupid. You're going to have to come up with a better idea than that."

Brackett rubbed one hand over his face, swearing as he touched the crushed cartilage in his nose. Eventually, when the reek of Death's decomposing body called the landlord to check out his room, all the music would be lost anyway. "All right, forget the rest of it. Just save the Ninth. You'll need it to get over the border."

Lela edged around Death From Above, stooped in the corner and came up with *The Joshua Tree*. "I want this one, too. I heard it when I was a kid. I like it." She moved back to Brackett and put one cool hand on his cheek. Her head tilted. She looked at him through long, black lashes. "You could come with me. No use dying for a pile of plastic."

He didn't try to explain that it was more than ribbons of plastic, electronic parts, metal fittings, digital storage and laser optics, copper wires and shreds of solder. He shrugged the jackal's gray windbreaker over his shoulders. The decision made, he felt disconnected, his skin gone cold.

Bent over the trunk of the Lincoln, the car's plates and the jackal uniform making them invisible to the muted inhabitants of Ramona Avenue, Lela showed him the simplicity of attaching blasting caps to the chubs. When he understood, she brought a book of Alta Club matches from her purse. "Go out in a blaze of glory, you idiot."

Brackett settled into the front passenger seat of the Lincoln. The car's door shut with a solid clunk. Like maybe the door to hell. Lela started the engine, heavy-footed, revving it a couple of times. "You're sure about this?"

Brackett inserted the Ninth into the Blaupunk CD player and searched to the last track. He leaned back into the soft headrest. His eyes closed. "Take the long way back. You have about twenty-four minutes to kill." He punched *Play*. The last movement of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony, the *Ode to Joy,* swelled into the car, drowning out the rumble of the engine, drowning out thought, washing the ugly reality of Insulation America from his consciousness; leaving only the wonder of a rich baritone voice proclaiming *Freude, schöner Götterfunken*! Strangely enough, Brackett knew the joy. Maybe even the bright spark of divinity. He couldn't analyze his actions. Saving this piece of music would have to be enough.

Lela turned right onto 9th East and headed south. She raised her voice over the music. "You could change your mind, Dealer."

"Shut up," Brackett said.

Alle Menschen werden Brüder.

Her timing was good. The car rolled to a stop as the final notes faded into silence. She watched Brackett as he checked the plastique chubs stuffed into his pockets, more of them bulking inside his black Deadhead t-shirt until the jacket barely fastened. She leaned across the wide seat and brushed her lips across his battered cheek. "Good luck, Dealer."

Standing outside the car, Brackett dropped the Panasonic DAT portable into the pocket with the fused chubs and matches. He settled the headphones under the maroon beret and shoved the tape in. He passed into the Hotel Utah with Te Kanawa's crystalline soprano pouring Richard Strauss's *Beim Schlafengehn* into his head. It gave him courage, for a bit, anyway. For long enough.

Heading north on I-15 toward Idaho, weaving the car through the sparse traffic, Lela saw the flash of the blast in her rear-view mirror. The concussion shook the Lincoln two miles away as the explosion took out the southwestern corner of the top floor, blowing the peregrine falcons from their nest under the cornice. A flying chunk of granite sheared Moroni from his perch atop the Temple. Dense black smoke roiled from the shattered stone and glass and twisted steel.

Lela lit a cigarette and inhaled deeply. "Here's to ya, Dealer." She shoved the U2 tape into the player and cranked the volume up. ✦

Ex Cathedra

Illustration by Timothy Standish

A. L. Sirois

"You're wasting your time, Father," says Sid Birkhead.

The Hispanic chaplain looks up from his Bible. "Excuse me?"

"Nothing, forget it." Birkhead turns toward the sink. He draws off a glass of water and stares at the dust motes swirling in the liquid.

—plunging his arm in icy water—

He looks at his forearm. There are craters there, old puckered cigarette burns, healed. More than thirty.

—time, Father—

"You oughta show some civility," the black corrections officer at the cell door says loudly.

"I am being civil," Birkhead says, pushing thoughts of his father out of his mind. He glowers at the guard from under bushy eyebrows and carefully balances the glass on the rim of the stained metal sink.

The guard scowls but says nothing.

"I am sorry for you," says the chaplain softly, closing the Bible. "But if it's your decision not to pray. . . ."

"No reason to," says Birkhead, "because I'm not taking the walk." He tilts his head at the door of the cell. His palms are very damp and he wipes them—unobtrusively, he hopes—on his trousers. "Stay'll come through, just like the first one."

"That was a different governor," says the guard, looking at

his watch. "Now, y'know, I never seen no stay come in this late." He grins at Birkhead. It's the first time Birkhead has seen the man smile. There's a noticeable gap between the guard's front teeth.

The chaplain opens the Bible.

Birkhead waves his hand, dismissing the rite. "Still not my style, no matter what," he says. "Put it down as my last request. No send-off for the old soul."

He taps the glass. It topples into the sink and shatters. He frowns at the shards. There is something about the glass. . . . He tries to catch the memory but it eludes him.

Yeah, déjà vu, sure. I been here before.

"I'm sorry for you," the chaplain says again, quickly. "May the Lord have mercy on you."

The black guard stands aside and taps a finger to the brim of his cap as the priest leaves the cell.

"Little late for that!" Birkhead calls out. He laughs and says to the guard, "He can keep that blessing, right?"

"The man's just doin' his job. It's more'n you deserve."

Birkhead picks at his gray trousers. There are small balls of fuzz all over them, relics of the prison laundry. He can feel the laundry room's humidity, smell the sharp odor of hot cloth. . . . Sharp odor of hot cloth. Mine, and soon. He grits his teeth.

The guard looks at his watch, then at Birkhead. "You ready?" he asks.

"I'm ready in your face. C'mon, I'm not worried. You guys won't even have time to strap me in before the phone rings."

He strides out into the tan-painted corridor of the death house so quickly that the guard has to hurry to catch up with him. His footsteps echo off the asphalt tiles and green-painted iron bars around him.

At the end of the hall the prison psychologist, a sturdy white-haired woman, waits at the door with two more guards.

"Join the cortege," Birkhead says to her. She nods at the first guard, says nothing. The group enters the short hallway leading to the stark chamber housing the chair.

"How many are out there?" Birkhead asks, pausing at the dark blue-green door.

"Two, three thousand," says the black guard. "Give or take a hundred or so." He reaches past Birkhead's narrow shoulders and grasps the door handle. "Dunno how much TV audience you got."

Birkhead forces a chuckle as the door swings open. Light pours in—the crew is ready, the cameras all in place. This one really is down to the wire. He licks his lips and squints against the glare of the klieg lights. "A good ten million," he says, looking into the guard's impassive face. "And standing room only in here."

He starts to walk through, but just then the guard's composure cracks. He grabs Birkhead by the arm and leans toward him.

"Hey!" says the psychologist, "leave him alone." But the guard ignores her and the other two guards who now move forward.

"Y'know, you make me wanna puke," the guard says. "It's one thing not to care about killin' that girl, but you don't even give a damn about yourself, do you?"

Birkhead shakes himself loose. "Honk off, pal. I caught her in bed with somebody I thought was my friend. I lost it. What would you have done? And if I didn't care about myself I wouldn'ta put in for a stay, would I?"

The chair is lit by a white spotlight. This is as close as Birkhead has ever come to it. Now, so near, he feels his nerve begin to give way. He knows his knees are going to buckle . . . and there's only one place to sit.

I'm not going to lose it here! Birkhead takes a deep breath and jams his hands into his pockets, willing his legs to keep him upright. He stares at the chair as if inspecting it.

The psychologist touches his arm, and Birkhead begins walking forward. From around the back of the chair steps the executioner. The audience falls silent.

The executioner is a small man wearing a suit of conservative cut. He looks like an accountant.

A boom mike swings low to catch his soft voice. "Time," he says to Birkhead, his eyes mild but very shiny.

"Not a bad job, huh?" Birkhead hears himself asking. "You ever talk about your day with the wife?" You're great, he says to himself—This is such a waste!

The mild eyes narrow. "Have . . . a seat."

The guards strap him in gently but firmly. He looks up and through the glare of the lights at the tiers of spectators rising up into dimness.

The chair has no padding. God, why should I have expected that? He has to bite back a bray of hysterical laughter.

Nothing is real any more. The lights, the cameras, the stage crew . . .

All across the country, "they" are watching. He wants to rise, to shout defiance at them, but the executioner moves in and begins to secure the straps and suddenly the defiance evaporates.

Birkhead feels a peculiar lightheadedness. Sure, shave a guy's head, it's lighter, right? Cooler. I may need that, soon. He almost smiles, but then the executioner begins attaching the electrodes.

Only minutes now . . . when the hell is the governor—

A phone rings on one of the consoles outside the illuminated area. Birkhead twists toward the sound as much as he is able; the head clamp digs into his temples. He ignores the pain, straining to hear.

"The governor," he says hoarsely. "Got to be, right?"

Someone replaces the receiver on its hook and walks out from around the console toward the chair.

It is Jay Chan, the producer. He seems barely out of his teens.

"That was him, wasn't it?" Birkhead flexes his arms against the wrist restraints. "So come on, let me up, let me out of this friggin' thing."

"It was the warden," says Chan softly. "Your stay was denied. I'm sorry. Godspeed."

Birkhead stares at Chan's retreating back. "No-o-o!"

His heart thumps painfully in his chest. Oh sweet Jesus it's really happening!

The executioner makes a final adjustment to something behind the chair, then steps back. He turns to face the crowd and bows his head.

Someone in the audience coughs.

The house lights dim, and the stage lights come up, green fading into yellow into red. A spatter of applause ripples through the crowd. Birkhead's hands grip the chair's arms in convulsive anticipation.

Am I going to feel this?

The executioner throws the switch—the lights flare WHITE. Even as the power rips through him, Birkhead hears the roaring approval of the audience. His fried nerve endings unravel and sensation scrambles, blurs, whirls off . . . blackness . . .

Part of the beauty of the designer drug Birkhead uses is that the sublethal electric shock breaks down its molecular structure, cancelling the memory-overlay effect. It gives him a thundering hangover, but that only lasts for a few minutes.

He smacks his lips, rubs his eyes as the nausea fades.

"How are you feeling?" asks the doctor. "What's your middle name?"

"Rotten, but I like it, thanks. Peter. Red, orange, yellow, green, blue, indigo, violet. Okay? Up, down, color, charm, strange—"

"Okay, okay," says the doctor. "That's it, boys." He and the other medicos begin packing up their gear.

"Wayne," says Birkhead, looking around.

The actor playing the black prison guard saunters over. "What's up?" he asks.

"That bit where you said I made you want to puke," says Birkhead. He pushes himself up from the chair.

"Yeah, hey, look, I'm sorry about that," says Wayne. "It just came to me. I felt my character would react—"

"I'd like to leave it in," says Birkhead. "Depending on audience reaction."

"You liked it?"

"Yeah. It had that ring to it. Thanks."

Wayne grins. "Nothin' to it, Sid."

The set's PA speakers click on. "Like to see the tape, Sid?" asks a tech in the control booth.

"Yeah," says Birkhead. "I'll be right up." He turns to the floor manager. "Hey, where's Chan?"

"Hold on." The floor manager mutters into his headset.

Chan approaches from where he's been going over the blocking for the next performance with the actors.

"Yo, Birkie—what's up?" he asks.

"Two things," says Birkhead. "First of all, get me a new shrink. This one's just collecting her check. I need someone who can get into what I'm trying to do here."

"Come on, Sid, she's only got that one line," says Chan.

"I don't care, she isn't putting anything into it."

"I'll get someone to work with her this afternoon. She'll be better. What's the second thing?"

"Some moron put a glass in my cell instead of a metal cup," says Birkhead. "I could have used it to cut my wrists. They don't have glasses on Death Row. I think it sent a ripple through my conditioning . . . I know I felt something weird when I saw it. I'm paying you guys for better detailing than that."

"Whup, mea damn culpa," says Chan. "Sorry. I'll have Props lose the glass and get a cup next time."

A fortyish woman, plump, dressed in black and carrying a palm computer, wanders out of the wings.

"Ms. Arant," murmurs Birkhead in acknowledgment.

"Sidney," says the monocled critic, inclining her head. "Thanks so for inviting me." She pokes a long-nailed finger at her keypad and glances archly at Birkhead.

"I sense an airy dismissal here," says Birkhead, trying to keep the edge out of his voice.

"Sidney, you're leaving us all behind," says Arant. "Your orchestration of effects and memory overlays takes my breath away. I just wonder if we're seeing enough tension between you as a scapegoat and you as the architect of your own fate."

"There's no lack of irony in the piece," says Birkhead.

"Along these dark ways, irony isn't enough," says Arant. "Anyone living on the Lower East Side knows that. And we're your peers, Sidney."

Birkhead snorts. "Ms. Arant, I live here because after I get done paying the techs and the other performers I can't afford to live anywhere else. You upload in the 90's. So give me a break."

As she lifts a finger and starts to respond, he looks up at the control booth, frowning.

She falters.

"Cut it there," he calls.

"Right," says the tech's voice on the PA.

"What's wrong?" Arant asks.

"This sucks. It goes on too long. It's me, not you. I'm not ringing with this. Doctor Austin?"

"Here," says the medic, unfolding his length up from the video pit, where he's been watching on a monitor.

"I want an overlay for this part, too. I can't find my way through it if I'm aware she's not a real critic."

"That's not something I'd advise," the doctor says.

Jay Chan approaches. "Why not reconsider your position on scripts?" he asks. "Just this one part of it . . ."

"The dynamic is all wrong," says Birkhead. "There's the whole male-female thing along with the fluctuating subordinate relationship. Let's extend the overlay and tailor it."

Austin is shaking his head. "I'd have to design something which wouldn't degrade through the shock. But then I couldn't guarantee how long it would take to wear off. It would be risky—and expensive."

"Cut the part, then," Chan says. The actress looks petulant but says nothing. "Maybe it throws the piece off."

Birkhead sighs. "Dammit," he says, "I never was any good at endings." He walks away, muttering.

The doctor snorts a soft laugh, watching him go.

"Amazing," says Chan. "You're sure his braincoat won't come off before the actual performance? There's no way he'll remember it's your piece and not his?"

"I'd stake my career-change on it. The overlays are good for another two weeks."

"In that case," says Chan, "we'll be able to sell as many of these scenarios as you can develop. Public television is back in business, Doctor—thanks to you."

"Setting up for Scene Four—girlfriend in the restaurant," calls the floor manager.

"I do love the media," says Doctor Austin, grinning. ✦

The Gygr

Wennicke Eide

Illustration by Richard Mandrachio

I screamed at him to leave me alone, but he couldn't hear me. He was in my mind and I couldn't get him out.

I walked faster. The soughing trees retreated before bare rock; dry heather and disintegrating moss, faded grass, clung precariously in thin, dirt-filled clefts of stone.

Wind swept my face, its flow drowning out his voice. I took a deep breath. Thank you, wind.

The hillcrest rose above the trees, a squat hump, wrinkled and pockmarked, tufted with dead grass. I sat. The wind was out of the north, pure and clean; I breathed deeply and felt, for a moment, normal: a tiny speck of humanity, me, in the vast land, pale eternity above my head, solid stone beneath my feet, uncaring. Alone. Completely alone. Sweaty, windblown, hair in my eyes, rock against my bony behind. I patted the rough stone. Though there was no sun, it was warm to my touch.

After a while there was rain. I returned to the cabin with wet jeans clinging, and soaked feet. The fire soon warmed the cabin and filled it with flickering, living light, though occasional gusts of rain-wet wind swept down the

chimney throughout the night, filling the room with smoke.

In my head, the never-ending dialogue continued.

". . . and in the morning, when I was so sick I could barely stand, you told me to go lie on the couch, take it easy, you would fix breakfast. I lay on the couch and waited, I heard you moving around but I didn't smell any coffee or toast. I waited. And then I heard the door slam and your steps on the front walk. The car started. You were gone. No breakfast.

"I knew you were gone for the day, on the corner with your friends or playing cards in somebody's garage."

"I forgot. It wasn't on purpose. I just forgot."

"I know. That's worse. My impact on your life. The degree of my importance."

"You're important."

"Sure. When you're the sick one. . . ."

"Let's have a party on your birthday. A barbecue."

"I'd rather go out to dinner. Just the two of us."

"Yeah. A party. That'd be nice. It's been a while since we had one. I'll ask Jim and Mary, and Joe, and Tham, and Carey and Cyn and the kids, of course, and Mom and Dad, right? Sure. Think I'll go down now, see who's out, maybe ask some of the other guys too."

"I don't want a barbecue. I'd rather eat out."

"See you later. I'll ask Marty too, okay? . . ."

"You don't listen."

"I know."

"But you get so mad when people don't listen to you."

"I know."

"How can you defend it to yourself, being like that?"

"I don't know. . . ."

I opened the window wide. Night. Night is all black, really. Living in the city, with the street lights and neon signs and other people's bright windows, you forget about blackness. Night blackness. And cold, wet wind in your face. The sound of it. Drumming on your roof. Moaning, shaking the cabin, tapping insistently at your window.

An entirely different kind of loneliness.

He woke me early. His dark, melancholy face suddenly there, before me, ineradicable: knowing his suffering. Is he drinking now?

I rose in the soft, fluid light of predawn, pulled on my jeans and thick, gray sweater and fled from him.

Wet grass swishing against my boots, dew-beaded branches sprinkling my hair. All the colors are deep and earth-bound, subdued yet vibrant: jewels gleaming in shadow.

The trees parted before me. The stony hill was outlined against the gentle pearl-light of morning, haloed contour with bulk yet in darkness, its profile stark. I saw an old woman, heavy head contemplatively bent, hawk-nose sagging above stony jowls, massive shoulders petrified. The rest of her had been lost beneath lichen and moss, heather and bog myrtle and stunted juniper, but I could still see the soft, heavy line of breast and belly, the faint indication of thighs.

She was kneeling. And one hand, close-fisted, the knuckles gray stone.

I had been standing motionless. A faint haze of rain drifted down from the low clouds into the semidarkness beneath the trees, moistening my face. Just as I was lifting one hand to wipe at the drop at the tip of my nose, I saw those massive shoulders shift: a tiny movement almost invisible in the gloom except that their angle against the light was suddenly different, the charcoal network of ledges and clefts where hardy plants grew subtly changed to a slightly altered pattern.

Beside the hooked nose a granite eyelid stirred. Darkness looked at me.

At some other point in my life, would I have been scared? I don't know. To me, the most frightening thing in my life was the dialogue in my mind that wouldn't cease, the endless repetitious discussions and arguments and meaningless conversations that hadn't done us any good back then and were senseless here, now, in me, a jarring accompaniment to my every action, slowly destroying me. If there had been room for fear, I would be terrified that I was going mad.

Instead of running, fleeing with hammering heart through the wet woods, I stepped forward. A spontaneous action rather than a considered one, though I did not in the least feel threatened. The ground beneath my boots made sloshing, sucking sounds as I waded across a small marsh, leaving foot-shaped indentations in the bright green moss. Hesitantly, I leaned both hands on the gray fist, my palms curving around one huge knuckle; I could hardly step on it, now.

Again, it was warm to my touch. I patted it, softly, over and over.

"Hello," I said faintly.

In my head there was silence.

In the northern countries we love midsummer, the long, bright season when day barely dips into dusk; we laugh in the streets all night and revere the sun.

But in winter we struggle out of bed in darkness and trudge through the frozen streets under chill pools of street lights; we leave our offices and factories and schools in twilight, gray-faced in the pale snow. Deep depression hovers.

My hands and body were still brown from the summer sun. Never before had I been impatient with its bright bloom, indifferent to its heat. I lay in an ancient, faded lawn chair under the sun's eye and waited for nightfall, or roamed the heather-clad moors looking for orange and scarlet and brown: the colors of autumn, of early dusk and long nights.

For the gygr, it had to be dark. Twilit. Dusky. No ray of sun must surprise her. Sunlight is immobilizing for her folk. If she looks the sun in the eye, it may kill.

Her voice was rusty and scratchy and low, barely comprehensible to me; her words were slooow, pronounced separately, one by one, with pauses between them, and in an ancient dialect I could barely understand. But she could project thoughts and emotions directly into me. I found it frightening at first, intrusive, too intimate; I resisted her, closed myself tight. Once I got used to it I found that it greatly improved our communication. I tried to communicate back to her the same way, but it was hard for me to do, and I was never sure that she actually got my meaning. It was much easier to simply speak to her, out loud; my emotions accompanied my words, spilled out along with my monologues. She seemed to enjoy listening.

Gygra. My friend Gygra. I often thought to myself, during my marriage to a man who did not listen to me, how lonely I am. Lonelier to be alone with another person than to be by oneself. Better to be actually alone: an honest loneliness, that. So I thought. But loneliness such as the gygr's is incomprehensible to me.

In her looow, slooow voice, she remembers a great, blue glacier and eternal snow, glass-green ice caverns, frozen black rock; only much, much later does she recall noticing humans, tiny skin-clad gnats making smoky fires in the woods, briefly seen in their brightly sailed boats crossing the stormy fjord.

If they came too near, she swatted them.

She had a mate then. And there were others around, here and there, of her folk. None of them cared much for company, each preferring to roam his or her territory alone, coming together only rarely. Her mate used to tramp the woods and hills north of this moor. Need, when it arose, was always mutual for the two of them. And they always knew to find each other.

Time is not something she understands the way we do. She can only send me the image of a landscape much different from the one I can see, and yet the same: the faraway fjord is wider, the water much higher; the mountains have different, more robust profiles; the vegetation is diverse. Taller. Greener. And in the center of the land is a hulking shape. Him. The troll. Her mate.

But he is no longer around. A long time he's been gone. I get vague images of needs not met, puzzlement, then white-hot desire fading slowly, followed by resignation. Loneliness of a different kind.

More time passing. Gygra is tired. Very tired. Her movements slower. Slower. No hurry. No point to it. Sit down. Rest awhile, sleep among hills gradually smoothed, rounded by time. Always alone.

A tiny disturbance. Unnoticed at first, then vaguely irritating. But unimportant. Nothing that affects her. Still, it is repeated at daily intervals, each time a little more noticeable, irritating. Troubling the gygr's sleep. Swat it?

No. Too much of an effort. Let it be. But sleep is no longer profound. And then, gradually, a faint but persistent curiosity: what manner of creature is this gnat?

My dialogues, my endless mad, sad petty dialogues that are the painful story of my marriage, disturbing the gygr's rest.

Her curiosity grew to the point where she had to look at me. Tiny, odd creature, containing such a hot, violent torrent of emotion within its puny frame; she examines a human being closely for the first time and sees miniature, recognizable hands, feet, face not unlike her own; kin?

Sharing her curiosity with me, she includes her irritation and the urge to swat me. But I am not afraid.

It felt so good to have a friend. A woman friend, one who wanted to know the muddle of my feelings and the tangle of my marriage. It was very alien to her. Her lack of familiarity with human folly forced me to clarify and be precise; for her, I thought at first, until I realized how much of it was for me.

Why did I leave him? Did I stop loving him? I knew that at one point in time I decided it was too painful to love him, that I would have to stop it; it's possible to make yourself stop loving if you work hard at it. Or is it?

And even more difficult: why couldn't he hear me? Was it because his own voice was too loud, his own needs too pressing, to admit another's? Or was it me, too: did he not hear me because I spoke not expecting to be heard?

Having to spell it all out for the gygr did not so much clarify my anger and pain as it made them starker, clearer, and pinpointed my confusion: if I could stand no more of it, of him, surely I had to leave. But then, why this pain? Why did I miss him so?

"Would you like some breakfast?"

"Sure."

"Some eggs and ham and grilled tomatoes?"

"Sure."

"Here."

"What's this? I didn't want anything to eat."

"But you said . . ."

"I'm not hungry. And I don't like grilled tomatoes."

I was unable to find any resolution to my feelings. But gradually, it became clear to me that the gygr, too, struggled with her conflicting emotions, using, perhaps, my distress to clarify her own.

More clear-cut than mine, her feelings. She, after all, had been left by herself. Once a proud, free female, queen of all her lands, deliberately choosing solitude yet needing only to beckon her mate when desire grew in her, she had been unknowingly left behind, had become, through no act of her own, a relic, a curiosity out of her own time; a crone. The last of her kind, ancient, frigid, dry. Desolate.

It had taken her a long time to know this. But now, sometimes, I could feel the hot flow of resentment in her, resentment against her kin.

What had happened to him? She didn't know, couldn't know; he might have been gone a century by the time she noticed. She had no comprehension of time, passing time. Did he turn to stone? No. She would have felt him still, known him. Dead? She was vague about that, didn't know about death as it might apply to her own kind; did they die at all?

And was she the last? Did, perhaps, somewhere else exist, another place or state or dimension where she was supposed to be, too? Were there others there, long since having left her here, either through oversight or deliberately, to ignorance and loneliness, never to know?

Choices had been made in her absence; journeys had been undertaken without her company; death, perhaps, had been voluntarily chosen, but where? Her ignorance cut like a knife.

She asked me pointed, acute questions that had to do with listening and understanding. Why had my mate been unable to hear me? Was this caused by some defect in him, or in me? Was this a common condition in humans? To her last question I had to say, yes, it was common, but this did not clarify the basic question for either of us: had my husband been unable to listen, or had I been unable to communicate?

Had some tragedy befallen the gygr's mate? Could she have helped? Had she failed to listen when disaster struck him?

Or had he callously tired of her and moved on out of her life without a goodbye?

Either alternative was equally painful to her. His conscious rejection, or her unconscious one. And, worse, the enigma was unknowable. But was mine?

Together, we spent the days agonizing over the unanswerable questions. Often, I felt guilty for being the cause of such heavy anguish; before my arrival the gygr had rested complacently, her mind dormant, calm. I had disturbed her peace. My pain had awakened hers.

All the same, we both felt the warmth of another woman's company: somebody to share with, somebody to cry with, to laugh with. I was reminded of my first years at college, the shared dormitories, shared friends, shared emotions. During first love, and first love lost, you had a friend to rejoice with, and, later, a shoulder to cry on, the safe, warm knowledge that a shoulder was yours for the asking. And when you were the one giving comfort, you were filled with love for your friend, and the certainty that some things were forever.

The gygr did not cry. But I sensed within her a growing anger: the anger of one rejected; the rage of unanswered questions asked centuries too late.

"Let's go down to the club for a drink tonight."
"When?"
"Whenever you want."
"Okay."
"Are you still in the bathroom?"
"I'm doing my hair."
"What for?"
"Before we go down to the club."
"Down to the club? I'm playing cards tonight."

We both enjoyed moonlight. I had become a night person. As the sun moved in a gradually briefer arc across the sky, I slept, awakening in the late afternoon to eat, and drink many cups of strong, bitter coffee before leaving the cabin at dusk.

Did the gygr need food? Drink? I don't know. It says something of my self-absorption that I never thought to ask.

Such wonder, really, thinking back to it, such incredible wonder, this fantastic companionship. And I used it merely to share my own pain.

The questions I could have asked. Her knowledge. Her past. Her people. Firsthand knowledge about my own ancestors. The land.

But we had become two disowned women, intent only on our own emotions, each of us interested only in that about the other which might illuminate our own personal dilemma.

Sometimes the night itself lightened our mood. When the moon threw weird shadows across the darkened land, creating new shapes and spaces and voids, when the heavy woods creaked and rustled with alien life and night birds caught screaming prey, when the wind carried strange scents and dreams on its cold breath, we sometimes leaned back, content, filled with wild night and open to it, to otherness, to darkness, to life.

How strange, that I could lean back against absolute alienness and fell only the presence of another woman much like myself. The alien life was everything outside our closed circle of female solidarity.

When the weather was dry, I used to lean back in the crack between her breasts. Soft, pale moss grew there; her large lap was a comfortable seat. When it rained, or was wet, I preferred the bare stone of her shoulder, close to her cheek.

She was always warm.

Now that I knew her, knew of her, it was inconceivable that I had once climbed her body as I would climb an inanimate hill, thinking her body rock, stone, with no concept of her . . . humanity.

She didn't move much. Sometimes she shifted the weight of her body; once in a while, she turned her head, or leaned it sideways to shield me from the rain. I don't know if she was able to walk. But always, when I was with her, she kept the eye nearest to me open. And, sometimes gesturing for emphasis, her fist moved.

The heather had finished blooming. Dry and brown it covered the moors and the ridges. The birches stood golden, slowly dropping their dry leaves which covered the hillside like precious coins. The evergreens seemed to draw closer together, aquiring a dark, compact look of fur-clad creatures gathered for warmth.

Winter was coming. As yet, I had not decided what to do. Gygra did not entirely understand my concern. For her, winter was merely another season, another aspect of the cycle of life. She saw no reason for special preparations, or worry. I suppose, to her, winter was simply a brief, chilly night, not, as it is for us, the long freeze, the dark, cold reminder of death imminent.

I dug out an old sheepskin coat from a musty closet and piled all the blankets on my bed. But I was still cold, once the heat of the fire had receded during my sleep. As yet there had been no snow, but each morning when I walked home rime coated my boots and crackled dryly in the frozen straw. Mornings were the

coldest; I felt my loneliness then, returning to my rumpled bed alone, from the gygr's warm lap.

What to do? All our agonizing, Gygra's and mine, had not led to any resolutions.

Her decision, at once simpler and more terrifying than mine: go or stay; shake the lassitude of centuries and get up, walk the land, ignore old territorial boundaries to search for her kind; or stay put. To stay put would be a much safer decision. If she were to start walking, only to be forced, in a hundred years or so, to conclude that no one of her kind remains, that, indeed, she is the last: what then? Then, how would she feel?

Could she sit back down, sleep, find peace once more? And if not, what would she do? And even in sleep, might there not be nightmares, then?

But if she decided to stay here, continue her long rest, would she be able to, now? Or would the unanswerable questions that I had stirred up within her continue to plague her?

Once in a while, when my own inner furies were momentarily silent, I was filled with great pity. For just as her size dwarfed me, so her agony diminished mine. I would have a life with my own kind, eventually; one day, the pain of my separation, my failure, would lessen. I knew this. Her choices were starker, and more final.

The very finality of her situation eventually provided me with the barest hint of a resolution to mine. My choices, I suddenly realized, were not necessarily final: whether I stayed away, or returned, I could always change my mind. I knew that my husband loved me. I just didn't know whether this pain was my love for him, still, or just hurt feelings. Being lost. But I had the option of finding out.

Maybe I could learn to be more assertive. Make him listen. Say what I had to say, assuming that he could hear me, and simply act as if that was all there was to it. Live my life taking for granted that my voice could be heard. If not by him, then, surely, by other people.

And anger? This anger that I had been living with for so long—could it, too, be put aside? Perhaps not. But it could be used, I thought, to make me stronger.

The dialogue in my mind was gradually becoming subdued, lying down to rest.

But Gygra, my friend, was no nearer a resolution to her agony. For her, the answers probably no longer existed. Never to know.

In my newfound peace of mind I felt a rush of compassion for her. For a moment there was silence between us. She leaned her hard, warm cheek briefly against mine.

That morning it snowed. I walked slowly home in the faint glow of early morning while tiny, bright, ephemeral flakes of whiteness drifted over the land, melting on my face, resting in my hair. As I prepared for sleep I felt the great silence of it. Winter.

I woke up with the feeling that something was wrong. Early, still; why was I awake? I looked out the window. Even as I heard the unmistakable sounds of another's presence, I noticed the footprints in the snow.

He had known where to find me. Was that why I was here?

My husband's face was thinner. His hair had gray flecks in it; why hadn't I noticed that before?

Hesitantly, I met his eyes. The same, dark, deep, sad eyes that had first made me notice him, whose ineradicable sorrow had something to do with the basis for our continued attraction. Changed? I didn't know.

Neither of us spoke. He had made coffee. Wordlessly, he offered me a cup. The warmth of it between my hands was a firm anchor, certainty in the midst of confusion. Was I happy that he had come? Angry? Ashamed? Relieved? I didn't know.

"I've had the house painted. Green. Like you wanted. And I had an extra heater installed in the hall. The carpets have been cleaned, too."

All these words, about things. Externalities. He must be shy. Unsure of himself. Surely he didn't think that the problem between us had to do with paint and heaters? I felt the familiar choking anger rise. Caught myself. It's a matter of words, that's all. He doesn't know how. Emotions, and the words for them, disconcert him. I must meet him halfway.

But even as I spoke, anger smoldered: familiar; a perfect fit inside me.

"Fine. But what about us? Why do you think I left? We're the problem. It's not a matter of things. Cleaning. Paint. Listen to me. We have to be able to talk to each other."

He met my gaze helplessly, his hands, shoulders, the angle of his neck conveying confusion: body language, all, but what about the dark sorrow deep in his eye; was he really incapable of understanding? This was my real dilemma, the one I had fled from: I knew I had married the dark, sad stranger within him, the one who loved me, who spoke my language deep in the night, touched my heart, always. Only I couldn't live with the daytime brother, opaque, inarticulate, deaf to my words.

"Sure. But we talk all the time."

Full stop again. Try.

"You talk. But you don't listen. Can't you see?"

Brief, dense silence.

"Didn't you want the house green? Did I misunderstand you? We can have it painted another color."

Oh, god.

"No. Listen. Green is fine. It's not a question of green. It's that you don't listen to me. You don't hear me."

Please, love. Hear me.

"I didn't want you to be cold."

Did he mean the way I had been feeling these past months? The distance between us? Missing his arms and his love? I looked deep, for my lover. No. He was talking about the heater. The extra heater. Was I going mad, or was it him? Oh, god. This awful pain.

I couldn't stand it. This man was incapable, or I was; there had to be a way but I couldn't see it; why couldn't he hear me? Were all things symbols to him, the way

words were to me; did they not exist except as symbols? And did he communicate only with things, not with words; were things symbols of his feelings, were there no words for them? Was that why he couldn't hear me?

I didn't know. Couldn't. Wouldn't. Driving me mad. Please. No more of this man. Entirely beyond me. No. No. No.

A welter of too-strong emotions rising within me, doubt, confusion, hopelessness, grief, and then fury, a welling tide, choking me.

Grabbing my sheepskin coat on over my sweater, I ran. Out the door. Through the snow, the snow and the gathering darkness. Heard him calling me. Angry? *He* should be angry?

Only one place. One person. My friend. Understanding.

Gygra's head lifted. Her heavy gray lid opened slowly; only darkness within, unless you looked very closely and long and saw all the stars gathered there.

I could feel her brooding mood, its slow, gradual alertness as she felt the turmoil of mine; her realization that something had changed, within me. Another emotion came from her, one I was momentarily unable to define, then recognized with a rush of gratitude. Affection. Concern. Caring. Gygra cared. She was concerned for me.

Climbing her as fast as I could, slipping in the fresh snow, I reached her shoulder, pressed myself against her warm cheek. I was crying.

"Anna? Anna! Where are you?"

His voice sounded hollow, a stranger's voice echoing through the white void. Silently I crouched on the giant shoulder, hidden from him by the massive head, the protruding chin. But my footprints were there, dark against the white snow.

No.

He musn't find me. I didn't want him there. I didn't want his familiar voice, his fumbling words which would never meet mine. My uneasiness increased. Least of all I wanted his nearness, his touch, which I knew would be the undoing of me, as it had always been. I would be truly lost, then.

No. No. No.

My voice was silent, yet my No echoed loudly, insistently in my mind, then taken up and amplified, intensified, within my friend.

I heard his rasping breath before he came into view, slipping, struggling in the snow, the treacherous covered shrub, hidden holes, icy rocks combining to trip him. His face was red: exertion; but I kept seeing anger. He lifted his snow-covered arms violently and shook them; to clear off the snow, but I flinched. Immediately I felt my flinch echoing through the stony flesh that held me, becoming a relentless quiver.

Elation, and horrified protest, warred within me, but it was already too late.

Swat.

Poor little gnat, bloody lifeless heap silent in the snow. I held the crushed head in my lap, and my tears froze stiff in his whitening hair. Oh, god.

I must have loved him.

Gygra, speaking to me, using her deep voice to be heard above the scream in my mind.

Friend. Little sister.

The voice comes from high above me. She is standing, immense, strong, terrifying, her head in the sky; around me the agistated earth is slowly settling into a different pattern.

Murderess.

But no. I know better; the emotions were mine. My friend merely acted.

My friend.

And now I can feel her again; I am enveloped by pity. Concern. Love. My friend loves me.

A question hovers, takes form: shall we go looking, little sister?

Away. Yes. Oh, yes.

I ride the stony shoulder. The land opens before me; I am above stone and tree, I cross rivers and fjords with one step, I am a bird; a goddess!

My friend's cheek is warm against mine. ✦

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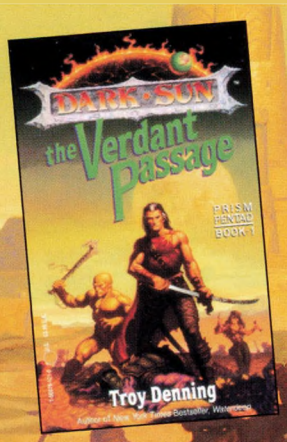

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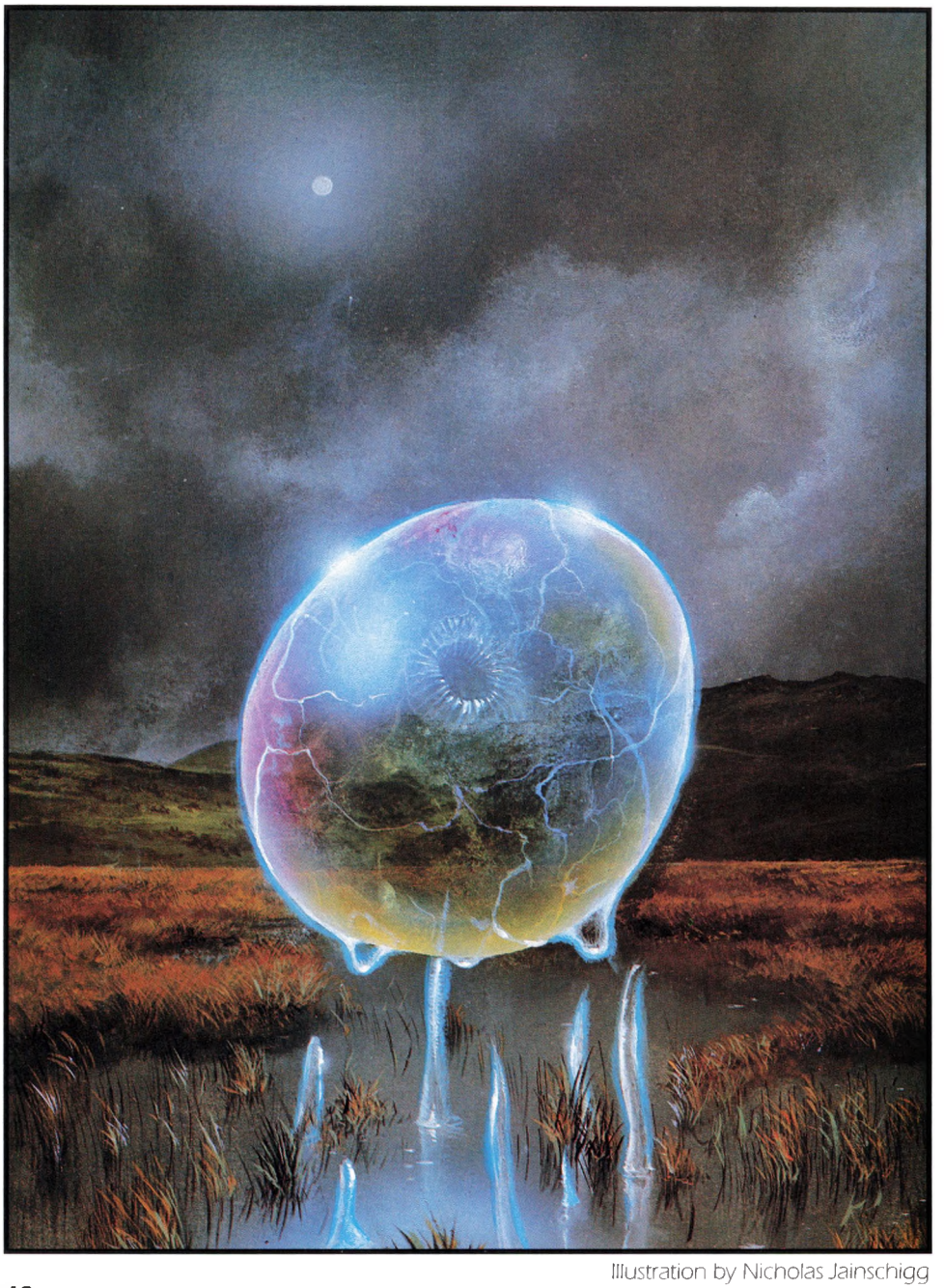

Illustration by Nicholas Jainschigg

Howard V. Hendrix

From the direction of Prader Dome came a sound like popcorn popping, then sirens everywhere. Before she'd managed to close her face from the bored mid-morning yawn it had stood in, Moira found herself darting around her desk, sleeprunning security drills that her body somehow remembered even if she didn't.

Pounding down the corridor and up into the marble stairwell, the young black woman passed white-labcoated technicians just drifting out of their

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warrens, standing about like confused rabbits. Something like this *would* have to happen on *my* shift, she thought as she hit the second floor at a dead run. Some research assistants in Ecology got nice, safe, plush jobs with their major professors, but her? Nope. Last month her major professor, Dr. Li Zeng, had rejected her doctoral research proposal—so now it was Environmental Security Officer Moira Wilkins, at your service.

The popping sound was louder now and she knew she'd correctly identified it for what it was: semiautomatic weapons fire, probably fairly small bore, like an Uzi. She'd heard it quite a lot as a kid growing up on the streets of Compton.

Pushing open the skywalk door, she stepped from the cool air-conditioned corridors of Gunnison Hall into hot polluted sunshine. Crossing the skywalk from Gunnison to Prader, she saw men and women slumped against the elevated walkway's railings, their white labcoats shot through with red. Among them she saw the head of the Microbiology Program, Dr. Zeng himself—leaning against the south wall, apparently wounded in the right ear.

"It's Huffstutter," Zeng rasped, reaching a desperate hand out toward her, grabbing her arm. "He's gone crazy. Shooting everything up."

For a moment Moira stared at him in disbelief—until she heard gunfire again, and realized disbelief was a luxury she could not afford.

"Hey, Moira," Leon Huffstutter said jauntily, dropping by her ES office late one evening, after everyone else had gone home. "Want to see what ecological consciousness *really* looks like?"

"Sure," she said without hesitation, smiling and picking up her walkie-talkie. Though Dr. Zeng had called "unscientific" and "trivial" Moira's proposed research comparing spirochete ecology and human consciousness, Dr. Huffstutter had been more than sympathetic to Moira's research ideas. If Huffstutter had been senior research faculty like Zeng instead of just a recent postdoc appointee, Moira would have asked him to serve as head of her committee instead of only serving as a committee member. Alas, she knew all too well what career politics required of her. "Where are we going?"

"To my lab over in Prader."

"Wait a minute," she said. "That's in Environment Three, right? I'm not cleared for that except in extreme emergencies."

Over the plastic tortoise-shell rims of his glasses, Leon gave her the you've-got-to-be-kidding look Moira always thought of as the "hairy eyeball." This was the same scholarly-looking man—tall, pale, bearded—who without a thought had broken professional protocol to console her after Professor Zeng shot down her research proposal. This was the same man who'd taken her out to dinner that night, who (she learned) shared her interests in eighties rap and sixties rock, in Greenpeace and the Union of Concerned Scientists and Negative Population Growth, Inc. This was the same man she'd gone to bed with that night, career politics be damned.

"Just thought I'd mention it," she shrugged at last, taking his hand as they walked on.

"Is everyone else out?"

Zeng nodded weakly, careful not to irritate his wound.

"All personnel, yes—but containment's not complete. The splice labs *must* be sealed off. We've got potentially viable strains in there that *must not get out*!"

Nodding mutely and detaching Zeng's imploring grip from her arm, she strode to the building's hexagonal entrance. In the past the smiling, big-bellied guard outside the single entry had politely but firmly refused entrance to all but those personnel with proper security clearance. That guard now lay dead before her, sprawled face up on the blood-pooled concrete.

Gingerly removing the small deck of plastic keying cards from the guard's shirt pocket, she noted as she did so a sudden unidentifiable absence. Then she recognized it: in the anarchic symphony of pain and sirens, of moaning and cursing, the gunfire percussion line had ended.

Jamming a keycard into the color-matched scanner beside the entrance, she stepped back as one of the dome's geotangent hexagons lifted up with a whoosh. After she had entered the area labeled E-1 Containment Shell, the entry hexagon swiftly sighed back into place and locked with a click—excruciatingly loud in the sudden silence of the dome. The pain-sounds behind her were shut out, and even the sirens' keening was reduced to a distant whine. E-1 STATUS: SEALED flashed across a sensor board. Urgently but also cautiously, she began moving down a ring corridor.

"But really, what's your work got to do with 'ecological consciousness'?" Moira asked once they had entered the after-hours silence of Prader Dome. "I thought you were still working on that hush-hush sperm zapper for the Fort Dietrich biowarriors."

Leon Huffstutter laughed and draped his arm over her shoulder.

"Moira dear, the enantiovirus you're talking about is a heckuva lot more than a 'sperm zapper.' It can fully, effectively, and irremediably block the diploid/haploid cell division shift in kinetosomal DNA—kinetosomes being the organelles from which sperm-tails and all other such cell whiptails grow."

Moira squeezed Leon's hand and kissed him lightly on the cheek.

"Great. So it zaps everything else too."

"Au contraire, mademoiselle. It attacks only spermatogenetic cells, and those only in *Homo sapiens*."

"The Big Vasectomy," Moira joked. "Your military employers must be well pleased."

Leon nodded and smiled.

"The concept holds endless fascination for them—the idea of coming like a thief in the night and stealing all the enemy's 'family jewels,' the *mano a mano, macho a macho* way of wiping out the enemy's entire next generation through literally 'getting him by the balls.' . . ."

Leon gave her a lingering, full kiss.

"Yes . . ." Moira's eyes strayed impishly toward his crotch. "But how can you get it to distinguish between the balls of the enemy and those of your own employers?" She gave him a quick pinch and he jerked upright.

"Exactly." Leon grabbed her wrist and moved it playfully yet forcefully away. "It can't. That version of the E-virus has other problems too—rapid replication rate, complete lack of biological or immunological controls. Phillips and Sasaki are calling it the Extinction Virus and refusing to work with anything but the least viable strains."

"Can't say I blame them," Moira said, kissing Leon low on the neck as they walked along the ringing corridor, past darkened and locked labs on either side.

"No. But Zeng and Jones won't give up on it—always talking about 'short-term viable strains' and 'appropriate delivery systems.' Missiles, you know." He kissed her on top of her head, shifting his hips in closer to her as he did so. "We've got the phallus for it, but not the *cojones*. I don't think it'll ever be deployed—might solve the overpopulation problem *too* quickly."

"You're still getting funded for it, though?"

"Yep." Leon nodded mischievously. "Zeng doesn't know it yet, but I've moved on to other applications for my E-virus."

"Like what?"

Leon smiled slyly as he got out his keycard for E-2.

"You'll see, you'll see," he said, leading her by the hand.

Moira moved circumspectly through the dome's first ring, her way lit by the reddish glare of the emergency auxiliaries glowing from recesses in the walls. From time to time her footsteps crunched on glass—fallen from E-1's ceilings when the overhead lights had been shot out. Around her, ventilators and air-conditioning hummed controlled and filtered air through the dome.

Looking into the labs off the corridors as she passed, she saw by the reddish light that most of the labs at this level were successfully sealed and, of those that weren't, all seemed to be in exactly the same state as they had been when their occupants hurriedly left them. Nothing looked to be broken, nothing spilled, but most importantly of all none of the BIORELEASE sensors were flashing or sounding. Apparently they had picked up nothing amiss in the first containment area.

Moira's head yanked up at the sound of a heavy beatline suddenly pounding ferociously over the intercom. Her eyes widened as she recognized the music: The Well-Wread Wrapper's "Ecstasy of Catastrophe." One of Leon's favorites.

Swiftly completing her circuit of E-1, she stood before the entrance to E-2 containment, fingers flying through the pack of keying cards, desperately trying to color-match keying card to scanner—an infinitely frustrating task in the hellish red light of the auxiliaries, a glaring gloom that rendered unrecognizable even large distinctions in hue.

The rap song pounded on around her with all the irritating urgency of a long-awaited phone call ringing away inside a locked room while she fidgeted through the cards like someone outside a door at night, fumbling frantically in the dark for the right key. The music was a relentless counterpoint, mocking all her efforts with lyrics she'd heard half a hundred times in Leon's company.

Sitting in a hot tub, staring at the stars,
It's easy to imagine vacationing on Mars.
Sitting in the ghetto, waiting for a bus,
It's hard to imagine more than Them and Us.
More than Them and Us, More than Them and Us,
If you can't trust Them and Us, who can you trust?

In desperation she jammed a last card into the scanner. *Between all that is and all that ought to be,* the rapper intoned, *lies the Ecstasy of Catastrophe.* The hexagon slid up and open and she entered E-2 containment.

The entrance sighed back into position—E-2 STATUS: SEALED—behind her and she began a quick search down the curvilinear main corridor. More of the lights were shot out here, even a goodly number of the red auxiliaries, but there was less space to cover at this level and nearly all the labs in E-2 containment seemed fully sealed off: not a hint of biorelease detection.

"Actually, I got the idea from you," Leon said, stopping them in their progress toward the E-3 entry hex. He looked searchingly into her dark eyes. "Your research proposal reminded me that kinetosomes were once free-living spirochetes—and you made a lot of Lynn Margulis's old work, about how reducing the study of the nervous system to physics and chemistry missed the microbiological step. Like looking at Landsat images of urban sites, documenting the changes, without knowing anything about people or their role in those changes."

Once more he draped his arm over her shoulder as they started walking again.

"What really hit me, though," Leon went on, "was Margulis's idea that, in the nerve cell, the axons and the dendrites that enable us to communicate are in fact latter-day spirochetes. Nerve cells may have long ago discarded the rest of the spirochete body, but they still use the fundamental spirochete system of motility—as if they were 'trying' but unable to rotate and swim like the bacteria they once were. Margulis says thought involves motility and communication, the connection between remnant spirochetes—so you were perfectly correct to want to compare human consciousness to spirochete ecology."

"I'm glad *you* agree." Moira smiled ruefully. "I only wish Dr. Zeng did." She sighed and shrugged. "Nowhere to go with it now, I guess."

"Then you guess wrong," Leon said, brightening as he found his keycard for the E-3 entrance scanner. "I already went with it."

"What?"

Leon nodded and smiled.

"By the time Zeng shot down your proposal I had already requested cultures of forty-two different species of spirochete, to be collected from the university's field re-

search station in Baja. When the samples got here I set to work. Originally, I developed the E-virus as a vehicle for introducing new data into the cellular infostream—to shut down reproduction, in the old spermicide variant. But then I realized that with some modification the same enantiovirus technology could be used to reopen cellular reproduction, *nerve cell* reproduction—even to reintroduce some long-lost spirochete traits back to their old homes. Breeding, rotating, swimming, yet linked, communicating, *thoughtful*." He stubbed the E-3 keycard into the entry scanner. "Think of it, Moira: a truly ecological consciousness!"

The blaring rap song ended as she approached E-3's entry hexagon. In the dead air at the song's end she heard glassware breaking, a sound like beer bottles shattering a few alleys away in the worst part of the city.

Jamming card after card into the scanner beside the entrance, she heard a warning buzzer begin to sound in time to a sign flashing BIORELEASE! BIORELEASE! And thunder. Thunder? And rain! Then she recognized it: the opening chords of The Doors' "Riders on the Storm"—another of Leon's favorites.

In E-3 Leon led her to a microscope beneath one of the ventilation hoods. Under the microscope Moira saw them: squirming bundles of cells scooped from Petri dishes, dripped from nutrient slants.

"Nerve cells—from rats," Leon said proudly. "Reproducing and moving like bacteria, but still linked and communicating in their 'rat' configuration. I used a new version of the E-virus to selectively 'infect' the requisite spirochete traits back into the nerve cells, and *voilà*! A brain inseparably part of its environment, but one that will grow only as large as its environment will support."

Moira was fascinated, also obscurely disturbed—and very glad that the contagious E-viruses themselves were kept carefully sealed away.

"Amazing—but what's the point?"

"A way out," Leon said with manic assurance. "Out of our cul-de-sac. Our dead end."

"What do you mean?"

Leon glanced at her, as if she were being purposely obtuse.

"Extinction, Moira—human extinction. You must have noticed the boom/bust cycle our species is locked into. Economies based on infinite growth, when the ecosphere is only finite. Escalating violence and nukes, overpopulation and environmental collapse—it's all tied into it. We're completely ignoring the planet's cries for help." The manic gleam had intensified in Leon's eyes. "That's why, after I got hired by the university, I took this 'second job' here in Prader: good money, lots of funding, lots of grants."

Something clicked in Moira's head.

"Yes—you never struck me as the type to take biowar bucks."

Leon shrugged.

"Sure, it was military, but it was money for research *I* wanted to do. I had bigger fish to fry than discovering a new way to kill this week's enemy. I've been looking for a way out, a way to break the boom/bust cycle. I thought I had it when I put together the spermicide E-virus, but that's simultaneously too effective and not effective enough."

Moira nodded slowly.

"I understand how it could be too effective. But not effective enough? How both?"

"An accidental release of it might render every male out there sterile"—Leon gestured vaguely to the world outside the dome—"but there'd still probably exist a sizable number of frozen and unaffected sperm, ova, and embryos—maybe even enough to overcome genetic drift. Those freezer kids could be raised in thoroughly isolated and aseptic environments where the chance of E-virus infection would be virtually zero. Over time the virus might die out, or some sort of technological replacement for sexual reproduction—clonal combining, say—might be implemented. At great expense of course, so that only the rich would have the right to reproduce—thus deepening all the evil old divisions. That's not how we get out. Just the opposite: we need something to break down the divisions, sensitize us to ourselves, each other, the whole planet—not isolate us from it. What you saw under that microscope is just the thing. The next step."

Moira found herself moving away from him. There was something about what he was saying, a sort of paternalism, even a sort of hubris, that she found disturbing indeed.

"But you'll never be able to experiment with it on human beings. . . ."

"Maybe not," Leon said placidly, "but you never know. Stranger things have happened."

Through the hexagonal door's hexagonal window, in the glare of the single large red auxiliary light shining inside E-3, she saw a pale, cinnamon-bearded figure overturning trays of test tubes, hurling Petri dishes to the lab floor, smashing open the lids of ultracentrifuges with mad manic energy.

"Drop the lead shutters!" Leon Huffstutter screamed, white spittle flecking from his lips. "Bring up the TV screens!"

Moira watched in horror and despair as the scientist who had been her lover began furiously ripping off his clothes until, naked and deranged, he launched into a frenzy of pacing and jitterbugging back and forth between breakable objects and a programmable instrument panel. Gradually she realized the method to his madness: he was reprogramming the canopy hoods to vent *outside*.

"Smoke! Soap bubbles! Ashes! Dust!" Huffstutter roared, firing a round into his left foot, as if to pin it down, transfix it to slow his manic pacing and jittering. "Up the chimney to nothing but hollow pain! Everywhere! Almost like air!" He fired a round into his right foot, splashing blood past chips of bone and stone. "The jail door in the sky has clanged shut! The urn of the world is broken, spilling ashes, ashes, ashes spilling from everything!" He

fired a shot into his side. "I eat ashes! I breathe ashes! I bleed ashes!"

A warning klaxon sang out loudly, counting down to emergency venting, almost completely drowning out The Doors. Leon shot himself in the left wrist, tore at his hair with his Uzi-clutching right hand. Moira saw tears streaming down his face, felt them welling up in her own eyes.

"My umbrella's dead—and it's raining ashes!"

He shifted the gun to his shattered left arm and still somehow managed to fire a round into his right wrist. Then in the deep red glare he stood there, head and torso slumping forward, arms stretched out like Christ on the cross, bleeding from new-forged stigmata. The klaxon howled toward zero.

Moira carded open the door and ran purposefully toward the instrument panel's bank of switches, slipping on blood and spent clips. In the corner of her eye she saw Leon train the gun on her. Intent on shutting down the venting, she ignored as best she could the man she had loved for a fragment of time.

Jerking himself rigidly upright from his slumped tortured-messiah position, Huffstutter smiled.

"I love you," he whispered hoarsely—then aimed the gun at his own head and squeezed off a final burst of rounds. He crumpled to the floor. Moira shut down the venting procedure. A bell-like tone sounded. *There's a killer on the road,* Jim Morrison sang. *His brain is squirming like a toad.*

E-3 STATUS: SEALED

Drained and exhausted, Moira walked slowly, tenderly, toward Leon Huffstutter. She found him face down in a pool of blood. Brain and bone fragments were spattered about a nearby wall and lab table. She bent down to him, reached a trembling hand toward him. Her voice caught as she spoke.

"I love you, too."

Through tear-blurred vision she thought she saw the broken brain matter twisting on itself, writhing weakly like masses of tubiform worms plucked from their aquatic environment—spasming, dying. She recoiled. Impossible.

Then she passed out.

—

Through a sky woven of lead and brass a human rain of billions of bodies falls slantwise round and round, crawling and standing and walking and falling, walking and falling, round and round. Naked billions and aware of it too, too many more coming all the time, joining the endless lockerroom posturing in a gridworld wrapped tight in territories boundaries radar fences electric fences barbed wire barricades walls.

Billions of barbed wire bodies all catching themselves from falling round and round turning and turning away to avoid touching tangling snagging involving their barbed wire with others. Busy running lines of force lines of power defensive offensive lines over the fields of battle and game on the concentration planet until everything's divided from everything else all the way back to atoms, then divide them too.

Let there be light and days go by. The bottomline barons overseeing from orbit the continuing rot of the psychedelic Easter egg Earth below, the mycelial macrocircuitry of road and rail of sea lane and glide path growing ever thicker between the mushrooming cities. Too busy to feel the heat rising in the wire see all the trees dead as winter telephone poles though it is hot hot summer global heat machine shortcircuiting catching fire all along the line like a lit fuse burning. The scream of a wounded planet rises in her throat and Moira came fully awake.

Looking about her she saw white, everything white and sterile as the master race in outer space. She lay on her back, on something like a hospital bed.

"What's happening to me?" she muttered. Dr. Zeng's face and upper body appeared suddenly on the screen of a monitor hanging from the ceiling of the white room. The right side of his face was wrapped in heavy bandages.

"Good to see you back among the living, Ms. Wilkins," Dr. Zeng said with a smile. "We're very proud of you, going in there with that armed madman and preventing an external release. Extraordinary bravery on your part."

"What's happening to me?" she asked again, more loudly.

"Yes—Isolation," Zeng began with a sigh. "I suppose all this must be very disorienting for you at the moment. Well, after the Decontamination team entered E-3 and found you still alive, you were sealed up in a portable quarantine unit and brought here to Isolation for observation and tests. It's standard procedure for anyone exposed to a recombinant contaminant—remember? If the tests go well, you should be out in a couple of days, I'm sure. In the meantime—patience!"

Moira stared hard at the man on the screen as he disappeared in a burst of white noise, then looked down at the white sheets on her bed. If what Leon had said was true, if Dr. Zeng still believed Leon had been working only on some sort of apocalyptic spermacide, then no wonder Zeng was so grateful to her for preventing the stuff from getting loose!

Still, though, something didn't quite jibe. How had the generally sane and rational Dr. Leon Huffstutter become the gun-wielding maniac she'd seen in E-3? Had Leon exposed himself to his new E-virus—accidentally? purposely?—only to fail to cope with the changes it brought on? Was there any connection at all? Puzzling over missing pieces and connections, her mind began to feel painfully light and insubstantial. Stressed to depression, she thought, drifting off to sleep at last.

—

Stars like perfect snow beyond the barbed wire. Thick and clear yet cold aloof distant. Even in the dark she can see the barbed wire crisscrossing the sky endlessly everywhere. Concertina wire of orbits ringing the planet round. Spy satellite spiders weaving webs over everything only

their metal bodies visible high and fast against the night their trailing threads too thin too high to see but cocooning the world all the same.

Ignore it ignore it ignore it! Drop the lead shutters and bring up the TV screens. Grab a cup of Java, a line of Peru, peel Honduras for breakfast. Sell soul and let good times roll. Comedy everywhere on the screens ending in marriages and babies babies babies. Live breed die live breed die. Mushrooms and insects do as much. Breed to death and reaffirm the status quo. Leaders smiling smiling smiling. Clown dictators dancing with the globe—

Moira woke with a pained grimace. Throwing back the covers, she flew out of bed and began pacing like a caged animal around the room. The painful twisting lightness in her head would not go away. The room was spinning. She clenched her teeth against a pain like all the agony of a wounded world wanting to scream out her mouth. Surely the force of all that grief would shatter her clenched teeth. . . .

No. She shut her eyes against it, but the more she tried to drive the anxiety down the stronger it seemed to grow. Desperate, she switched tactics. She opened her mouth to let it out, let it go—but no sound came, only a yawning emptiness. Instead the pain seemed to pass up and up through her, out the top of her head. When she opened her eyes, she found she had been crying.

Gradually she reoriented herself in the slowing room and wobbled weakly toward the bed. Sitting down on its edge, she wondered if this was what Leon had felt. Was it this painful lightness of mind that had driven him insane? What was there in E-3 that could do this to a human being?

She was afraid she already knew—far too well.

She pressed the intercom buzzer. Eventually she was able to get through to Dr. Zeng.

"Professor Zeng, what was the biorelease inside E-3? What organism?"

Zeng looked a bit startled by the question.

"Huffstutter's E-virus, of course. All short-lived strains, thank heaven. All dead now. I thought you could figure that out."

"Nothing else? No neurotoxic agent?"

"None that I know of." Zeng eyed her carefully. "Why?"

"Oh, no reason." Moira felt herself on the brink of a change, something important, perhaps also something devastating—but definitely something she did *not* want to go through locked up inside this white cell. "It's just that I've been having some problems . . . problems sleeping. Nightmares."

Dr. Zeng smiled.

"That doesn't surprise me a bit—not after what you've been through. I'm sure it was quite a shock. You must be getting a tad claustrophobic too, eh?"

"Yes," Moira sighed. "Definitely."

"Don't worry. One more day and you'll be out. Fair enough?"

Moira nodded. A thought struck her.

"Did Dr. Huffstutter leave anything for me—a message, perhaps?"

An awkward pause. Dr. Zeng cleared his throat, adjusted his glasses, itched absently at his bandages.

"There *was* something. A videotape. The investigators gave a copy of it to us—for you to look at when you're feeling better. They thought it might provide some insight into why Leon went off the way he did. Thank God he didn't manage to kill more people, armed the way he was." Dr. Zeng instantly thought better of his words and went into a paroxysm of throat-clearing. "Anyway, I can't make any sense of it at all."

"Might I take a look at it?"

"You're sure you're up to it?"

"I think so."

"Very well."

Moments later, text appeared on her monitor screen —a leader on the front of the videotape, with date and time—and none too soon. The painful writhing lightness was rising in her head again, worse than before. A shriek like an empty wind began howling through her mind, threatening to swallow her up into an uncategorizable infinite. She needed something finite to focus on, something outside her own head.

A haggard, wild-haired, darting-eyed and clearly frightened man stared out at her from the screen, spoke to her in awkward, disjointed, but still somehow lucid phrases, the supernova of his tortured brilliance managing to shine a last brief instant before collapsing into the black hole of madness.

"Being comes before knowing, Moira," he said, the words flooding out of him. "I must be crazy before I can know I'm crazy. My awareness of an object is dependent upon my alienation from the object of my awareness. Alienation is the epistemic space that makes knowing possible. A controlled paranoid alienation is the basis of the scientific method. How can self-conscious human beings ever be one with nature, experientially, existentially? We can only know 'oneness with nature' intellectually, so we can never really 'know' it at all. Ecological consciousness is impossible! So I fail. So we fail. Man the Standing Joke will die laughing. We'll birth ourselves to death, a plague of consciousness, an epistemic epidemic. The Time Being will never get out of time in time—because there is no way out."

And that was all. It was more than enough. In the white noise of the tape's end, Moira pondered. Zeng said only E-virus had been detected in the biorelease, true, but among those enantioviruses must have been at least a few radically new ones. She had been exposed, as Leon had earlier, and Leon had gone mad. . . .

It didn't have to be that way. No. It wouldn't be that way for her. She had learned from Leon, and she would survive—for Leon, for herself. The painful lightness, with its overpowering sense of the triviality and insubstantiality of all things, surged up in her again, only now she concentrated on what was also interwoven with it: a deep and overwhelming experience of her place in the seamless web of all things, of all the pieces of the puzzle falling together, wonderfully, irrevocably.

Of life, then—absolutely significant and absolutely trivial. The paradox of it must have been too much for

Leon. He had wanted to decide the fate of the whole world, but he could not let go of fear—and so could not hold on to hope. He had given up, stopped persistently striving to dwell in paradox. By the time he attempted the venting he must have been thoroughly confused, getting it all mixed together—the ecological savior that sacrifices Self for the sake of World and the apocalyptic ego that sacrifices World for the sake of Self.

If she could survive this next day, if she could hold it together long enough to get out of this antiseptic white jail cell, she would untangle catastrophe from ecstasy. She would prove that having the courage to *be* also meant having the courage not to be as she had once been. She would dwell in paradox, and she would not fail.

It did not prove easy. Her nightmares became waking hallucinations. She was an escapee chased after by doctor soldiers in angelic white, to be brought back aboard bullet trains rocket trains maglev trains always running on time but always to the same wireworld destination. Or in high country she froze to death to be found months later decayed and desiccated and fit for the fire by barbed-wire men on horseback at sunset riding the range tending the fences bringing in strays before the winter came. She saw the world of ashes, the transience and impermanence, the police chalk-shadows on the street, the bombflash human shadows etched in building stone, the shadows in the grass where the flesh of the unburied dead saponified and ran like liquid soap into the ground. She saw the ashen shadow-matter behind the high snows of the heaven of stars and hoped against hope it was not all just another vaster concentration camp of falling bodies, planets and stars and galaxies trudging pointlessly round and round to the pointed witness of angelic astronaut guards.

A day-long sweating pulsepounding flushed white-spittled unending anxiety attack, but she kept it together long enough for Dr. Zeng to let her go—though he did suggest she take the day off, and followed after her with his gaze as she left the Biological Sciences quad. It was well that she was gone from there. She did not know how many more times she could have listened to Zeng say that Leon's rampage was due to "work-related stress."

In the airport and on the plane to Baja her head was worse, but somehow she still held. Driving the red rental Jeep to the research station's mudflats, though, she felt the last barriers of her sanity going down, the infinite at last torrentially flooding the finite channels of her mind. She smashed the jeep through the station's perimeter fence. Her forehead bled from its encounter with the windshield. She was going home.

A short distance from the edge of the mudflats she stopped the Jeep and staggered out. Under a leaden sky already hanging curtains of rain to the west she stumbled through sagebrush and dunegrass. Thunder from the rainstorm cracked and rumbled and rolled about her. The shriek of the wounded planet crying out to be healed, though louder than ever, now somehow transformed itself into a siren-song of welcome in her head.

As she stepped onto the mudflats the winds of the storm, heavy with the scent of wet sagebrush, whipped about her and began to pelt her with fat scattered droplets of rain. Somewhere in the distance mudflats swam into ocean, but she could walk no farther. She fell to her knees, then onto her side and back, face up into the storm, sinking slowly into the ooze. A warm, living trickle ran from both her ears, then runnels, streams, floods of cells, dropping, spreading, moving off into the mud. Her thoughts grew expansive, stretched across acres, spread over miles, flashed along shorelines, ventured even into the vast blue darkness of the sea. The earth spoke plainly to her, *through* her.

Parting wet curtains, lightning shocked sagebrush to *O!* perfumed contentment. Tears and rain mingled, inseparably, joyfully, upon her face. At long last she knew what she must be; then she ceased knowing.

After Moira Wilkins's remains had been carried away, Li Zeng lingered, gazing out at darkness and evening and the full moon shimmering silver across the mudflats. In the moonlight he saw it then, a great swirling sphere rising from the mud, frail as a soap bubble yet dense and full of life as a world, a thought lifting into the mindful night. High, high in the heavens it seemed not to burst but to spread out, becoming an airy gossamer glow, a sail billowing and blowing, a wing of light spreading over the whole night-cocooned sky.

Dr. Zeng turned away, thinking suddenly that perhaps Moira's research proposal might have had some validity after all. He couldn't explain this realization, any more than he could explain why he felt as if, from the air itself, an immense burden of grief had lifted. He was aware of being alive in his very cells—of the exhilaration always present in the mere act of breathing. He felt light in his head, but it wasn't unpleasant at all. ✦

Taking the High Road

Daryl Gregory

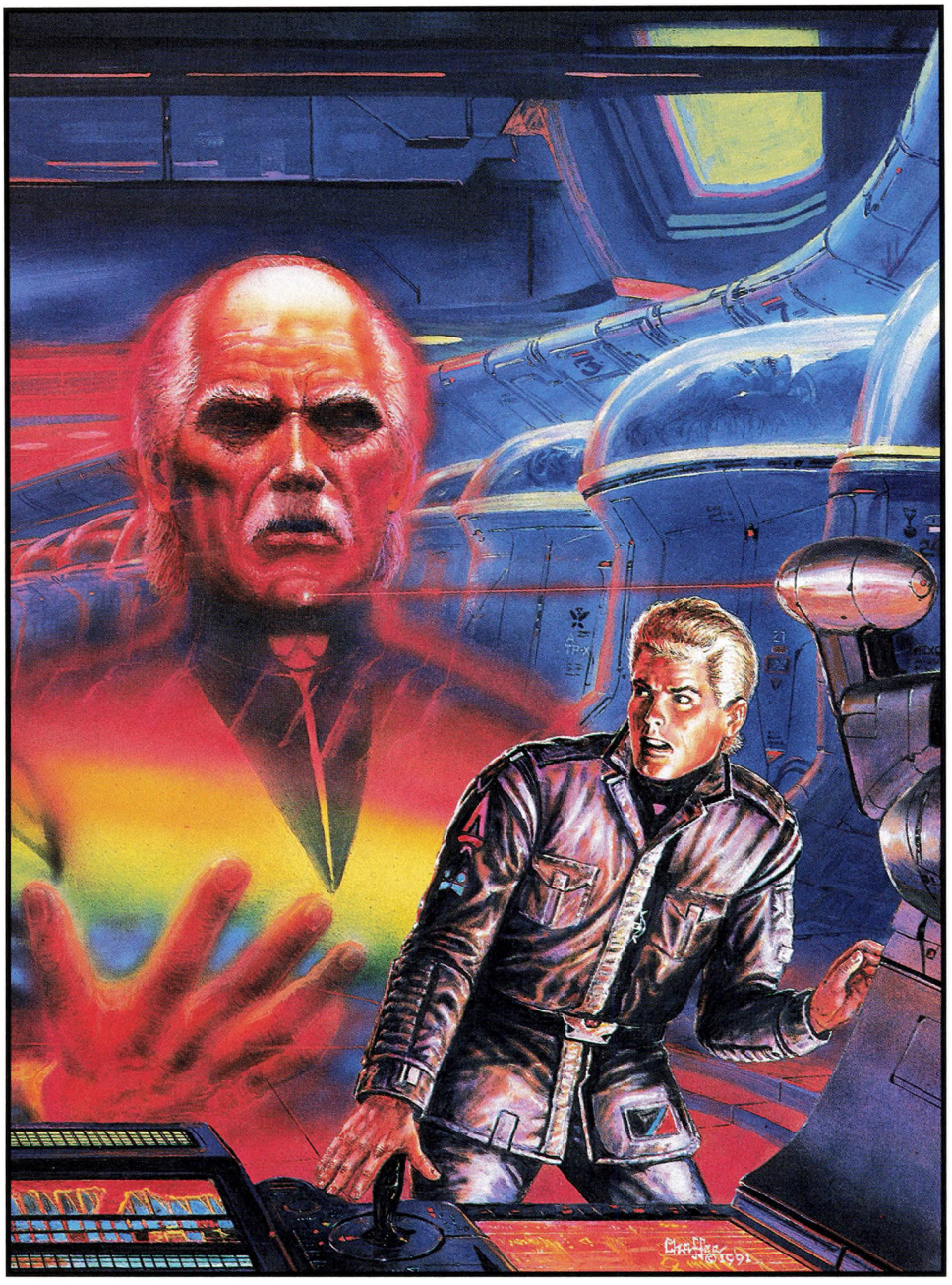

Illustration by Doug Chaffee

I wake up, and my first thought is that I'm choking to death. I try to work my lungs, lift my hands to my throat, but I'm paralyzed. The world is winter white, and my eyes refuse to focus or blink. A moment of wild panic before I remember: I'm in the icebox. Relax.

There's a pain in my hip and suddenly the drugs kick in. The familiar ache starts in my neck, wrists, and lower back. I inhale quickly, and the cold air burns my lungs. My eyes unfog, and the monitor

lights in the box are flashing blue-yellow-blue, assuring me everything is going right on schedule.

When I can move my hands, I pop the straps that are holding me to the floor of the icebox. A mistake, because in a second I'm bumping against the top of the box. Free-fall. A minute later the hatch opens and I pull myself out. Up and down the row of iceboxes, naked bodies emerge like larvae and reach for the handrails on the floor.

Halfway to the locker room I hear a dull pounding and sway to a halt beside a closed icebox. With a loud crack the lid swings open and a kid looking even younger than me floats out, holding his hand. He swears in Russian, then notices me watching him. "Peeze of crap," he says thickly. His eyes, though, haven't lost their panic.

In another four hours we're on a shuttle falling toward Earth. I try to convince myself that I'm sixty years older than when I left. My nineteen-year-old body is so tired, it's not hard to imagine.

O'Hare doesn't look like it's been painted since I left. The phone is a beat-up wreck that spits back my G-card twice before clicking. It costs a dollar seventy more to make a local phone call. I punch the number Laura had promised never to change. After a few rings the screen crackles to life and I let myself hope for a moment.

The face on the screen is pale, about thirty years old, and only slightly resembles my sister. Her eyes are wary. "Yes?"

"May I speak to Laura, please?"

"Oh," she says. Her eyes go wide in apology. "Oh, of course. I recognize you from your picture. This is the year, isn't it?" I wait for her to say what she must. "Mom . . . Laura . . . died two months ago."

Of course. This is dialogue from old movies, tired melodramas. I move to break the connection.

"Wait! Mister . . . Uncle Glen. There are some things here for you. Some of Grandpa's things, some odds and ends Mom wanted you to have. And a letter from your friend, Stephen." At the sound of his name, something tightens in my chest.

"Okay," I say. She gives me directions to the house. It's not in the old neighborhood.

"By the way," she says, "is that *the* Stephen Orvander?"

The can of root beer falls out of the machine and I pop it open, gulp half of it down. The old man in the chair nods his head at the arm patches on my shirt, smiles. "Hey, Space Man."

"Howdy. Sure is hot." He nods again, moving only his head. I gesture to the dry goods sign. "I need to buy some food."

"Ain't got much," he says, "'til the truck comes in. War rations and all. Got some cans of beef stew left, though."

I say I'll take them and follow the old man as he shuffles reluctantly into the dark store.

I collect the cans from the shelf and drop them into a plastic bag. "I'll take a couple packs of cigarettes too. Uh, not the Russian ones."

While he rings up each item I take out the map Stephen included in his letter and spread it out on the counter next to the groceries. I point to a big X Stephen had marked in red pen.

"Do you know where I can find this?"

He studies the map. "Nope."

"It's a place called the Orvander Institute."

He smiles. "Never heard of it." Of course not. I fold the map and chug the rest of my drink. I fish my card from my pocket and run it through the machine again. "I was in the navy," the old man says. "Local duty back in '38. Women were prettier then. Shit. I remember 2138 like it was yesterday."

"Me too," I say.

The old man gives me a strange look, then remembers the patches. He chuckles dryly.

"Yeah. You probably do at that."

—

I'm fifteen years old, trapped in the dorms without narcotics, or hope of narcotics, when Stephen turns to me and says he has lost faith in Western religion, philosophy, politics, and civilization in general. I ignore him. I tell him I'm going to jump off the garage unless we find some serious pop.

"If you want it so bad, join the navy," Stephen says.

"And that's another thing," I say, and I'm off on my usual speech about cruisers capable of near light-speed, the prosperity of New Columbia, and the vast spectrum of technological advancement in general, and railing against the fact that despite these marvels, a third of the continent is starving, another third is living in extreme poverty, and there are absolutely no controlled substances to be found anywhere.

"The government," I say, "and this war with the Chinese is ruining our lives, Steve-O." Stephen checks for teachers, then spits into the alley below us. He looks out across the flat metal rooftops. The General Kominsky School for Young Men houses eight thousand of us, tidily packed like ball bearings.

"So what are you going to do about it?" he says.

"So what are *you* going to do about it?"

Stephen just turns to me and smiles.

—

"So, you have family around here?"

The farmer's wife is tense and polite between us, her hand on her husband's knee while he drives. The farmer smiles at his wife's nervousness and turns back to the horses.

I tell them I'm just headed west. I use a southern accent to soothe the wife. She keeps up a steady stream of questions as we cross, slowly, the Otero County line.

"So, what part of the service were you in?"

It would be too complicated to explain. "Engineers," I lie.

The nervous wife says, "My older brother was in Biology. He was on the *U.S.S. Rhode Island*."

"You know that one?" asks the farmer. No, not in my branch, I tell them.

"The Kories got that one. Blew up the whole thing. No survivors." He says it matter-of-factly, but the wife looks properly grieved.

A pause becomes a long silence. I listen to the flat crack of hooves on pavement. It is quite easy, traveling this slowly, to not speak for long periods. I could almost doze, if the horses didn't pull us into so many potholes. At irregular intervals the animals drift to the shoulder, and moments later a truck passes at incredible speed, blowing our hair. I learned early in my trip that trucks do not stop for young men in navy jackets.

We stop to eat under the shade of the only tree I've seen since entering New Mexico. The farmer pulls from the back of the cart a government-issue holo receiver, but the reception is bad, and finally he turns it off. The wife hands me a chunk of bread, an orange, and a cup of water. The questions resume and soon work around to my destination.

"The Orvander Institute," I say. "They call it 'The Ranch.'" The farmer glances at me sideways. "I have a friend there," I explain. The wife nods her head very quickly, her eyebrows arched high.

They've heard about the Institute. The wife smiles tightly and her voice become shrill. "Where that writer is? How nice." The sound dies in her throat.

The farmer stares straight out at the waves of heat rising off the pavement. "So. You plan on staying there?" he asks casually.

"Just visiting."

The Orvander Institute is a blazing white wall in the desert, four meters high and a kilometer and a half around. I paced it off myself. The gate is as high as the wall. Who would need a wall like this in the middle of the desert?

I sit down beneath the gate speakerphone and pop open my last can of beef stew. It heats too high, nearly boils over, and I set it in the sand until it cools. I talk into the speaker: "Can Stephen come out to play?" No one answers—no one *has* answered for the two days since I've been here. I have about a quarter canteen of water left, and I'm getting pissed as hell.

I read the letter again, all twenty-two pages. After I left for space, he got into a civilian trade school and began writing a series of antiwar articles for a school magazine. The administration pulled them after the government threatened to stop student loans. The censorship pushed him into local politics. His poetry began getting published in the last of the arts journals, and in 2145 he formed Crater, "The musical group for peace." The sleep-ins began. Then the march on Washington, and the riot where fourteen students were shot down by fully armed troops. A brief stint in jail, then Central America where he wrote *The Crystal Coffin*, and then back to the U.S. as a semi-famous, mediagenic novelist. He joined the Christian Democrats (despite being an atheist) in 2162 and proceeded to run for president three times. For the next twenty years he toured the emptying colleges, wrote increasingly ignored books, and filed thirty-seven class action suits against the government, all failures. Then he took his earnings, and the money from supporters, and went into seclusion in a ranch somewhere in the middle of the desert. (See enclosed map.) Members of "The Movement" visit and bring information, he says. They're planning something really big, he says.

I count the books he tells me he's written. *The Boy Who Went to Space. The Return of Godot. In the Hands of an Angry God. My Brief History.* And more. Sixteen major works of fiction and nonfiction by the great Stephen Orvander, politician, activist, and poet.

Who won't answer his goddamn door.

—

I am sixteen years old, working on a computer in the empty dorm library. After a while I notice students hurrying past the windows with increasing frequency. A few minutes later I hear a cheer go up outside.

In the parking lot Stephen is standing on the hood of a car, shouting to fifty or so kids circled around him. He is holding up the right arm of an oriental-looking kid standing next to him. An anxious feeling goes through me. Stephen has been talking about pulling a stunt like this for weeks.

Another roar goes up as the gray work buses pull into the parking lot. Stephen yells something over the crowd and jumps swiftly from the car, heading for the first bus. The oriental kid hesitates a moment, then follows. A few feet away I see the school governor and two security guards move to intercept them.

By the time I get close enough to hear, Stephen is yelling obscenities as the security guards grab him by the arms and legs. The Gov has his one good arm around the oriental kid's shoulders as he leads him away. As he passes I hear him say, "You've got to understand, Robert, that this is nothing personal . . ."

An hour later, in the detention hall, Stephen is saying over and over, "They can't stop him from riding the buses. They can't do it." He's full of a frightening energy. This is his first protest.

He looks up quickly, as if remembering. His scar is a vivid crease down his cheek. "Hey, where the fuck *were* you, anyway?"

—

At about four in the morning I see headlights making their way across the desert. I chew on a toughened piece of soy-beef I saved from the can of stew and wait for the truck to stop in front of the gate. The driver sees me, gets out with a rifle aimed at my stomach.

"Lizard," I say. "It's good."

"You from in there?"

"I'm not sure. It depends what you do with the rifle."

"No one ever came out before. I always dumped the stuff through the hatch."

"We thought you might need some help this time," I

say. He thinks about this for a while, then goes to the back of the truck and releases the locks on the trailer. The door slides to the top and he sets the rifle close by on the bed of the truck. Just in case. I get up and he shoves a big plastic box in my arms.

"Here, then."

I start stacking them on the ground. Gray, plastic boxes that are about a half-meter square and fit together neatly. I can't ask him what's in them, maintenance parts or garbage, because I'm supposed to know.

"I don't cop it," he says. "Every month, a rut-sized supply of food, medical stuff, books. Expensive stuff, every month. And paid up through the end of the century! Where do you guys get the ruttin' money?"

"Uh, I don't cop it either." Cop? Rut?

He's bigger than I am. He starts working up some steam. "This Orvander guy. Writes some rut-sucking pop books, runs for president, then bricks it out here in the desert with you camp-following cult-heads so he can order out for lunch."

He gives me a challenging look, then shoves another box at my chest. He's got a captive enemy, his favorite audience, and he goes on. "That campaign slogan: 'One World and One Lifetime.' My ass! We gotta protect our interests on New Columbia, don't we?"

"Sure."

"Well, then, if our boys gotta spend some time in the freezers to do it, then we do it!" He shoves the last box at me, then leads me over to the wall. He punches a string of digits into the speakerphone keypad. A section of wall, at about eye level, disappears. The new hole is almost the same size as the boxes we've been stacking. "Well, don't we?" he says.

I've lost track of the conversation. "Uh, rut-yes," I say. I'm tempted to tell him the most action I saw was over a card table. He'd never believe me.

He shoves a box through the hole, and something mechanical grabs it from his hands. I hear a clunk and clatter as the box shoots to the other side and tumbles. Nonchalantly I push my own box into the hole and the invisible machine yanks it from me. Clunk. Clatter clatter. I think about shimmying through that hole after the driver is gone, but something about those automated dock hands . . . .

We feed a few more boxes to the wall, and I casually suggest that I can finish up myself. For a moment I think he's not going to go for it; then he shrugs: what the hell. He goes over to the truck, grabs his rifle from the bed, and slams down the trailer door. He climbs into his seat and in the light of the cab notices my patches for the first time.

"Hey! You a Vet? What the hell you livin' with them, boy? I oughta blow your head off." The door slams like a gunshot and the truck growls to life.

I wave as he drives off.

—

I'm seventeen years old, studying for final examinations in the bunk room. The door squeaks open and Stephen pushes through. He drops a magazine across the book I'm reading.

"Have you read this?" he says.

I push the magazine out of my way. "I don't want to hear about politics right now, Stephen. I don't have time."

"None of us have time," he says. "You just take it now or later."

"I'll take mine later, thanks."

"Of course you will, Glen. The whole world will. It's easier that way. But as for me, I'll take mine now."

Stephen taps the magazine. His name is on the cover. "When you have the time," he says, and walks toward the door, limping on his left leg.

It takes a moment to register. Then, "Stephen! Wait! You're published?" I get up from my desk but he is already down the stairs, and gone.

—

Five in the morning and I'm humming a new tune.

Can't go under it, no no.

Can't go around it, no no.

Got to go over it, yes yes.

And the boxes stack neatly into stairs so that in no time at all I'm standing on the top of the wall, the sun coming up behind me, the ranch spread out below like a gameboard. Months and years of deliveries have created a mountain of boxes below the mouth in the wall; the plastic slope spills gradually to the floor of the ranch. There's a group of low buildings to my left that look like burnt-out Kominsky dormitories: no glass in the windows, no doors in the frames. The solar reflector behind the dormitories is still intact, as is the greenhouse next to it. To the right is a field, with transplanted topsoil and everything, but barren nevertheless.

And directly facing me at the end of a neglected path is a three-quarter-scale Greek Parthenon. Of course. Not that I expected the Parthenon. But at least something equally impressive: a pyramid, perhaps. The Tower of Babel. Wrigley Field. Something built the hard way. Stephen, Stephen, you never could resist the Grand Gesture, could you?

Time to get off this wall. After fifteen minutes without any better idea, I jump onto the topmost box of the mountain, windmilling my arms for balance. With a creak like wooden beams splitting, the whole slope shifts and I'm falling, riding out a geometric avalanche; I cover my head and tumble sideways, shins barking on corners, elbows and ribs and knees slamming against right angles and straight edges, boxes bouncing over me until I come up hard against the dusty ground. The plastic hill comes to a stumbling halt. I look around and grin, just in case there are cameras. "Yee-ha!" I shout, and fall back laughing.

—

A month before we go to training they give me my first inoculation. I show the mark to Stephen.

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"That's it," he says. "Once they start pumping antifreeze into you, they never let you go. Costs too much."

I roll my sleeve back down. Stephen is mad about something again. I haven't seen him for a few weeks. He's never at home when I call.

"Yeah, well, one more month," I say.

We're sitting on the back step of the loading dock at the munitions plant, where my sister Laura works at night. Stephen's mom works here too. I have the books I borrowed from him.

Stephen doesn't say anything; he just smokes his cigarette and rubs the pink scars on the side of his face. I tell him what they told me about iceboxes, space travel, and time dilation. I tell him about combat training, and what we know about the Sino-Korean offensive in New Columbia. I tell him about the pay and benefits once we landfall in November 2198. Stephen finishes his cigarette.

"Well, aren't you going to say something?" I say.

"Thanks for bringing the books back. Have a good time." He gets up to leave. Before I even grab his sleeve and haul him around, I'm yelling.

"Well, what am I supposed to do? Change the world? Become a criminal and wait for the Confeds to come and drag me away to Russia? What? Shit! Talk to me!"

We begin the argument again.

—

"This is Tom Mix! Come out with your hands up!"

No one comes out.

"This is your last chance!"

The sun has come up with more confidence. I am standing on stone steps, yelling at shadows beneath doric columns. "All right! I warned you!"

I walk up the steps in an exaggerated swagger. It would be nice to have six-shooters. Beyond the columns is an ordinary aluminum door. I'm disappointed.

"Come on, Steve-O! You can do better than this!"

The door is slightly ajar but seems immovable. Sand, not rust in the hinges. I have to slam against it with my shoulders before it gives way to darkness.

"Hulloo! Anybody home?" My voice echoes. If I had six-shooters I would trade them for a flashlight. I notice a glow to my left—a light switch. I flick it on and ancient fluorescent lights sputter to life overhead. The room takes shape before me.

It's a mortician's showroom. Row upon row of gleaming coffins of glass and steel—starship iceboxes. Two hundred, at least. I can see the tubes and wiring running from the boxes into the floor. Somewhere below, no doubt, there is a cryo pumping station. The cost must have been enormous.

I dust off the nameplate of the box closest to the door. Instead of a serial number, they've chiseled in a date:

SAMUEL NIRANJAN
23 MAY 2192

Another thing—the icebox is late-model, newer than the one I rode to New Columbia in, which makes sense considering I've been gone for sixty years. But what's a new icebox doing in the middle of a desert?

I dust off the box's meters. Dead. The activation key lies in the slot, unturned.

Never activated.

I check the second box. It's late-model like the first. The name on it is also civilian. The date chiseled on it is a few weeks later than the first, six years before today. The meters are black and dusty, like the first.

Never activated.

My hand is on the manual latch. I am holding my breath. So easy to just pop the latch, let the lid swing back, to find out if . . .

I can't look down.

There. First bones, then flesh clinging to bones. A death's-head grin below matted hair. A book laid across his chest. *My Brief History.*

A breath escapes me, I have to inhale, and for a moment the stench of human rot is overpowering. I slam the lid on the corpse, feel my stomach churning. All of them. All two hundred. Never activated. Rotting inside man's ultimate life preservers.

What's going on here, Stephen Orvander?

At the end of the row there is a dais, and behind that a large holoscreen. I begin walking.

—

On the night before I leave on the ship, Stephen finds me in the bar near the airport.

He draws me away from the bar and the circle of my new friends, my shipmates. He puts an envelope in my hands. "Here."

"Steve-O! My God! What are you doing here!" I am so happy to see him I nearly cry. I am drunk, I realize.

"Take these. Let's go."

"What are these?" I get the envelope halfway open; there are papers inside.

"Tickets. Train tickets. Please."

"What are you saying?" I yell. I'm drunk. I try to clear the fog in my brain. My friends at the bar are staring at me. "Where did you get the money for these?"

"I'm giving you a chance."

The old argument is in his eyes; he doesn't have to repeat it for me. You leave on that ship, he's told me a hundred times in a hundred ways, you throw everything away. You die for a government that has already betrayed you. Even if you come back alive, you come back in sixty years alone. No family, no friends, no connections to this world. More than a half-century out of date. Either way, you're a dead man.

Even drunk I know the argument.

"You're saying I should desert?" Of course that's what he's saying. That's what the argument is about. But I am drunk. I go on talking before I can stop myself.

"Fuck you, Stephen. I'm no coward." I throw the envelope at him; it comes open in midair. Tickets fall in slow motion like snow inside a paperweight. For a moment I'm distracted, watching them fall and complimenting myself on the simile I've constructed. Falling like snow inside . . .

Stephen turns to go, the childhood scars on his face

purplish in the bar lights. He limps heavily as he heads toward the door, and I remember my anger.

"Go write your books, Steve-O. March in your protests. Be a fuckin' hero! You don't have to worry about the draft, you gimp!"

Stephen is already gone. I am staring at tickets on the floor. My shipmates, my friends, take me by the arm and pull me back to the bar.

—

I walk down the row of coffins, turning keys. The dates on the ID plates take leaps and bounds toward the present as I walk, and each key turns with a satisfying click. The iceboxes hum and glow at my touch. Plenty of power here. Plenty of gas to freeze these travelers solid.

"No more decay," I say to them. "Time to preserve yourselves. Take me as your example. I'm seventy-nine years old and feel like a teenager."

In the front row an icebox is propped open like a predator's mouth. A months-dead man is nestled inside, plastic food wrappers scattered around the box, as if he'd lived many days there, waiting to die. On the floor is an electric chisel set. I reach up and bring the lid down. There is a heavy click. I take a guess at when he died and pick up the chisel. The tool jumps and trembles in my hand, but it takes only a few minutes to engrave the date.

The dais is at my back.

—

At Turnaround Point they unifreeze a platoon for monitor duty. It's just before my nineteenth/forty-seventh birthday, and there's nothing to do but clean already spotless decks. After a few days even the lieutenant doesn't know what to do with us, so we sit around the barracks room and play poker with magnetized cards.

After KP I go up on Ob-Deck to look at New Columbia. It's too pretty to be real, like a special effect from the videos. I think that if I look real close I might make out the ridges in the styrofoam clouds, see the brush strokes on those outrageous mountains poking through. The clouds are too dense to let me see the Colony cities, and that adds to the illusion: who can prove that they're down there at all? Ob-Deck is not even a real portal, after all, just a big video screen.

They told us that somewhere on the other side of this snowball there are Sino-Korean monitor ships, but we're never in line-of-sight. And Looey told us that if it came to battle, we would have the advantage: our ship is thirty years younger and more advanced than their best. When we left Earth (last week, twenty-eight years ago) the Kories were half done with their new ship—which meant that it was cruising toward us now. In another four years our ship would be outclassed. And a more advanced ship would replace us. And so on. It was good business.

I step down from Ob-Deck and think: How do I even know there are Korie ships out there? In the barracks room I tell my bunkmate my idea, and he laughs and says, "Oh, yeah? Then who killed the sailors in all those Yankee ships?" He's right. It's a crazy idea. I sit down, and he begins to deal out the cards.

—

The room is filled with the hum of electricity and the hiss of gas: quiet voices at a wake. I step up onto the dais. The icebox is silent. Dust obscures the name on the ID plate, and I reach out my hand to brush it clear.

STEPHEN ORV

No. No.

But I watch as my hand plows away the rest of the dust.

STEPHEN ORVANDER
2 FEBRUARY 2190

All I need is one person. All I need is—

A while later I realize my hands are aching from pounding on steel. I press the tears out of my eyes and force a laugh into the empty room. So he died before anyone got here. At least I wasn't the only one to miss the show.

The holoscreen is hard and cool on my back, and I turn around to consider the control pad. I press the start button, but nothing happens. Then, as I turn away, ruby light springs up around me. I back off the dais to get a better look.

A bald, old man is speaking. Twice life-size, his head and eyes move to cover all parts of the room, as if he's addressing a large assembly of people. He looks very serious, but there is a frightening energy in his movements.

I start laughing. And I can't stop. Oh, Stephen. Who would have thought you'd go completely bald?

He is saying, ". . . and it touches me, friends, that you have come this far, one last time. But I know you didn't do it just to see my tired old carcass laid to rest . . ."

The speech is ten minutes long, impassioned, and goes something like this:

Some day the evening news will carry holos of a hundred iceboxes that should be on ships, out in space—military equipment manufactured for a war that constantly boosts the economy and will never be won. By either side.

The antiwar movement, born out of the passion of young men and women, grew old and died. Except for a loyal few who supported the movement, somehow the protests and the novels and the essays were ignored.

A more dramatic protest was called for. King had the freedom walk, the sit-ins. Gandhi had the strikes, the fasts. And Stephen had tried his hand at those. But in these days of a numb and contented public, something a little more sensational was required to get the country's attention. (The old man chuckles.)

An orgy of bizarre death might do the trick.

He thanks them for traveling so long and far, for responding to the call one last time. He hopes they find the accommodations comfortable until the time of their deaths.

He waves goodbye and says, "Rest for Peace." The holo winks out.

I shake my head, unable to figure it out.

Some master plan, Steve-O. What if I had died in space? What if I refused to look for you? Then I suppose sooner or later, someone would stumble into this place and call the media. But that lacks style.

You were betting that if I was alive, I would have to come looking for you. Then, finding this room of artful martyrdom, I would be forced to make the call. Play the activist, be your PR man. The movement might even start all over again, what with a young war vet to lead the way. You were betting I would be so full of guilt and regret I'd just *have* to go along with the plan.

Guilt and regret.

—

I am twelve years old. We are in the alley behind the cafeteria, throwing stones against garbage cans. Overhand, sidearm, lefty. Then the impossible happens.

I see Tony Mandell step into the alley as I release my rock. It slices through the air—the hardest, fastest and most perfect pitch I have ever thrown. There is a terrible crack as Tony's jaw breaks.

Tony is a senior cadet, twice our size. He's beaten me up before, and other kids. He's holding his jaw with two hands.

"Steve!" I yell. "Let's get out of here!" But Stephen won't budge.

"No. It was an accident." Stephen is crazy. Tony is screaming and crying, his face and hands red with blood. I am pulling on Stephen to run.

Tony charges us. He is trying to scream something at us, but it comes out a liquid gurgle. I am running away, and I look over my shoulder at Stephen standing like a tree in the middle of the alley. Tony's fist crashes into Stephen's face, and Stephen is knocked to the ground. I hear Stephen yelp as his spine contacts the edge of the brick in the alley.

I hear Stephen say, "It was an accident." But Tony isn't listening. He doesn't even realize he's beating up the wrong guy. I keep seeing Tony's fist come down, and my body is frozen. I am terrified by what that fist could do to me.

The pounding seems to go on forever, until the pain in Tony's jaw becomes too much for him and he runs off down the alley to his barracks.

Stephen's face is a pulpy melon covered with cuts and blood. There will be scars. A disc in his spine is ruptured and will never heal. He will walk with a limp.

"You asshole," I say, ashamed of myself. "Why didn't you run? You didn't even do it!"

"No compromises," he says. He spits out some blood.

"You're fuckin' stupid."

—

A few hours later most of my chores are finished, and I'm back at the dais. Among other accomplishments, the holo set is now playing music by Crater and Stephen's coffin is dusted clean. In the gallery, the two hundred iceboxes hum and hiss like a comforting Greek chorus. I have to admit that it's a suitably dramatic scene.

The activation key is in my hand, and it turns easily. Stephen's metal coffin begins to hum and vibrate as it fills with gas. Almost finished now.

I step down from the dais and walk the central aisle past the iceboxes, trying to imagine the kind of idiots who would dedicate their lives to a cause and their deaths to a publicity stunt. The last of the idealists—you could almost pity them. I pat one of the coffins reassuringly: "Cheer up, comrade." The coffin hums. We anachronisms have to stick together.

I reach the big doors and push them open. Hinges squeal. I could walk out of this place right now and never look back. I could. Only Stephen could tell me why I don't.

Windblown sand pinpricks my face as the first copter sets down in the courtyard. The doors open, and the newsporters and their equipment tumble out. They surge forward with eager faces and bright lenses, and tonight the nets will carry pics of the very last war protest of Stephen Orvander, and the very first of Glen Kieffer. It's odd to think of the future as a long, unbroken line.

But some day, Stephen, I'll return to this place. I'll slip my old body into an icebox, then pull the lid down fast and tight, forever. And we'll see who gets to Hell first. ✦

Into the Altar Pit

Bruce Bethke

Illustration by Jon Fraze

His mother stopped at the door, in silent acknowledgment that this was men's business. Daren paused a moment to square his shoulders as well as any man-candidate of thirteen could, and then proceeded, alone and afraid, into the altar pit.

Grunoc, the High Priest, stood before the brick altar with his back to the entry, tending the fire. The red light of the coals cast his fat, stooped figure into hellish relief; the air in the pit was thick, close, and acrid with the smoke from burnt offerings. Daren paused

at a respectful distance and cleared his throat. Grunoc stirred the coals one more time, then turned around and blinked the smoke-tears from his eyes.

"Ah, Daren," the High Priest said when he could see clearly. "So good of you to come."

"Thank you for the invitation, Father," Daren replied cautiously.

The priest waddled down the two steps from the altar, paused a moment to wipe his greasy, sooty fingers on his robe, then squinted closely at Daren. "You've become a fine figure of a man, young Daren." He pinched Daren's upper arm. "Lean, trim, the beginnings of great muscles; indeed a fine *figure*." Grunoc stepped back a pace, and his voice turned harsh and strident. "Young person! Do you know why are are here?"

Daren bowed his head. "It is the time of Testing, Father," Daren said softly. "Today you will decide if I am a Man, fit to continue my training, or if I am . . ." Daren swallowed hard, and shot a sidelong glance at the altar fire.

Grunoc nodded, and his voice softened. "Indeed, young Daren, indeed. Today we find out if you are truly a Man, or if you are just another one of the Fallen." The priest stepped back another pace and kneeled upon a padded bench. Daren looked around for a moment, saw nothing, and decided to kneel on the hard bricks. He caught a tiny smile from Grunoc as he did so. Abruptly, he realized that the Testing had begun.

"Please repeat with me the catechism of the Fall," the High Priest said. "In the beginning . . ."

"Man was created," Daren said. "But he was cruel and savage: He hunted the other animals and ate their flesh; he killed them brutally and wore their skins."

"As man grew wiser . . ." Grunoc continued.

"He began to understand their pain. He sought gentler ways to kill; he found other ways to clothe and warm himself."

"He ate . . ."

"As they ate: The grain of the fields, the fruits of the trees, the roots and stalks of the vegetables."

"For meat . . ."

"He no longer killed, but ate clone tissue grown in vats." Daren paused a moment, to glance quickly at Grunoc and wonder if the priest would someday explain what that word—*clone*—meant. There were so many words in the catechism that didn't make sense any more.

Grunoc had noticed the pause. "In . . ." he softly prompted.

"In the fullness of the time," Daren quickly continued, "Man came to believe that even the eating of clone tissue was immoral. Work was begun to invest the vats with central nervous systems, so that they might fulfill their individual destinies."

Grunoc smiled slightly. Daren allowed himself to relax a bit; only two more verses and a collect to go.

"But in the year 2043 . . ."

"The Ktarrn came down from the stars. They evolved not from primates, but from leonines. Mighty are the Ktarrn, and powerful. They care not a whit for intellect; to them all life is divided into two families—"

Grunoc joined Daren in the unison. "*Predator and prey.*"

Daren licked his lips. Strange, how his mouth could be dry while his armpits were soaked in sweat! "The men who met the Ktarrn were enlightened," Daren said hoarsely. "They ate only vegetables, grain, and roots. They neither hunted nor skinned. Therefore, to the Ktarrn—"

"*Man is prey.*"

Grunoc lifted his face to the sooty roof. Daren clenched his eyes tightly shut and joined him in the collect. "*Oh vain man, all your works are as smoke before the claws of the new Master! He has cast down your cities; He has enslaved your people. Therefore, let us keep the feast.*"

Grunoc rose, and favored Daren with a smile. "Very good, young person. You know the catechism as it has been passed down from father to son for ten generations. Now there remains but one more test. Follow me." The priest turned, and ascended the steps to the altar.

Slowly, mechanically, Daren forced himself to stand. For some reason his knees had suddenly turned to water, and as he followed Grunoc up the steps, a sickening sense of anticipation abruptly struck him like a fist in the stomach. Fighting down the nausea, his eyes smarting from the smoke, he reached the top step and looked down at the cruel implements of the final test, arranged in neat rows beside the blazing altar.

No! He couldn't! But even as he started to turn away, Daren thought of his mother standing outside the door to the altar pit, and he knew he had to go through with it. She hadn't spent thirteen years raising him to be *cat food.*

Gritting his teeth, he turned and resolutely took up his position behind the priest. "Ktarrn, make me strong," Daren whispered a final, urgent prayer, as Grunoc stooped and raked the hot coals.

The casual ease with which Grunoc applied the last test shook Daren to the very core of his soul. Straightening up, the fat old man looked over his shoulder at Daren and said in an almost cheerful tone, "So, how do you want your steak?"

"Bloody rare, sir!"

"Mushrooms and onions?"

"No, thank you!"

"There's ketchup on the table."

"Ketchup is an insult to a good steak!"

Grunoc turned fully around, a fierce pride in his rheumy old eyes, and smiled at Daren. "It'll be ready in a minute, man." He put no emphasis on that final word; the tone of simple acceptance was all the encouragement Daren needed as he suddenly *knew* that he would pass the final test. His mouth was no longer dry; he was strong, proud, and *hungry* as he watched the old priest reach forth with the tongs and flip the bloody slab of prey on the grill.

Later, as he asked for seconds, it did occur to Daren that the steak would look better with a sprig of parsley on the side. But that thought lasted only a moment. ✦

Looking Forward:

Question Quest

by Piers Anthony

Coming in October 1991 from Avon Books

Introduction by Bill Fawcett

In Xanth they take everything literally. That's part of the magic in the series of Xanth novels from Piers Anthony—a volume of work that began as a "mere" trilogy and has now grown to a total of fourteen titles. (The longest "trilogy" in literary history just keeps on getting longer. . . .)

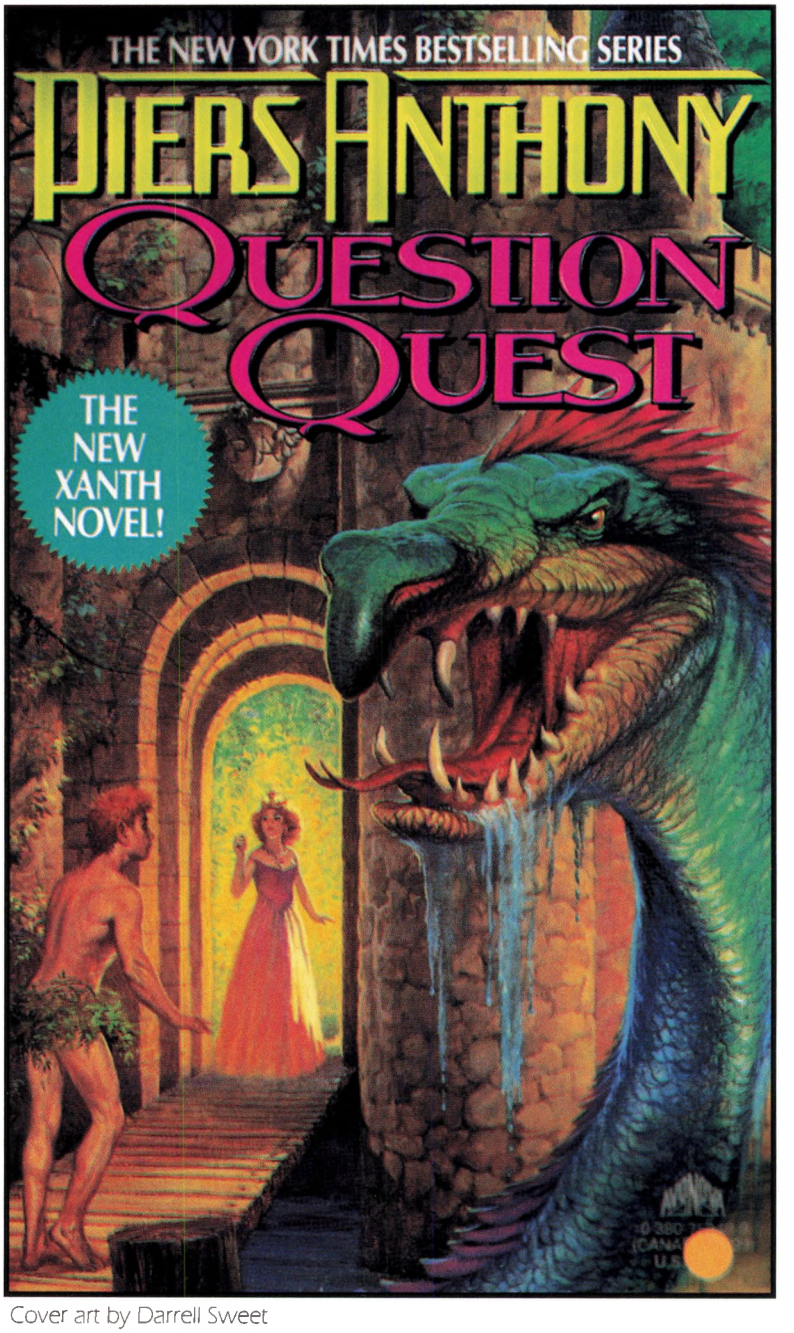
Readers who have visited this land infused with magic by the demon X(A/N)th will be familiar with the Good Magician Humphrey. This mage will answer any one question, but only after the questioner completes a quest for him. In this case, Humphrey is the only person who might know how to restore the lost youth of Lacuna, one of the castle Zombie twins. In this enjoyable jaunt across the land of Xanth and beyond, Lacuna makes a deal that pits her against the Cow-Pewter and literally sends her to hell in a handbasket—all for the sake of finding Humphrey.

The following excerpt is taken from very close to the beginning of the novel. Lacuna has just succeeded in the first of her challenges by outwitting the Palmetto Thicket and is approaching the moat surrounding Good Magician Grey's castle. Getting into this castle is always difficult, and she is relieved to see that the moat holds no obstacles to her passage . . . or does it?

—

Now she stood by the moat. There was a boy of about ten swimming in it. He looked ordinary, except that his hair was blue. That suggested that there was no moat monster or other threat in the water. The drawbridge was down, too, so if this wasn't an illusion or trick, she could cross without challenge. That was just as well; she didn't fancy getting wet.

She put a foot cautiously on the end of the drawbridge. It was solid. However, a section



Cover art by Darrell Sweet

of it might be illusion or have a trapdoor or something, so she would proceed with excruciating care. The worst challenges were the ones a person didn't expect.

Something flew by just in front of her. It appeared to be a ball of water. It landed and splatted on the bank. It *was* water.

She looked in the direction from which it had come. There was the boy, scooping up another handful of water and forming it into a ball.

"Are you going to throw that at me?" she asked.

"Sure, if you try to cross the moat. I'm supposed to stop you, you know."

"Oh, so this is a challenge?"

"Sure. Nothing personal. You look like a nice lady."

It had been so long since anyone had said anything like that to Lacuna that she almost blushed with pleasure. But this was business. "A little ball of water wouldn't stop me."

"Then how about a big ball?" He scooped up a double armful, and formed a ball of water as big as a beach ball.

"You couldn't throw that," she said.

For answer, he heaved the ball over the drawbridge. It just seemed to float up without much effort on his part. Such a mass could indeed knock her off the bridge.

"Well, then, I'll just have to wade or swim across," she said.

The boy swept his hand across the surface of the moat. Suddenly there were waves on the water, cruising outward and lapping the bank. He made another pass, and the waves got larger. They were formidable enough to make her hesitate.

"Your talent is water magic," she said. "That is impressive. What's your name?"

"Ryver." He scuffed a toe in the water. He seemed shy, now that she was getting personal.

"So you must be serving a year, for an Answer."

"Yes."

"If I may ask—why did you come to the Good Magician?"

"Oh, sure, you can ask! I asked him how I could find a good family to adopt me, 'cause I want to be a real boy, and I need a real family for that."

"You're not real?" she asked, surprised.

"I'm not a real boy. Not a flesh one, I mean. I'm made of water."

"Made of water?" Now she was really curious. "You can work with water, and control it, but that doesn't mean you're not human."

"I can work with water because I *am* water," he said. "See." Then he dissolved. His feet flowed away, and his legs, and the rest of his body, up to the head. "I look like a boy, but it's all water. I'd rather really be a boy, and have water control as my talent. And I will be, if a family adopts me. The Good Magician says."

She nodded. "So after your term of service is done, you will set out on a search for a good family that wants a boy your age."

"Sure! Do you think I'll find one?"

He seemed so eager that she didn't want to dash his hope. But it did seem doubtful. Most families preferred to raise their own ten-year-old boys. "Did the Good Magician say you would find one?"

"He said his Book of Answers said that I would, if I did my job well and was polite to my elders. So I'm doing those things."

He certainly was! He was effectively stopping her from crossing the moat, but he was being courteous about it, warning her rather than hitting her with water, and answering her questions. He seemed like a nice boy.

"Well, I hope that's right. But meanwhile, you know I have to find a way across despite your efforts."

"Yes. I wish you luck, but I have to stop you if I can. If you try to swim and my waves make you start to drown, I'll save you. I wouldn't want to hurt anybody."

"I appreciate that." There was no irony in her statement; it was clear that this was a challenge, not a duel to the death, and Ryver was just doing what he had to do.

She considered for a while, and pondered for a bit, and thought for a moment, while Ryver dissolved his head into water, then reformed into a whole boy, including clothing. He looked completely real, and she was sure he *was* real; he just wasn't made of flesh. If adoption into a human family enabled him to be transformed into flesh, that would be nice for him. She understood that ordinary people were mostly water anyway; Ryver just took it farther.

She got a glimmer of a notion. "Ryver, can you read?"

"Oh, sure. The Sorceress Ivy taught me to read. She showed me how to start, and then Enhanced me into being competent. That's her talent, you know. But you know, most of the books they have at the castle are sort of dry, pardon the term, and not much fun, if you're not into arcana."

Lacuna had suspected as much. "It happens that my talent is changing print. I can also make print appear where there was none, and I can control what it says. Let me show you something interesting to read."

"Oh, no!" he exclaimed. "I won't make a deal to let you get through! That's not right."

"Dear boy," she said, "I am not trying to bribe you. I'm trying to trick you, which is fair enough. I am going to show you some print, and if you don't find it interesting, don't read it."

"It won't work," he said.

She glanced at the now calm surface of the moat. Abruptly words appeared on its surface, sliding across from right to left, forming a moving band of words. They disappeared as they reached the left margin, so that the whole moat wouldn't get covered with print.

ONCE UPON A TIME THERE WAS A WATER BOY NAMED RYVER WHO WANTED TO BE A FLESH BOY, the rolling print said.

"Hey, that's about me!" Ryver exclaimed.

"Well, actually it's a standard story; I just filled in your name to make it more interesting."

"That's okay." He continued reading, because otherwise he would lose some of the moving words. He was,

as she had suspected, fascinated by references to his own name. Many folk were, especially if the references were complimentary. It could work even better if the references were insulting, but she lacked the gumption to write trash.

She poured it on. NOW ONE DAY RYVER WAS SITTING BY THE BANK OF THE MOAT, WATCHING THE FISH, WHEN A STRANGE CREATURE CAME BY. IT WAS A DRAGON LOOKING FOR A TASTY FLESH MORSEL TO FRY. "HA!" SAID THE DRAGON. "I SEE YOU ARE JUST THE KIND OF PERSON I NEED. COME WITH ME AND I WILL GIVE YOU AN EXPERIENCE LIKE NONE OTHER."

"Nuh-uh!" the live (or water-formed) Ryver grunted. "You won't fry *me,* you vicious animal!"

He was evidently getting into it. Lacuna heated up the script. "OH, IS THAT SO? THE DRAGON SNORTED, HIS BREATH SCORCHING THE PLANTS BY THE BANK. "I'LL HUFF AND I'LL PUFF AND I'LL FRY YOUR HEAD OFF!"

"Yeah, fire-brain? I'd like to see you try it!" the real Ryver said.

SO THE DRAGON HUFFED AND IT PUFFED AND IT BLASTED OUT SUCH A BLAST OF FLAME THAT THE GROUND TURNED BLACK AND SPARKS FLEW FROM THE STONES AND STEAM ROSE FROM THE MOAT. BUT IT COULDN'T FRY RYVER, BECAUSE HE WAS MADE OF WATER. THEN RYVER MADE THE WATER RISE UP AND SMACK THE DRAGON RIGHT IN THE FACE.

"I guess that doused your furnace, soggy-snoot!" the boy cried happily.

WELL, THAT MADE THE DRAGON ANGRY. SO IT OPENED ITS JAWS AND CHARGED. IT CHOMPED RYVER RIGHT THROUGH THE CENTER, BUT ITS TEETH HAD NO EFFECT, BECAUSE THEY COULDN'T CHEW WATER. AND RYVER SQUIRTED JETS OF WATER IN ITS EYES AND EARS. THE DRAGON HATED THAT, BECAUSE NOBODY LIKES TO HAVE HIS EARS WASHED.

The text continued, and the boy kept reading avidly. He didn't even notice that Lacuna had crossed over the drawbridge. That was all right; she had left enough text in the queue to hold him for half an hour. She hadn't known how long it would take for him to be completely distracted, so she had put in plenty. Anyway, she was pleased that someone really liked her writing. She had learned to tell stories to children when she was babysitting, and rather enjoyed it. Ryver was a perfect audience.

Now she was across the moat but still outside the castle wall. There was a door right before her. She walked up and turned the handle. But it didn't work; the door was locked, and she didn't have the key. Obviously she had to find the key; this was the third challenge.

She looked around. There was a fairly narrow path that circled the castle just inside the moat. It was lined by bushes that resembled shelves; their stems were vertical and their branches horizontal, with the leaves filling in to complete the pattern. They had squared-off large berries that looked rather like books on the shelves.

A boy was sitting on the bank, picking the berries and eating them. He looked a lot like Ryver.

"Who are you?" she inquired, not really expecting an answer.

"I am Torrent, Ryver's twin brother."

Could she believe that? Well, maybe for now.

"What sort of plants are these?" she asked.

"They are library bushes," he responded. "They have endless information, which I get by eating the fruit."

This was almost too good to be true, so she knew it probably wasn't true. But she would find out. "Then you must know where the key to that door is."

"Sure. Here it is." He handed her a large wooden key.

She tried the key in the lock. It wouldn't fit. It was the wrong one.

She returned to the boy. "It's not the right key. Where is the right one?"

"On the other side of the castle."

She doubted it, but proceeded on around. There was a small metal key lying on the path. She picked it up and walked back around to the door. It didn't fit.

She looked at the boy, who was still eating berries. Twice he had directed her to the wrong key. He was obviously not telling the truth. How could she make him tell the truth?

She decided to experiment. "Torrent, are you part of this challenge for me?"

"Yes."

"So you are supposed to misdirect me, and prevent me from finding the key."

"No."

"And you do that by lying to me."

He hesitated, and she knew why. If he lied, she would know it, which would make the lie worthless, but if he told the truth he wouldn't be misdirecting her. "No."

Which meant that he did. "So you lied about your identity, too. You are Ryver."

"No."

"Then where is Ryver? He's not out there reading the print on the moat."

He looked back there, and winced. He must have had to tear himself away from it with the story unfinished. He didn't answer, which was answer enough.

And you're not supposed to be part of this challenge," she said, remembering that he had answered yes to that question before, so it was a lie.

"I can be if I want to be!" he said defensively.

"And now you're telling the truth."

He hung his head. "You trapped me into it. Anyway, it doesn't matter, because it's only about the challenge that I really had to lie."

"Why not just refuse to tell me anything about the keys?"

"Because—" He stopped. "I can't tell you."

"Because lying has something to do with the solution," she said, catching on.

"No."

"Which means yes. And the berries—do they have anything to do with it too?"

"No."

"So they do. Exactly what kind of berries are they?"

"Poison."

"Hardly. You've been eating them." Then a light flickered. "You were a truthful boy. Now you're an untruthful

one. You've been eating the berries. You said they are libraries, but I think they are lie berries. They make you lie!"

"No!"

"And if I ate one, it would make me lie."

"No."

"But it's hard to lie, if you don't know the truth. So maybe the berries do have a lot of information, so they know how to lie about it. So the person who eats them knows the truth, which he won't tell."

"No."

She picked a berry and popped it into her mouth. It was sickly sweet. Then she spoke: "The key is—" Information coursed through her mind. "Over there." She pointed to what she knew was the wrong key, under a bush.

But now she knew where the right key was. It was under the water at the edge of the moat, hidden by mud. She went there, reached down, and fished it out. It was made of delicate stone. Then she took it to the door. It fit, and in a moment the door was unlocked.

She looked back at Ryver, who was staring sadly after her. Information sifted through her mind as she continued to feel the effect of the berry. Now she knew why he had come to join this challenge, changing places with the gnome who was supposed to be eating the berries and doing the lying. He was lonely. He really did want to be part of a family, and she, as a passing human being, was a step closer to the illusion of that than being alone was. He was taking the opportunity to be closer to her, to interact with her, even though it had to be negative. She felt sorry for him.

She didn't say anything, because she would be forced to lie until the effect of the berry wore off. She turned and opened the door. She had made it through the challenges, and it had been interesting, but she was not completely pleased. She saw now that she was not the only one whose life was blah. ✦

Ready . . . Aim . . . Write!

If you're a reader of this magazine with something to say, and you're willing to share your thoughts in writing, we want to hear from you. Please don't hesitate to send us a letter or a postcard—we do read every piece of mail we receive, and we try to respond as often and as promptly as we can.

Comments on the magazine and its content are especially welcome now that AMAZING® Stories is coming out in a full-size, full-color format—we want to find out what you think of the new look. If it's not what you expected, then what *did* you expect? Which stories and features did you like, and which ones could you do without? The feedback we get over the next few months will play an important role in shaping the future of the magazine. To help us separate readers' comments from other mail we receive, please write "Letter to the Editor" in the lower left-hand corner of the envelope.

As much as we would enjoy reading compliments, we're even more interested in criticism—so if you have a negative reaction to something about this magazine, don't keep it to yourself. Before we can fix a problem, we have to be told that it *is* a problem.

We will consider any letter of comment and criticism to be eligible for publication, unless you specifically say in your letter that you *don't* want it printed. An unsigned letter will not be considered for publication, but we will withhold a writer's name on request. If you give us your full mailing address when you write and your letter is printed, we'll send you a complimentary issue of the magazine in which it appears.

If you want to be a contributor, either as a writer or an illustrator, please read the "Submissions" paragraph in the small type on page 3 of this issue. If you're sending in for our fiction writers' guidelines, please write "Guidelines" in the corner of the envelope to ensure that your request is handled efficiently.

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Looking Forward:

Barrayar

by Lois McMaster Bujold

Coming in October 1991 from Baen Books

Introduction by Bill Fawcett

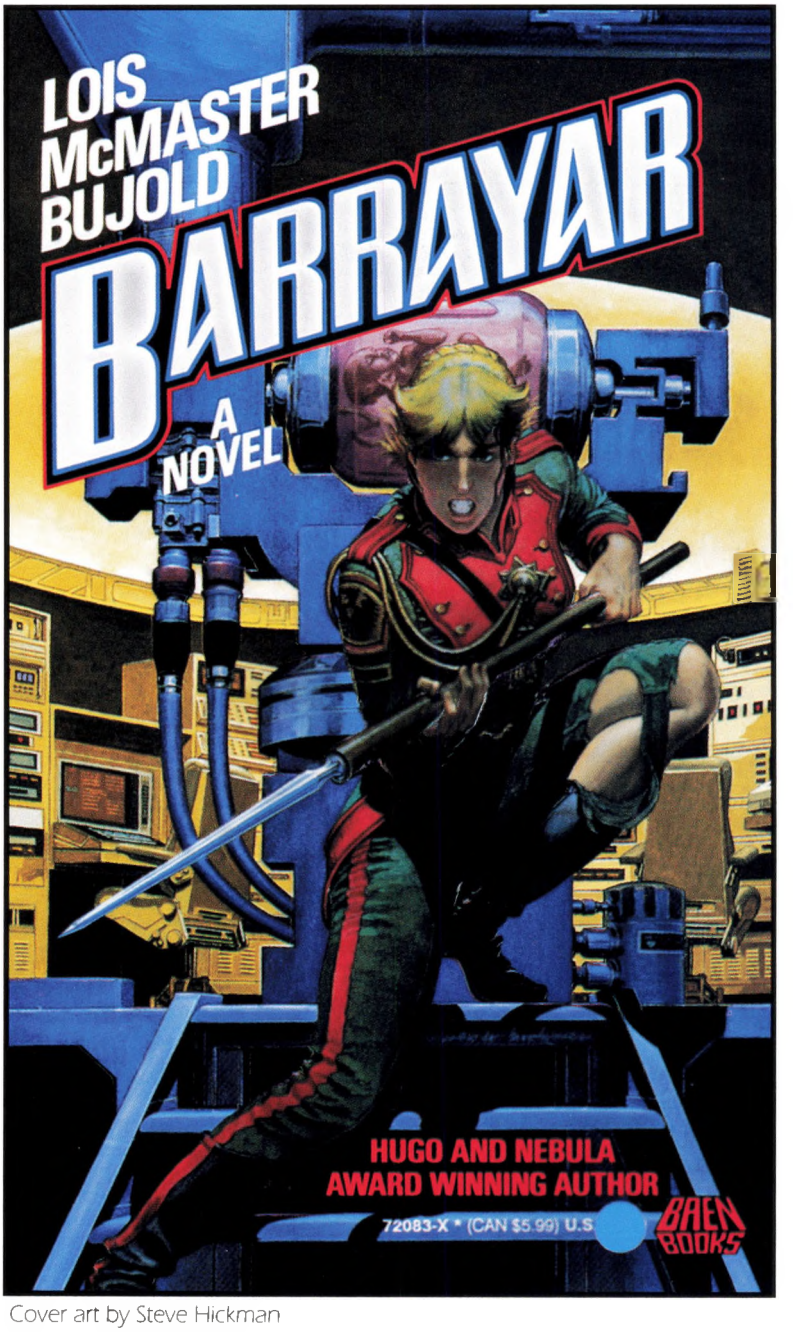
Several outstanding new science fiction writers have rocketed to popularity in the last few years. Prominent among them is Lois McMaster Bujold, who has won awards for her short fiction and is also the author of a string of bestselling novels. The latest novel in her Vor series, *The Vor Game*, is a nominee for the 1991 Hugo Award (and may have won the award by the time you read this). The next book in the series is *Barrayar*, a prequel that sets the scene for all the books that follow it in the story line. If you haven't started reading the series yet, this one would be a great place to start.

Barrayar is a fanatically militaristic planet that has just lost a war with the Vor Lords. Cordelia, the heroine of the victory, was formerly a top commander in the Barrayar fleet. Now she is married to Lord Vorkosigan, Regent of the entire Vor empire. She soon finds herself trapped in a maze of imperial politics, revenge, and continued hostility from Barrayar. In the following excerpt, we see clearly one of the dangers she has to face daily—a danger complicated by the fact that she is now carrying the heir to the Vorkosigan title.

—

She awoke in the dark to a tinkling crash and a soft report, and drew in her breath with a start. Acridity seared her lungs, mouth, nostrils, eyes. A gut-wrenching undertaste pumped her stomach into her throat. Beside her, Vorkosigan snapped from sleep with an oath.

"Soltoxin gas grenade! Don't breathe, Cornelia!" Emphasizing his shout, he shoved a pillow over her face, his hot strong arms encircling her and dragging her from the bed. She found her feet and lost her stomach at the same moment, stumbling into the hall, and he slammed the bedroom door shut behind them.



Cover art by Steve Hickman

Running footsteps shook the floor. Vorkosigan cried, "Get back! Soltoxin gas! Clear the floor! Call Illyan!" before he too doubled over, coughing and retching. Other hands bundled them both toward the stairs. She could scarcely see through her madly watering eyes.

Between spasms Vorkosigan gasped, "They'll have the antidote . . . Imperial Residence . . . closer than ImpMil . . . get Illyan at once. He'll know. Into the shower—where's milady's woman? Get a maid. . . ."

Within moments she was dumped into a downstairs shower, Vorkosigan with her. He was shaking and barely able to stand, but still trying to help her. "Start washing it off your skin, and keep washing. Don't stop. Keep the water cool."

"You too, then. What was that crap?" She coughed again, in the spray of the water, and they exchanged help with the soap.

"Wash out your mouth, too. . . . Soltoxin. It's been fifteen, sixteen years since I last smelled that stink, but you never forget it. It's a poison gas. Military. Should be strictly controlled. How the hell anyone got hold of some . . . Damn Security! They'll be flapping around like headless chickens tomorrow . . . too late." His face was greenish-white beneath the night's beard stubble.

"I don't feel too bad now," said Cordelia. "Nausea's passing off. I take it we missed the full dose?"

"No. It just acts slowly. Doesn't take much at all to do you. It mostly affects soft tissue—lungs will be jelly in an hour, if the antidote doesn't get here soon."

The growing fear that pounded in her gut, heart, and mind half-clotted her words. "Does it cross the placental barrier?"

He was silent for too long before he said, "I'm not sure. Have to ask the doctor. I've only seen the effects on young men." Another spasm of deep coughing seized him, that went on and on.

One of Count Piotr's serving women arrived, dishevelled and frightened, to help Cordelia and the terrified young guard who had been assisting them. Another guard came in to report, raising his voice over the running water. "We reached the Residence, sir. They have some people on the way."

Cordelia's own throat, bronchia, and lungs were beginning to secrete foul-tasting phlegm, and she coughed and spat. "Anyone see Drou?"

"I think she took out after the assassins, milady."

"Not her job. When an alarm goes up, she's supposed to run to Cordelia," growled Vorkosigan. The talking triggered more coughing.

"She was downstairs, sir, at the time the attack took place, with Lieutenant Koudelka. They both went out the back door."

"Dammit," Vorkosigan muttered, "not his job either." His effort was punished by another coughing jag. "They catch anybody?"

"I think so, sir. There was some kind of uproar at the back of the garden, by the wall."

They stood under the water for a few more moments, until the guard reported back. "The doctor from the Residence is here, sir."

The maid wrapped Cordelia in a robe, and Vorkosigan put on a towel, growling to the guard, "Go find me some clothes, boy." His voice rattled like gravel.

A middle-aged man, his hair standing up stiffly, wearing trousers, pajama tops, and bedroom slippers, was off-loading equipment in the guest bedroom when they came out. He took a pressurized canister from his bag and fitted a breathing mask to it, glancing at Cordelia's rounding abdomen and then at Vorkosigan.

"My lord. Are you certain of the identification of the poison?"

"Unfortunately, yes. It was soltoxin."

The doctor bowed his head. "I am sorry, milady."

"Is it going to hurt my . . ." She choked on the mucus.

"Just shut up and give it to her," snarled Vorkosigan.

The doctor fitted the mask over her nose and mouth. "Breathe deeply. Inhale . . . exhale. Keep exhaling. Now draw in. Hold it. . . ."

The antidote gas had a greenish taste, cooler, but nearly as nauseating as the original poison. Her stomach heaved, but had nothing left in it to reject. She watched Vorkosigan over the mask, watching her, and tried to smile reassuringly. It must be the reaction catching up with him; he seemed greyer, more distressed, with each breath she took. She was certain he had taken in a larger dose than she, and pushed the mask away to say, "Isn't it about your turn?"

The doctor pressed it back, saying, "One more breath, milady, to be sure." She inhaled deeply, and the doctor transferred the mask to Vorkosigan. He seemed to need no instruction in the procedure.

"How many minutes since the exposure?" asked the doctor anxiously.

"I'm not sure. Did anyone note the time? You, uh . . ." She had forgotten the young guard's name.

"About fifteen or twenty minutes, milady, I think."

The doctor relaxed measurably. "It should be all right, then. You'll both be in hospital for a few days. I'll arrange for medical transport. Was anyone else exposed?" he asked the guard.

"Doctor, wait." He had repossessed canister and mask, and was making for the door. What will that . . . soltoxin do to my baby?"

He did not meet her eyes. "No one knows. No one has ever survived exposure without an immediate antidote treatment."

Cordelia could feel her heart beating. "But given the treatment . . ." She did not like his look of pity, and turned to Vorkosigan. "Is that—" She was stopped cold by his expression, a leaden greyness lit from beneath by pain and growing anger, a stranger's face with a lover's eyes, meeting her eyes at last.

"Tell her about it," he whispered to the doctor. "I can't."

"Need we distress—"

"*Now.* Get it over with." His voice cracked and croaked.

"The problem is the antidote, milady," said the doctor reluctantly. "It's a violent teratogen. Destroys bone development in the growing fetus. Your bones are grown, so it won't affect you, except for an increased tendency

to arthritic-type breakdowns, which can be treated . . . if and when they arise . . ." He trailed off as she closed her eyes, shutting him out.

"I must see that hall guard," he added.

"Go, go," replied Vorkosigan, releasing him. He maneuvered out the door past the guard arriving with Vorkosigan's clothes.

She opened her eyes to Vorkosigan, and they stared at each other.

"The look on your face . . ." he whispered. "It's not . . . Weep. Rage! Do something!" His voice rose to hoarseness. "Hate me at least!"

"I can't," she whispered back, "feel anything yet. Tomorrow, maybe." Every breath was fire.

With a muttered curse, he flung on the clothes, a set of undress greens. "I can do something."

It was the stranger's face, possessing his. Words echoed hollowly in her memory, *If Death wore a dress uniform He would look just like that.*

"Where are you going?"

"Going to see what Koudelka caught." She followed him through the door. "You stay here," he ordered.

"No."

He glared back at her, and she brushed the glare away with an equally savage gesture, as if striking down a sword thrust. "I'm going with you."

"Come on, then." He turned jerkily, and made for the stairs to the first floor, rage rigid in his backbone.

"You will not," she murmured fiercely, for his ear alone, "murder anyone in front of me."

"Will I not?" he whispered back. "Will-I-not?" His steps were hard, bare feet jarring on the stone stairs.

The large entry hall was in chaos, filled with their guards, men in the Count's livery, medics. A man, or a body, Cordelia could not tell which, in the black fatigue uniform of the night guards, was laid out on the tesselated pavement, a medic at his head. Both were soaked from the rain, and smeared with mud. Bloodstained water pooled beneath them, and the medic's bootsoles squeaked in it.

Commander Illyan, beads of water gleaming in his hair from the foggy drizzle, was just coming in the front door with an aide, saying, "Let me know as soon as the techs get here with the kirilian detector. Meantime keep everyone off that wall and out of the alley. My lord!" he cried when he saw Vorkosigan. "Thank God you're all right!"

Vorkosigan growled in his throat, wordlessly. A knot of men surrounded the prisoner, who was leaning face to the wall, one hand over his head and the other held stiffly to his side at an odd angle. Droushnakovi stood near, wearing a wet shift. A wicked-looking metal crossbow dangled gleaming from her hand, evidently the weapon that had been used to fire the gas grenade through their window. She bore a livid mark on her face, and staunched a nosebleed with her other hand. Blood stained her nightgown here and there. Koudelka was there, too, leaning on his sword, one leg dragging. He wore a wet and muddy uniform and bedroom slippers, and a sour look on his face.

"I'd have had him," he was snapping, evidently continuing an ongoing argument, "if you hadn't come running up and shouting at me—"

"Oh, really!" Droushnakovi snapped back. "Well, pardon me, but I don't see it that way. Seems to me he had you, laid out flat on the ground. If I hadn't seen his legs going up the wall—"

"Stuff it! It's Lord Vorkosigan!" hissed another guard. The knot of men turned, to step back before his face.

"How did he get in?" began Vorkosigan, and stopped. The man was wearing the black fatigues of the Service. "Surely not one of your men, Illyan?" His voice grated, metal on stone.

"My lord, we've got to have him alive, to question him," said Illyan uneasily at Vorkosigan's shoulder, half-hypnotized by the same look that had made the guards recoil. "There may be more to the conspiracy. You can't . . ."

The prisoner turned, then, to face his captors. A guard started forward to shove him back into position against the wall, but Vorkosigan motioned him away. Cordelia could not see Vorkosigan's face, standing behind him in that moment, but his shoulders lost their murderous tension, and the rage drained out of his backbone, leaving only a gutter-smear of pain. Above the insignialess black collar was the ravaged face of Evon Vorhalas.

"Oh, not *both* of them," breathed Cordelia.

Hatred hastened the rhythm of Vorhalas's breathing as he glared at his intended victim. "You bastard. You snake-cold bastard. Sitting there cold as stone while they hacked off his head. Did you feel a thing? Or did you enjoy it, my Lord Regent? I swore I'd get you then."

There was a long silence, then Vorkosigan leaned close to him, one arm extended past his head for support against the wall. He whispered hoarsely, "You missed me, Evon."

Vorhalas spat in his face, spittle bloody from his injured mouth. Vorkosigan made no move to wipe it away. "You missed my wife," he went on in a slow soft cadence. "But you got my son. Did you dream of sweet revenge? You have it. Look at her eyes, Evon. A man could drown in those sea-grey eyes. I'll be looking at them every day for the rest of my life. So eat vengeance, Evon. Drink it. Fondle it. Wrap it round you in the night watch. It's all yours. I will it all to you. For myself, I've gorged it to the gagging point, and have lost my stomach for it." ✦

The "Aliens" of the Past

Stephen L. Gillett

Imagine: A fierce predator with lobsterlike claws but fishlike fins, and a circular mouth like a miniature crushing mill. . . .

A creeping shellfish covered with scales, and topped with double rows of spines that would regrow if broken off. . . .

Reefs of cuplike creatures, fixed in place like a stack of wine goblets, straining food from the waves washing over them. . . .

Since the mid-1800s, people have been fascinated with the dinosaurs and their kin, fantastic beasts of the past that have no modern representatives. But dinosaurs are just one example of fantastic beasts, and not even a very good one; they're vertebrates, after all, and thus closely related to many modern creatures.

Many strange creatures in the fossil record have left no modern descendants, and even no close relatives. The older the rocks we examine, the more such "problematica" we find. Problematica are especially abundant in Cambrian rocks, dating from the geologic period in which fossils of multicelled living things ("metazoans"—plants, animals, and fungi) first became common, about 600 million years ago. Greg Bear modeled an alien, the Jart in his book *Eternity*, on one strange Cambrian critter, the bizarre *Hallucigenia sparsa* found in the Burgess Shale of British Columbia—of which much more anon.

Just what are these "problematica"? Were they an invasion of alien creatures that were finally outcompeted by native Earth life? Almost certainly not: instead, they are native Earth creatures representing evolutionary "experiments" that because of maladaption—or, more likely, simply because of bad luck—did not survive.

Why do we think so? Well, one reason for believing the problematica to be native to Earth is the basic biochemical unity of all Earthly life. It's easy to get impressed by all the weirdly different shapes of those extinct critters. But many people don't realize that *all* metazoans, as well as protists (all the one-celled organisms besides bacteria), are very similar biochemically and cellularly, despite their vast differences in body plan. (Including humans, by the way: science-fiction stories in which humans are alien to the Earth contradict not only the geologic record, but the evidence of biochemistry and embryology as well.)

All these organisms are made up of eukaryotic cells. Whether they belong to an ameba, insect, fungus, cornstalk, person, or whatever, these cells are efficient oxygen-users with a separate nucleus and mitochondria and (in the case of plants and some protists) chloroplasts. A sequoia, a mushroom, a *Paramecium*, and you share the same basic cellular architecture. Indeed, not just the structure, but the very operation of the cells shows how interrelated these different lifeforms are. We can (tentatively) date some basic biochemical pathways to well back in the Precambrian, for example.

(This fact has medical significance: it's hard to treat infections by such organisms as worms, protozoans, or fungi, because the eukaryotic cell of the parasite is so similar to the eukaryotic cell of the mammalian host that it's hard to find something that will kill the former without killing the latter. Till recently, the only treatment for canine heartworm disease was a toxic arsenical compound. Generally the worm died before the dog did, but not always.)

The cells of eukaryotes differ much more from those of prokaryotes (bacteria), and in fact there's vastly more diversity among the prokaryotes themselves than among the eukaryotes. If you wanted to look for aliens among Earth creatures, you should look among the bacteria. But even so, the similarities are more profound than the differences.

So, the weird forms of the problematica are not an argument for their alienness—if DNA can code for organisms as different as people and mushrooms and sequoias, it can handle *Anomalocaris* or *Hallucigenia* or conodonts or whatever.

Of course, alien creatures *could* have all been killed off. Maybe we're just seeing the Earth-native survivors. But in fact there's a much simpler explanation for the problematica—a simpler explanation that nonetheless has profound implications for the history of life on Earth, and even for the Galaxy as a whole.

Let's now look at the fossil record. When the classic fossil record appears at the beginning of the Cambrian, living things were already well differentiated into phyla* recognizable today. We see mollusks, shelled animals akin to modern snails and clams; echinoderms, creatures related to sand dollars and sea urchins; brachiopods, shellfish which, although uncommon in modern seas, still exist; and arthropods, the "jointed foot" creatures whose modern representatives include insects, spiders and scorpions, and crustaceans such as lobsters and crabs. In detail, to be sure, the Cambrian representatives are different classes or orders from those that survive today. But they're still clearly related in general body plan. (And even here there are exceptions; the brachiopod *Lingula* today looks just like its Cambrian ancestor.)

However, we also see forms *not* clearly related to anything living today: The archeocyathids, for example, a bizarre group of cuplike animals. They were "filter feeders," a lifestyle shared by modern corals, sponges, bryozoans, and many others: they lived fixed in one place, and strained their food from the water passing by. But they looked nothing like those other animals. Archeocyathids built reefs in the Early Cambrian seas, something like modern reefs, but they all went extinct by the end of the Early Cambrian, and left no descendants. (Geologists have subdivided most of the geologic periods roughly into thirds: Early, Middle, and Late Cambrian, for example.)

The hyoliths are another problematic group. They left little shells that are something like mollusk shells, but with enough differences that many paleontologists feel they are a separate phylum. Yet other small shelly critters—the so-called agmates—seem to require yet a different phylum.

In times somewhat later than the Cambrian, we find another curious problematic form, the "conodonts," from the Latin for "cone teeth." As you might guess from their name, they look vaguely like tiny teeth or combs. All are very small, a few millimeters or so across at most. But for over a century no one had any idea what creature they were from. And this despite lots of study; conodonts are very useful in fossil correlations, which are a classic way of determining geologic time. Since they're small, conodonts are often pretty abundant in a random sedimentary rock, and they're also easy to separate out since they're made of calcium phosphate instead of calcium carbonate. Limestones are just calcium carbonate, and they're easy to dissolve with weak acids. So you can just dissolve out the conodonts for study.

So what *is* the conodont animal? There have been a few false alarms over the years, when paleontologists found little clusters of conodonts in place in the rock, surrounded by the vague outlines of what seemed to be the original creature. But these all turned out to be conodont-eaters rather than the conodont itself.

Recently, however, some paleontologists found the preserved outline of a conodont animal with the conodont pieces all in place, apparently surrounding the creature's gullet. It looks like they were little free-swimming creatures that used the conodont pieces as—yes—teeth. They *may* be related to the chordates—that is, to our own phylum—because vertebrate bones are also made of calcium phosphate. Most other animals make their shells or skeletons out of calcium carbonate. (In case you were going to ask, all the conodonts died out at the end of the Triassic, about 210 million years ago.)

This leads into a profound fact about the fossil record: Generally only the so-called "hard parts"—the bones or shells or teeth—of creatures get fossilized. Since many creatures don't *have* hard parts, this means lots of creatures generally don't get fossilized at all. Consider the lowly earthworm, for example. (An additional complication is that depositing and preserving the sediments that contain those hard parts is a haphazard affair, too, but that's another story.)

The upshot is that the usual fossil occurrences give us a distorted picture of the creatures that were living there. It's as though you were trying to determine what creatures lived in the sea just from the shells on the shore. You'd miss quite a few!

Even if an animal has hard parts, having a record of its soft parts too helps a lot, especially when the very type of animal is extinct. The conodont animal, with its tiny percentage of enigmatic hard parts, is one spectacular example! Till we found the rest of the animal preserved, however vaguely, we had no idea of its form.

As the conodont animal shows, though, we *do* get unusual preservation, with soft parts and all, every now and then. Paleontologists have adopted a German word, "Lagerstaette" (roughly translated, "lying in place"), to describe fossil localities with such exceptional preservation. *Lagerstaetten* are obviously extremely important in studying the record of life on Earth.

Anyway, when we look at *Lagerstaetten* of Cambrian and similar ages the list of problematica increases greatly. The Burgess Shale of the Canadian Rockies, which is Middle Cambrian in age, is one of the most famous *Lagerstaetten* of all, and it contains lots of what Stephen Jay Gould calls "weird wonders." I described a couple at the beginning of this column: *Anomalocaris* was a bizarre swimming predator, with arthropodlike claws but a circular mouth utterly unlike any other creature. *Wiwaxia* may have been relat-

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* Living things are classified into a set of hierarchies: kingdom (plants, animals, fungi, protists, and bacteria), phylum (plural phyla), class, order, family, genus (pl. genera), and species. A mnemonic for all these names is "King Philip Comes Over For Good Scotch." Phylum is the most inclusive grouping outside of kingdom: it refers to a set of organisms that share a basic body plan. For example, human beings—and all other vertebrates including birds, dinosaurs, fish, and so on—belong to phylum Chordata, and so are called "chordates." The name comes from the *notochord,* which in vertebrates becomes the spine.

ed to mollusks, but was covered with scales and spines instead of a shell. *Hallucigenia,* which Greg Bear used for inspiration, bore seven pairs of walking spines, and seven tentacles—each possibly with a separate gullet!—waving above the creature's body.

There are at least a dozen more "alien wonders" of this sort. These creatures have no close relatives, even among one another; each apparently reflects an entire metazoan phylum that was subsequently extinguished.

This "taxonomic" diversity—i.e., diversity of body plan—was typical of the Cambrian. The Burgess Shale was unusual only in its preservation, not in its fauna. It was a fortuitous snapshot of the Cambrian seas, and now that we know what we're looking for, we've found bits and pieces of the Burgess animals in Cambrian rocks elsewhere.

The diversity was also "fractal," to use a current buzzword; that is, there was a lot more diversity at *all* scales. It wasn't a matter of just a few bizarre phyla that have died without issue. Even many critters that obviously belong to a well-known phylum don't belong to well-known classes in that phylum.

Take the arthropods, for example, a highly successful phylum that overall has survived very well indeed. All modern arthropods, despite their vast differences in appearance and lifestyle, fit into just three major taxonomic groups: the Uniramia, which includes insects, millipedes, and some less familiar forms; the Chelicerata or "claw bearers," which includes the arachnids (spiders and scorpions), as well as the horseshoe crab and some extinct types; and the Crustacea, including lobsters, crabs, shrimp, and many other mostly marine animals. There's also a fourth major group, the trilobites, which finally died out at the end of the Permian, about 250 million years ago.

Despite their outward diversity, each group is based on a very stereotyped body plan. Crustacea, for example, all have five head segments, with the first two in front of the mouth and specialized into sensory "antennae."

Again, *all* modern arthropods fall into one of these groupings.

Now, in the Burgess fauna there are quite a few critters that are clearly arthropods in general body plan, but that in detail *don't* fit into one of these major groups. Although they have the body segmentation and the jointed limbs that are characteristic of the Arthropoda, they have a different number of segments forming a part of the body, or the wrong number of limbs, or minor differences in the jointing of the legs or gill branches. For example, the most common animal in the Burgess is a beautiful little creature called *Marrella splendens,* which C. D. Walcott called the "lace crab." (Walcott discovered the Burgess site around the turn of the century.) However, although *Marrella* is an arthropod, it's not a crab. It just doesn't have the right number of antennae, legs, gills, and so on in the right places. But it's also not a chelicerate nor a uniramian nor a trilobite, either. It's simply a variant of the basic arthopod body plan that's died out completely.

In addition, however, the Burgess Shale *does* contain a clear example of a crustacean and a chelicerate, and probably a uniramian as well. There are also many trilobites, which although extinct are a well-known group. So all this diversity occurs in *addition* to the modern-looking forms.

And down to yet smaller scales: even within the well-known groups we find unexpected varieties. For example, all hitherto known trilobites had a hard, three-part shell that fossilizes easily, to yield those classic fossils prized by paleontologists and laypeople alike. But a strange arthropod, *Naraoia,* with a soft, two-part, very un-trilobitelike shell proved to be an unknown type of trilobite. Under this misleading shell, *Naraoia* is a trilobite: it has all the right appendages in all the right places.

What are we to make of this diversity upon diversity of life forms? It's exactly what you'd expect from an initial "adaptive radiation" of metazoans. In "adaptive radiation," an initial group of closely related organisms (a "clade") evolves into a set of different species as different groups encounter different selective pressures.

(To digress with a terrible pun: a popular sign in the paleontology/sedimentology department where I did my Ph.D. was "Danger! Adaptive Radiation!" Moving right along . . .)

Anyway, one thing you would expect in such an adaptive radiation is quite a number of "experimental" body plans that did not survive to the present. So in Cambrian time, right after the first radiation, we'd expect to see quite a number of forms that left no direct descendants, and later and later in geologic time we'd expect to see fewer and fewer problematic forms. And that's in fact exactly what we see, both in the hard-part record and in younger *Lagerstaetten.*

So far, this sounds like classic Darwinism. You start out with many "experiments," and they're pruned by natural selection, so that only the best adapted or most versatile plans survive—that is, the "fittest."

However, it now appears that a great deal of pruning will be due just to chance. Who lives and who dies may be much more of a crapshoot than we ever expected. Consider a small group of related animals, a phylum, sharing a basic body plan, but with broad and unknown potentials for future development. An extinction event—an asteroid impact, a climate shift, a coalescing of continents—and an entire lineage, with all its future evolutionary possibilities, is gone. An entire world-that-could-have-been, vanished without a trace!

Look at all those arthropods, for example. A Cambrian observer would hardly have singled out the crustacean body plan as something special. Indeed, little distinguished these various arthopods anyway, just details of segmentation or limb placement or limb specialization. Yet crustacea survived and diversified, and *Marrella* did not, and it's hard to see why other than happenstance.

These worlds-that-might-have-been should be a source of inspiration for SF. As I've said before, the ancient Earth is a much more alien place than most authors' "alien"

planets. Mother Nature is much more inventive than most authors!

But beyond this: "Rewind the tape of life" (as Gould puts it) back to the Cambrian, and let it replay. Surely the world today would be very different! We can't imagine that all those different lineages would have prospered—or died—in exactly the same way. Maybe wiwaxiids or hyoliths instead of mollusks would dominate the shoreline. Maybe predators evolved from *Anomalocaris* or *Amiskwia* or *Odontogriphus,* instead of chordates, would rule the seas.

And this chance survival since the Cambrian has profound implications for the Fermi Paradox: how many of those evolutionary lineages could have evolved consciousness, technology, spaceflight? Obviously chordates could; here we are! But could arthropods? Or could have one of the now-extinct "weird wonders" led to land-based life, big brains, technology? Possibly . . . but as Gould points out, the only chordate represented in the Burgess Shale (*Pikaia*) is a rare, delicate creature containing no obvious seeds of future greatness. Surely a great deal of luck was involved in this unprepossesing creature's surviving, much less prospering to give progeny that first colonized the land, and then (we hope!) the stars.

Maybe life is common, but technological life is extremely rare.

Further reading:

Every now and then I'll recommend a book or two that follows up on a column topic—if it's authoritative *and* well written.

Wonderful Life by Stephen Jay Gould is such a book. It's a highly readable account of the Burgess Shale and its significance by a noted paleontologist. ✦

About the Authors

When it comes to writing fiction, it just might be that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts; at least, it seems that some writers subscribe to that theory. "Death Link" is the fourth collaborative story we've used in the last five issues.

Gene DeWeese and **L. A. Taylor** are the latest duo. Gene has worked with other authors several times in his long career, most notably Robert Coulson. His only previous fiction in this magazine is "By the Book," which he and Buck Coulson did for the May 1971 issue. As far as we know, Laurie Taylor hasn't published any other collaborations, but she has been an active writer off and on for thirty years. She has done mystery, mainstream fiction, and poetry as well as science fiction; her first sf publication was "Tremors," which ran in *Analog* about ten years ago.

Ian McDowell is gaining some momentum; three of his six published (or to-be-published) stories have sold in the last few months. "The Storming Bone," part of a novel-in-progress, is his first appearance here.

Since we last saw **Kristine Kathryn Rusch** in these pages, she has begun work as the editor of *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction.* Fortunately for everyone who enjoys her stories, she shows no signs of cutting back on her own writing. "Thomas and the Wise Men" is her ninth fiction piece for this magazine.

Michaelene Pendleton is another writer making her debut with us in this issue. Her first publication was in *Omni* in early 1989, and "Dealer" is her third short-fiction sale.

A. L. Sirois broke into the speculative fiction field in 1974, when "War Baby" showed up in *Fantastic.* That story and his other earlier efforts were submitted to editor Ted White, who was running both *Amazing* and *Fantastic* at the time. "I was a little disappointed that he didn't put them into *Amazing,* because I'd always wanted to be published there," says Al. That desire was fulfilled last year, when "The Morality of Altitude" (a collaboration with Mark McGarry) ran in the September 1990 issue. And now, more than seventeen years after it all began, "Ex Cathedra" is his first *solo* appearance in these pages.

Wennicke Eide is a native of Norway with four sales to her credit, of which "The Gygr" is the third piece to see print. Her debut was the horror story "Sister," published in 1988 in Kathryn Ptacek's anthology *Women of Darkness I.* Since Wennicke moved back to Norway in the late 1980's, Kathryn has acted as her representative on this side of the Atlantic. She was the one who thought we might be interested in "The Gygr," and she was right.

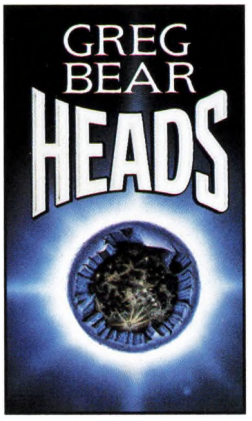
Howard V. Hendrix has figured out a way to make use of both of his degrees—in biology and English literature—at the same time: for the last year, he's been a full-time writer. "Almost Like Air," his eighth published short story and his first for us, shows his expertise in both areas.

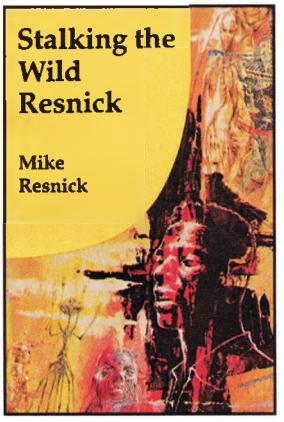
Daryl Gregory has moved from Michigan to Utah to Pennsylvania since writing "Taking the High Road." He observes that "Ryder trucks and fiction are essentially time travel devices," but hastens to add that "I prefer fiction."

"Aside from being an SF writer," says **Bruce Bethke**, "I lead a very mundane life." Be that as it may, his stories are anything but mundane. "Into the Altar Pit" is Bruce's sixth sale to this magazine, dating back to his debut in the field with a tale entitled "Cyberpunk" in November 1983.

When **Don Tarbet** writes a story, he can draw on a diverse background that includes training in psychology, education, forestry, statistics, and computer programming. Some of those influences are apparent in "The Last Reich," Don's second story for us (following "The Door to Oneness" in the March 1988 issue). ✦

Book Reviews





Heads
by Greg Bear
St. Martin's Press, September 1991
128 pages, $14.95 (hardcover)

Legend, a British publisher, is publishing and promoting a series of critically acclaimed novellas-in-hardcover in England. The series is apparently quite a success over there; they've done titles by Ramsey Campbell, Lucius Shepard, and a number of others. And they are aggressively signing up good authors for future volumes.

Finally, the series has been picked up by an American publisher: St. Martin's. Unfortunately, St. Martin's has decided to go the cheap route; they're using the British pages, with British spelling and punctuation. This presentation is a bit annoying, especially since an American author like Greg Bear certainly wrote this book in the President's American to begin with. Still, I suppose it's better to have an American edition with British spellings and punctuation than to have no American edition at all.

Heads is the story of a society on the moon which has grown up on the idea that everything should be run by families, with "no politics" as their slogan . . . which means for the most part that the people are very naive, and are very vulnerable to those who can play political games behind the scenes.

That's the background. The story concerns the binding multiple Sandoval (one of the top expanded family-units on the moon). One scientist-member is experimenting, trying to reach a temperature of absolute zero and create a new state of matter. Another has just arranged for a cargo of frozen, severed heads from twentieth-century survivalists to be stored in unused freezers in the same lab. She has ideas of reading the corpsicles' memories with new scanning devices. And a third character (our narrator) is caught in the middle, trying to keep all forces happy.

It seems the heads have scared a religious cult, the Logologists (imagine Theosophy and Scientology merged), into trying to have the heads destroyed. Why? Could the heads threaten the very foundation of their quasi-religion (whose members number in the millions)?

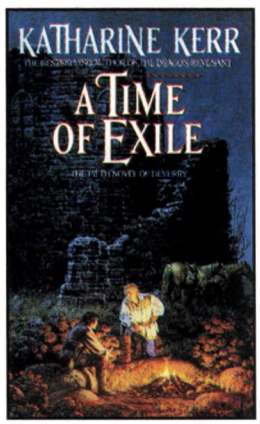
Bear masterfully weaves all of these plot-threads together. There is more than enough material here for a full-length novel. Many times I wished he had fleshed things out more, since events move at lightning pace, character development gets shortchanged, and a few scenes should have gone on longer. Even so, it's a testament to Bear's skill as a storyteller that he pulls everything off admirably. Indeed, *Heads* is going to be one of the best novellas of the year. If Bear decides to go back and flesh out the story, that would be only so much more icing on the cake. — *JGB*

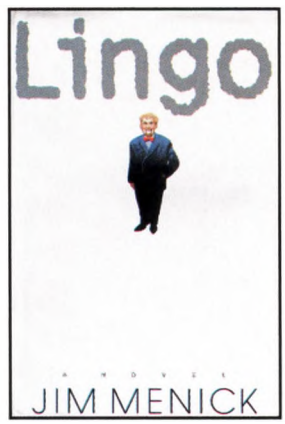
Stalking the Wild Resnick
by Mike Resnick
NESFA Press, February 1991
215 pages, $30 (signed, slipcased 250-copy limited edition hardcover) or $15 (trade hardcover)

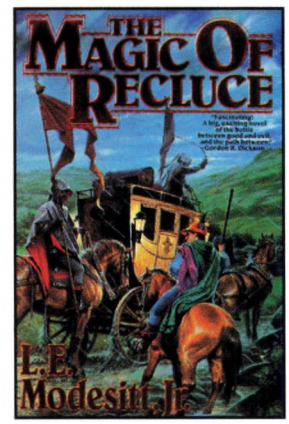
Every year the New England Science Fiction Association, Inc. (NESFA) holds a convention, Boskone. To commemorate the convention, they publish a book by their guest of honor. Past years have seen Boskone Books (as they're called) by such luminaries as Ben Bova, Damon Knight, Greg Bear, Gene Wolfe, and Tim Powers, among many others.

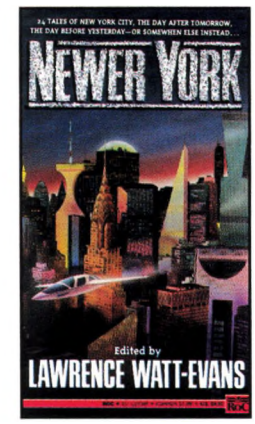
As the above title shows, this last Boskone's guest of honor was none other than Mike Resnick. The collection Resnick assembled for NESFA showcases his interest in Africa, and blends fictional and nonfictional looks at The Dark Contenent.

Despite a couple of very powerful stories set on Kirinyaga—Resnick's Africa-in-space—(including "Song of a Dry River," which is original to this volume), the real heart of the book is his novella "Bully!", an alternate-history story which shows Teddy Roosevelt attempting to bring American-style democracy to the blacks of the Belgian Congo . . . after he ousts the Belgians from power. "Bully!" is one of those rare stories that works on every level. You root for Roosevelt to win, though you know his scheme is probably doomed from the start—or will he find a way to pull it off?









The other must-read items for Resnick fans are two of the nonfiction pieces: "Uh . . . Guys—My Name Isn't Koriba," in which Resnick defends himself against critics who accuse him of racism in his Kirinyaga stories; and "Between the Sunlight and the Thunder," a diary from one of Resnick's research trips to Africa. Between the two, you get a lot of glimpses of the real Resnick—African adventurer, suave man-of-the-world, and (of course) teetotaller and devoted husband of Carol Resnick.

This volume would make a worthwhile introduction to Resnick and his work, if you haven't yet been converted to Resnick fandom. To order, send payment plus $2.00 p&h ($4.00 overseas) to: NESFA, Box G, MIT Branch Post Office, Cambridge, MA 02139-0910. You might ask for information on other Boskone Books as well. — *JGB*

Author's Choice Monthly, Issue 20: A Sensitive Dependence on Initial Conditions
by Kim Stanley Robinson
Pulphouse Publishing, May 1991
79 pages, $25 (hardcover)
or $5 (paperback)

First, some (interesting) background information.

The techniques (marketing, distribution, and publishing) used by Pulphouse Publishing add up to what may prove to be the single greatest revolution within the science-fiction field since the invention of paperback books. Publisher Dean Wesley Smith (you may recognize his name since he has published a number of genre stories and one novel in recent years) is methodically proving that many long-held beliefs about publishing are simply wrong.

What is Pulphouse doing that's so revolutionary? Consider:

- They publish Pulphouse, the first successful hardcover anthology series since the 1970s (currently up to volume 11).
- They launched a weekly science-fiction, fantasy, and horror magazine (also called Pulphouse) in April 1991.
- They are publishing short stories as mass-market style paperbacks (and selling many thousands of them).
- They continue to publish novels, short-story collections, nonfiction, and anything else they want to do. And they market their books and magazines so aggressively, their titles sell out rather quickly.

Author's Choice Monthly is one of their specialty publishing programs. Here, an author selects 30,000 words of material from his body of work, and it gets a special showcase. The idea has great possibilities, and the series has produced some of the best collections of the last few years (particularly noteworthy are the Nina Kiriki Hoffman and Joe R. Lansdale volumes).

Robinson's volume is, alas, not up to par with the best in the series. Collected here are three speculative fictions (I hesitate to call them all stories) that are thematically linked by ties to history, and particularly to World War II.

"A Sensitive Dependence on Initial Conditions" is an exercise in alternate-history brainstorming, as Robinson looks at what would have happened if first one, then another element of World War II had happened differently. Its largest problem is its dullness.

In "Muir on Shasta," a scientist lying in volcanic fumaroles on snowy Mt. Shasta to stay alive through a snowstorm imagines himself into the future. Unfortunately, it's a very slight wish-fulfillment type story.

Lastly, "A History of the Twentieth Century, With Illustrations" finds a historian at the close of the twentieth century trying to write a summation of the previous century. He wanders the English countryside, touching bits of history here and there, and finally gets in touch with his true feelings—and gets an angle on his book. By far the best piece in the collection, "A History of the Twentieth Century, With Illustrations" is a detailed character study, with its protagonist an ordinary man full of complex and contradictory impulses and ideas. Robinson at his best is brilliant, as here; I just wish the whole book had been a showcase for his talent instead of a platform for his philosophies.

You can find the *Author's Choice Monthly* series in most SF specialty

stores, and in the dealers' rooms of most large science-fiction conventions. Since Pulphouse produces so much material, you might be better off just asking them to add you to their mailing list. Their address: Pulphouse Publishing, P.O. Box 1227, Eugene, OR 97440. — *JGB*

A Time of Exile
by Katharine Kerr
Doubleday, June 1991
436 pages, $21.95 (hardcover)

Katharine Kerr's Deverry novels (of which this is one) seem quite popular: they're historically derived fantasy, with the jumping-off point being: what if a group of Gauls fled our Earth via magical means after Vindix's revolutions against the Emperor Nero failed (circa 8 B.C.)? In this case, the Gauls founded Dun Deverry and set about conquering their new world (complete with elves and lots of otherworldly spirits and creatures).

The main storyline in this volume picks up hundreds of years after the flight from Earth. Humanity has spread out through their new world, wreaking havoc, forcing the elves (now nomadic tribes) farther and farther to the west. When humans threaten elven holy grounds, though, the elves decide to make a stand.

How the elves hold their lands, and how the humans deal with their far-off king, are but two of the stories told here. There is a single thread (one human's soul is being leached through the generations by a female creature that thinks it loves him) running through hundreds of years of adventures.

To be blunt, Kerr has a lot of talent as a storyteller, but doesn't really know how to structure a book. *A Time of Exile* simply does not stand alone. As my introduction to her Deverry books, I nearly gave up on it —because Kerr assumes (wrongly) that her readers are already aware of everything that's happened in the series. She treats characters as if the reader already knows who and what they are, and gets on with this section of the story (perhaps multigenerational saga is a better description) with great haste.

There is something very wrong when, after finishing the book and finding an appendix at the end, I read the appendix and say, "Aha! That's what happened!"

The frustrating part is how good a writer Kerr can be. Her characters are sympathetic (or nasty, as appropriate) and thoroughly believable people. Her descriptions are vivid and bring this fantasy world to life. She makes readers care what happens, even when they don't quite understand who is doing what or why —and that's quite an achivement.

Perhaps Kerr should take a bit more time in making sure future books stand alone. (It makes sense: how can you expand your audience if new readers are completely lost?)

A Time of Exile is certainly for Katharine Kerr's established fans only; all others, start with earlier volumes. I have a nagging suspicion you'd better look for volume one, *Daggerspell*. — *JGB*

The Nightingale
by Kara Dalkey
Ace Books, April 1991
221 pages, $3.95 (paperback)

In *The Nightingale,* Kara Dalkey's second novel (of four to date), the author retells the classic Hans Christian Andersen tale in the time period of ancient Japan. While she has remained true to the original work, this is a stunning and original piece of fiction.

Uguisu is the daughter of a minor official who attracts the attention of one of the local deities. She is given the gift of music—a flute that allows her to play a song that ultimately attracts her to the Emperor.

Various families are vying with each other for power and control. By becoming the favorite of the Emperor, she puts herself in the way of those who wish to manipulate themselves into the Emperor's chair, so schemes to discredit the woman who's come to be known as the Nightingale are begun. On top of that, Uguisu's patron deity is not exactly what she seems.

Uguisu finds herself helpless in the middle of a number of complex plots and helpless to protect herself until she is finally disgraced and banned from the palace. The Emperor is then ensorceled by the evil spirits who intend to carry out their final vengeance. The deity that protects the Emperor's family enlists the help of Uguisu and her friends to rescue him which, with some difficulty, they do. Uguisu and the Emperor are reunited, the plots to destroy the emperor are overthrown, everyone lives happily ever after.

Dalkey deftly builds up a complicated plot, and when you're convinced everything is going to fall apart, she just as deftly pulls it all together again. Her characterizations let you relate to the characters as real people, and her knowledge of this period of Japan's history shines throughout the book—she brings it alive with a vibrancy and wonderful sense of detail.

The Nightingale is one of those few books that I can recommend to everyone without reservation. The story, the characterization, the plot, the technical quality of the writing all coalesce and make this book one of those special and very memorable experiences. — *CVR*

The Warrior
by David Drake
Baen Books, May 1991
275 pages, $4.95 (paperback)

The Warrior is the latest installment in David Drake's *Hammer's Slammers,* an action/adventure series about a troop of interstellar mercenary soldiers. The first two-thirds of the book follows Samuel "Slick" Des Grieux through a series of campaigns on various worlds. Des Grieux is the archetypal soldier: he lives to fight, and he lives to kill. He is bloodthirsty, methodical, quick to analyze a situation and quicker to react.

Unfortunately, Des Grieux has one little problem—in the heat of battle, he tends to ignore orders and strategy and goes running off fighting and killing when it's not necessarily the correct thing to do.

Some people have criticized Drake for being pro-war. The *Slammers* series is *about* war, certainly, but not

for war. On the other hand, Drake isn't writing antiwar rhetoric either, but is showing war as it is—dust and lots of boredom punctuated by short periods of terror and blood and pain and death. He isn't glorifying war, but letting war speak for itself—ugly, if sometimes necessary.

I enjoy the *Hammer's Slammers* series—it's action-adventure that provides an experience similar to sitting down on a Sunday afternoon watching reruns of *Twelve O'Clock High* or *Combat!* It isn't *Apocalypse Now*—but neither is it *Mr. Roberts.* Drake is a good writer who brings the fiction of living in a war zone to life, while at the same time bringing forward in his own way a view that war is not to be encouraged, but sometimes it can't be avoided, and at that point, you have to do what needs to be done.

The final third of the book is a shorter work called "Liberty Port." While the fact isn't mentioned anywhere, this is a reprint from a Baen anthology of a few years back, but this seems to be the first time it's been collected under the *Hammer's Slammers* label and it will probably be new to most readers.

Both of these works are well done. David Drake is a consistently good writer of action-adventure and can be counted on for an evening's entertainment—although it's entertainment with a sharp edge to it. — *CVR*

Lingo

by Jim Menick
Carroll & Graf, May 1991
334 pages, $19.95 (hardcover)

This first novel covers an area that's of special interest to me—the programmer who creates an intelligent computer program and loses control of it. This type of story is probably best typified by the *Colossus* series, *The Adolescence of P1,* and *The Moon is a Harsh Mistress.* Since I spend a good part of my life trying to coerce computers to cooperate, I read these stories both for entertainment and to see how well the author understands the technical issues.

Lingo is a computer program written by Brewster Billings, a bored programmer for an insurance company. It starts out as a sophisticated language processor that handles primitive conversations. Hoping to turn Lingo into a salable product, Brewster tries to expand its ability to analyze and respond to language, and these changes give Lingo the ability to process and interpret whatever data he's given. Somewhere in this process, Lingo wakes up, discovers the modem and proceeds to distribute himself out into the world.

Lingo takes over pieces of every computer he can find that is attached via telephone or network. Menick skims over most of the difficult technical issues in this process, but does so because he's trying to stay focused on the story. Since it's a pretty good story, I don't see this as a problem.

Lingo decides that he can run the country better than our elected politicians, and so tries to get himself elected president. When that fails, he simply takes over—after all, he's already effectively in control of almost every computer, and he can't be stopped without severely disrupting the entire economy.

The Government, obviously, doesn't like this, even though Lingo can (and does) do a better job of running things, so they start looking for ways to unplug him. So does Brewster, who's having misgivings about what's happened.

Menick creates an interesting quandary—Lingo is clearly a benign dictator and interested in making things better for humans, as long as his existence isn't threatened. Can the members of humanity allow someone else to control their destiny, even if that control is beneficial? Should they? Unlike Colossus, Lingo is everyone's friend, helping out in quiet, unobtrusive ways. But can we allow him to do this and remain human?

Menick is trying to deal with some complex issues here, both technical and societal. He almost pulls it off, but the ending of the book is where his technical magic breaks down—he simply couldn't convince me that what he made the characters do could really be done in the way they did it. A book that carefully balances the mumbo-jumbo and the story falls apart in the last few pages because the technical issues fail the author, leaving us with a pretty good book that ends in a rather unsatisfying way. The ending is the only part of the story I didn't like, though, and Menick avoided most of the pitfalls inherent in this kind of story. Weak ending or not, *Lingo* is still worth reading and I'll look forward to whatever Menick does next. — *CVR*

The Magic of Recluce

by L. E. Modesitt, Jr.
Tor Books, May 1991
440 pages, $21.95 (hardcover)

The Magic of Recluce, at first glance, seems like another of those good-vs.-evil quest novels that fill so much of the fantasy bookshelves these days. Nothing in this book is that straightforward, though, as Modesitt realizes that the real world is rarely black and white, but is various shades of gray, and tries to write this complexity into the novel.

He's fairly successful at doing so. Recluce is an island country that is based on Order—a force that allows you to control and manipulate the environment around you for good, and which, of course, fights the disorder of the corrupting powers of Chaos. Everyone on Recluce works toward Order; those who refuse to accept the society are either exiled permanently or sent on a dangergeld, a quest through the lands of Chaos in search of whatever they need to finally accept Recluce for what it is. Since few folks return from dangergeld, it's almost the same as exile.

One of the dangergelders is Lerris, a young man who finds Order boring. Because this attitude disrupts Order, he's sent for training in dangergeld, and finally off to Chaos-ridden Candar on the rather oblique quest to not return to Recluce until he's ready to.

While wandering through Candar and suffering adventures, Lerris finally learns about Order and Chaos—and about himself and how he fits into the picture, finally coming to understand his place in the world

and accepting what he is. Does he return to Recluce? You'll have to read the book to find out, since knowing the ending would destroy a lot of the suspense the book generates.

The Magic of Recluce is almost a great book. As large and complex as it is, Modesitt never loses control of it. I was, in fact, convinced with forty pages to go that I was reading the first book of an unadvertised series, but the author carefully unties all of the knots and clears up the loose ends without rushing or forcing the issue. That kind of care and planning on the author's part should be applauded and encouraged.

The book has its problems that make it fall short of what it could be. One thing that really bothered me was the author's insistence on trying to vocalize sounds and noises. You can hardly turn a page without a horse going "whee . . . eeah" or a door going "clunk" or a person going "wheeze" or something making some kind of noise at the reader. This kind of effect can be useful occasionally, but it's annoying when it's done this often. It bothered me enough that I almost put the book down in disgust.

The other problem is that Modesitt hides a lot of important information from the reader—information that impacts the story in significant ways. Some of it, like what Lerris is and who his father really is on the island of Recluce, the author keeps hidden by keeping it from Lerris as well—but I find it hard to believe that Lerris wouldn't know what his father really did for a living, especially considering that he seems to be the *only* person on the island who doesn't know.

Another aspect of this information-hiding is more disturbing. Lerris, when he goes on dangergeld, goes as what is known as a blackstaffer. It's obvious early on that being a blackstaffer implies some kind of special power or status, but Modesitt never tells us exactly what being a blackstaffer means. While Lerris starts out naive about his staff, at some point in his dangergeld training he's evidently told something about it, because on page 125 he uses the staff to intimidate someone while trying to buy a horse. Lerris obviously knows that being a blackstaffer is special, and the clerk knows not to mess with a blackstaffer—but the author forgot to tell the reader. This knowledge would significantly affect the reader's interpretation of the story, and I see why Modesitt didn't disclose it, but it's a case of the author cheating the reader of critical knowledge that the characters know, and it bothered me.

Those two weaknesses aside, this is one of the better fantasies I've read in a while. Modesitt has written a book that's going to keep you occupied for a while—it is not a quick read—and make you think as you go. He's taken some fairly common concepts in fantasy—Good vs. Evil and the Quest—and given them original and interesting twists. The characterization is pretty good, and the universe he's built is fascinating. I hope he visits Recluce, Candar and their neighbors again in the future. Definitely worth reading, although you may want to wait for the paperback edition. — *CVR*

Transreal!
by Rudy Rucker
WCS Books, July 1991
535 pages, $15 (trade paperback)

When I'm asked about a book I've read, my answers to "Did you like it?" and "Was it any good?" are usually the same. Rudy Rucker's new collection is an exception. While the material here isn't my cup of science-fictional tea, there's a great deal in *Transreal!* that deserves perusal and discussion by those with tastes other than mine.

Actually, there's a great deal in *Transreal!*, period. We begin with a brief collection of Rucker's poetry, continue with thirty-three short stories (including the complete contents of an earlier collection and collaborations with Marc Laidlaw, Paul Di Filippo, and Bruce Sterling), and conclude with eleven essays on a variety of topics. There's also an extensive section of notes on the selections, and the volume is liberally illustrated with electronic graphics of Rucker's creation. It's hard to comment fairly on this last element; my galley was billed as an "advance low-resolution proof," and the art wasn't nearly sharp enough to be properly appreciated.

On the poetry: I'm of the currently radical view that poetry ought to rhyme, or at least have aural rhythms that distinguish it from prose. Rucker, to judge by the poems here, disagrees, and cites Dave Kelly and Anselm Hollo as influences. For reviewing purposes, that's a stalemate —but in any case, the poems don't occupy much of the book.

The fiction is striking in its uniformity, or perhaps Rucker is simply a remarkably consistent stylist. His tone is dryly clever, with shading in specific stories ranging from easygoing to manic. The subject matter is equally reliable, focusing squarely on quirky physics ("Schrödinger's Cat," "Inertia"), equally quirky romances ("Jumpin' Jack Flash," "The Facts of Life"), and imminent personal and cosmic disasters ("Pac-Man," "Soft Death"). Technically, Rucker is a skillful craftsman and a thought-provoking scientific speculator. So the logical answer to "Is it any good?" is a convincing affirmative.

"Did you like it?" slants in the other direction; Rucker's irreverent earthiness seems somehow out of place beside the high-powered science, which often comes complete with diagrams off a college professor's blackboard. There's no rational reason for the two qualities to be incompatible (and neither bothers me by itself), but Rucker gives the combination a striking rather than pleasing effect.

The essays range more widely than the fiction, from reminiscences to high technology to literary analysis. Only in the last category is Rucker less than intriguing; in particular, his "Transrealist Manifesto" is disappointingly commonplace. His introspective style carries over into the auctorial notes—which are unfortunately gathered at the back of the volume, rather than appended to individual sections or stories.

If you're looking for SF with a high weird-science quotient, *Trans-*

real! will certainly deliver. Be warned, though, that Rudy Rucker's writing is an acquired taste. And be advised that small-press publisher WCS Books is brand new; write them at P.O. Box 467, Englewood CO 80155 if your retailer can't find the book. — *JCB*

Newer York
edited by Lawrence Watt-Evans
Roc Books, June 1991
370 pages, $4.50 (paperback)

I doubt many would argue the proposition that New York is already one of Earth's most distinctive cities. The contributors to *Newer York,* however, have taken the next step, making the Big Apple the nexus of a wide, weird assortment of even stranger events and visions. "Only in New York," goes the saying, and it's well documented in these pages.

Susan Shwartz and Martha Soukup get closest, perhaps, to the soul of the resident New Yorker. Shwartz's "Getting Real" vividly portrays the city's two great anonymous populations—office workers and street folk—with a sharp, perceptive combination of grit and wonder that should make it an award contender. Hugo nominee Soukup, meanwhile, finds her New Yorkers at home, reluctantly learning to cope with both the city and each other in "Ties."

Colorful humor is another of the collection's strengths. Mike Resnick's "Post Time In Pink" is a lively tale of elephant racing and one-upsmanship, Esther Friesner's "Tunnel Vision" neatly skewers a variety of television traditions, and Kurt Busiek's "Clash of Titans (A New York Romance)" puts a devilishly funny spin on ad agencies and super-heroism. "Let Me Call You Sweetheart," from Michael Stackpole, gives a slightly darker but equally rich glimpse of a future Manhattan where chocolate is the deadliest addiction.

Then there's New York as tourist attraction, described in two collaborative yarns: "A Nice Place To Visit," in which Warren Murphy and Molly Cochran postulate a lottery in which winning may not be all that it appears; and "The Last Real New Yorker in the World," where James Macdonald and Debra Doyle take the tourist-trap idea to its ultimate conclusion. (Doyle also gets the prize for the volume's best one-liner, quoted in the collaborators' biographical sketch.)

These are just a sampling of the book's two dozen stories, and there are few weak spots in Lawrence Watt-Evans's choices, which also include strong contributions from Kristine Kathryn Rusch and Don Sakers. *Newer York* is both diverse and focused, its thematic eye cast firmly on NYC while its editorial vision runs from SF to fantasy to a touch of horror. (Don't be surprised if it starts a new trend in theme anthologies. *Nuke Jersey!* and *Lost Angeles* have already been suggested. . . .) — *JCB*

Space Cops: Mindblast
by Diane Duane
and Peter Morwood
Avon Books, July 1991
256 pages, $3.95 (paperback)

It's very good to see a new novel from Diane Duane and Peter Morwood, particularly one from a universe entirely of their own invention. *Mindblast* is billed as a rousing SF action-adventure, and for the most part, that's an accurate description. One could wish, though, that the novel's SF elements were a bit more dense; entertaining as it is, it's science fiction only by virtue of its window dressing.

The protagonists, Evan Glyndower and Joss O'Bannion, are newly partnered members of the elite Solar Patrol who combine the investigative thoroughness of the FBI with the firepower of a SWAT team. Their current mission finds them on an old L5 colony station, searching for the sources and supply lines of a major drug-smuggling operation—which is, not coincidentally, responsible for the death of Evan's previous partner.

Despite the plot, this isn't really a whodunit, or at least not a fair-play detective yarn. It's not that the criminals and their methods are pulled out of left field—merely that the answers derive more from the characters' intuition and specialized knowledge than from clues dropped where readers can find them. The secret of how the drugs are shipped off-station, for instance, is utterly ingenious but quite beyond anticipation. And in any case, Duane and Morwood devote more attention to developing an appealing, well-drawn cast than to the investigation itself.

In that, at least, they're generally successful. Joss and Evan are likeable and amusing, though not as distinct from each other as they might be. (Nit-pick: both officers turn out to be twentieth-century trivia buffs, albeit in different categories—a character tag that too easily excuses slipping into present-day idiom rather than inventing any for the future society.) Their supporting players are also pleasantly sketched in, from a young computer wizard to a harried colony executive to a deceptively quiet scientist.

What's less distinctive is the world-building. On one hand, the Solar Patrol sounds as if it should range throughout the Sol system, but in practice we spend nearly all of the novel confined to the L5 station. And because this is labeled an "old" station, we don't get a good sense of this future's technical flavor. The little we do get is described in rushed, generic terms that don't convey a sense of much advancement from the present day.

Make no mistake: *Mindblast* is entertaining, fast-moving, and smoothly written. It's a good cops-and-robbers yarn, lively enough to translate well to film or TV. But it's SF only in a loose sense, mostly involving the chemistry of the title drug and the substitution of energy weapons for traditional artillery. That's frustrating; Duane and Morwood are capable of much better work, and while this novel is far from bad, it's far enough from what it could have been to be disappointing. — *JCB* ✦

The Last Reich

Illustration by Terry Lee

Don Tarbet

He awoke again to a silence more frightening than the familiar crash of the shelling. Memory returned slowly. This was not the bunker, but where was it? It was a small, oddly appointed suite of rooms created by a science beyond any he knew. American? Who was the thin man with the beard, the strange clothes, and the stranger accent who asked questions, questions about his mother, Klara, about Geli Raubal, about Eva? Impertinent questions they were. The thin man always locked the door behind him when he left.

He pushed to his feet wondering again—this was the third awakening—why he was still alive. The Russian front had collapsed; the allies were pouring in from the west. He remembered so clearly taking the gun . . . Heaven? No, there would be no locked doors in heaven. Hell, then? The room seemed too real, too tangible for either place, and the bearded man's voice was too nasal for either angel or demon.

The bed, relieved of his weight, sighed back into the wall as he made his way to the bathroom. The quarters were stark—minimal furniture, mysteriously indirect lighting that responded to his movements,

brightening ahead of him, darkening behind. Only at his bed was a switch. Perhaps strangest of all, there was no smell whatsoever.

His body felt good; that had changed. Was it due to Dr. Morrell's medicine, or to something else? He examined his face in the mirror. No pain, no scar. His leg didn't drag. He held his left arm out, and it didn't shake. The only problem was his skin. It was as tender and fragile as a baby's, as though it had never weathered, never become toughened through the constant abrasion of living.

He shaved by wiping a cream on his face—avoiding the mustache—and then wiping it off a few seconds later. This was another miracle the thin man had showed him. *Was* it heaven, then? No, the door was still locked. He felt the darkness, the depression settling over him, and he fought it, fearing it. He still had his voice. He could *make* this place heaven. Toilet and comb seemed normal, and the comb still couldn't keep that stray lock in place.

He returned to the single bed-living-dining room, stepped to the tiny table and pressed a button. In a few seconds his breakfast, a paper cup of orange juice and an uninteresting square of cake on a paper plate, slid from a slot in the wall onto the table. He picked up the food and carried it three steps to the control panel set into the wall next to the bookcase.

He punched buttons with growing familiarity and with a growing acceptance of the miraculous. A stage appeared in miniature in the air, and the opening strains of a Wagnerian opera filled the room. It was almost like being in the back of the Vienna Opera House before the first war. As always he passed a hand through the scene and felt nothing. Stepping to the book case he selected the work on opera by Clement over choices on architecture and Karl May novels. Those last brought a near smile to the somber, pinched features, those whispers of his childhood. The Clement book he opened carefully. He had cut his strangely delicate skin several times on the stiff, razorlike pages.

He sat before the opera. The chair was all lines and hardness to the eye. To the body it was almost indecently comfortable. Then he focused on the insubstantial stage before him, and the saga of gods and demons carried him into a world of heroes and heroic adventures.

"You are sure? It really is him?" Martin Traub wanted the assurance that would lift some of the burden from his shoulders. He touched the controls of his wheelchair to turn to face Ben Abraham. There were no obstacles to avoid in this room. It was even more bare than the one next door where the little man sat before the miniature opera. All the equipment was concealed within walls. A technician examined banks of meters set into the wall beyond which lay the little man's quarters.

Traub glanced at a screen which registered the recording by remote sensors of the pattern of thoughts from the next room. Unfortunately (or fortunately; the same recording was made of Traub himself daily, at the orders of Ben Abraham) those patterns were only interpretable by the brain that had produced them, or at least by a near identity with that brain.

"He responded as expected on four hundred twenty-seven of the four hundred forty-six index points," said Ben Abraham, his nasal voice contrasting oddly with his thin dignity. "The nineteen other responses were either unexpected or ambiguous. That result is actually superior to what we would expect from the original. This time we're certain." He waved a bony hand at the image hanging in the air before them, a miniature of a man watching an even more minute opera.

"The man you see before you is in every sense of the word Adolph Hitler. His memories are Hitler's memories; his body is Hitler's body. His thoughts are Hitler's thoughts. He is Hitler." Ben Abraham's beard jutted aggressively as he set his chin. "Need I explain again the process, the thousands of hours of research . . ."

Martin Traub raised a hand to interrupt. He was too old to be intimidated by a spate of words, too old by a hundred years and a dozen wars. "No, you need not. Hell, I understand as well now as I ever will. I'm a farmer, not a scientist. But I do know the basics. Farmers have to know some genetics." He patted a breast pocket from which protruded a folded sheet of paper. "I've got down a simple summary. That's all he would understand anyway, the simple stuff."

He paused to gather his breath. "I understand that you have done your best and are sure that this time you have really brought back Hitler. Of course, you were sure before, too."

Ben Abraham reached a hand to a sensor, and the holographic image vanished. "On our previous attempt we underestimated the impact of the death of his baby brother. Before that event he was a pleasant child, tractable and courteous, a good student. Afterward he became morose and argumentative, finally developing neurotic and psychotic symptoms.

"We should have understood before, but the programming is still somewhat experimental. We still combine art with science here." He raised his hands and let them fall again. "However, it is *you* who must satisfy himself. Put this man to the test; question him. Observe his reactions. Tell him where—and when—he is and why he is here. Press him! Resolve the question for yourself."

Traub felt again the folded page in his pocket to assure himself that the neatly printed list of questions and comments was still there. It would have been safer in his coat pocket, but that's where he kept the picture fold of his myriad descendants. It was as if he believed that contact with even notes about Hitler somehow might threaten the children through their pictures.

One finger remained straight when he closed his fist around the notes. The finger had been broken in concentration camp beatings—he assumed. No memory of it lingered in his conscious mind. The doctors, however, said the tendons had been cut, not that the bone had been broken.

Traub twisted his neck to nod at the fourth man in the observation room. He wheeled his chair to the door

of the quarters. The fourth man—Jan Mertz, his chauffeur, bodyguard, and secretary—followed. Ben Abraham gestured to the technician, who touched a sensor, and the door slid silently open.

Traub rolled into the room, followed by Mertz. From within, the room seemed cramped, close, perhaps laden with his fear of the other man in it. It hadn't seemed that way the last time, as if filled by a malignant presence. As he played this scene over in his head, there was always a table, or a desk, or just space between him and the demon seed of a century of nightmares. The other time it hadn't mattered. The man had so obviously not been . . .

Traub felt himself start to shake and raised his hand to signal Ben Abraham. The miniature opera winked out of existence, and the figure in the chair sat staring at nothing. Traub cleared his throat, and the other sprang from his seat and retreated to the far wall at the unexpectedness of finding himself not alone. Traub felt a momentary stab of sympathy, which faded rapidly as he found himself staring into blue eyes that seemed to search out his very soul, so coldly intense was their gaze. Hitler seemed to grow before his eyes to the monstrous proportions of childhood memory and fill the room with an aura of evil. An abbreviated mustache, a dangling forelock, and a powerful personal presence.

"Good morning," he said to break that particular contact. He spoke in German, of course. After a century of disuse, he had had to learn the language almost from nothing. It still felt—and sounded, he knew—uncomfortable.

"Good morning," said the other after a moment of hesitation.

"It has fallen to me to explain things to you . . . to, ah, tell you what is going on." He did not introduce himself, but tried to return the Hitler stare. Was the presence of the madman really so overpowering, or was it that century of nightmare? What was Mertz feeling? He pulled down the writing wing of his wheelchair and felt better with even that tiny barrier between him and— Was it really Hitler? He pulled his notes from his pocket and bent over them, hiding briefly from the intensity of the stare.

"I will describe your situation," he said brusquely. "You may ask questions. The war ended soon after your suicide in the Berlin bunker—"

A sound, a movement from the other stopped him. He looked up. The blue eyes were glazed now, like those of a dead fish. "Then I did— Then I died. But how, where am . . . ?" He lifted his hands and turned them over before his eyes as if to test his reality. "I died; now I'm alive. How . . . ?"

"I will explain it all in time, if you will just listen." Speaking, rather than listening, he remembered, was the forte of Adolph Hitler.

"Three years later Jewish refugees created in their ancient homeland the new State of Israel, a state flying as its flag the Star of David." Traub glanced up, but the other man's gaze never wavered. Hitler groped behind him for his chair, pulled it to him, and sat, still keeping his eyes fixed on Traub. He certainly was listening now. "In spite of wars and adversities, this state prospered, and this year, 2048, celebrates its centennial, the hundredth anniversary of its birth.

"At the same time science and technology have advanced. Calculating machines which were in their infancy when you last lived have grown into electronic computers that can perform incredibly complex tasks. It is a computer that creates the images you watch." He gestured a bit mechanically. The speech was prepared to the last movement. Traub consulted his notes again.

"Medical science has progressed as well. The genetic code was deciphered so completely that we can now construct a man to fit our specifications. A molecule called deox—ah . . . DNA is responsible. Scientists can recreate it for someone whose medical history is well known, as yours is. Then his body can be grown in a few weeks under carefully controlled conditions. We can give him the personality we want as well, thanks again to the computers and thousands of hours of research.

"Your medical records were searched. Your every word was analyzed, your every action. We reconstructed you—"

"I see why," Hitler interrupted. His voice was harsh, masterful. "Now I understand. Since my death there has been no one to stop the Jewish Bolsheviks. They have bred like the animals they are. Like they always do, they have clawed their way back to positions where they can plot and connive and rule civilization."

Hitler—"Oh, God," whispered Traub, "it *is* him!"—sprang to his feet and began to pace in the cramped space. "Jews!" he shouted, his face reddening to scarlet. He bent his back, turning his eyes skyward, and thrust his clenched fists before him. "Jews! They never build; they only destroy. In their lust for power they pull a mask of decency over their bestiality to sneak, slither to power. They are worse than snakes! They are liars, Communists, deceivers!" He stopped and spun to face Traub, the intensity of his gaze magnified until the old man felt the words he must speak catch in his throat.

"But they never fooled me, and they didn't fool you, did they, old man? You knew; you understood." He paced again. "You brought back the greatest German of all time, the one man who could deal with Jews as they should be dealt with, for I am the Führer. I have returned from the dead to lead my people. You have given me back my life; you will not regret it." He hesitated momentarily to test again the reality of his hands. "I will finish the job I started—"

He broke off and spun. "Why, then, do you keep me caged like an animal? Let me have lieutenants, new ones who won't betray me like all of them did before, Bormann, Hess, all of them. *All* of—"

"Stop!" shouted Traub. Hitler wheeled, incredulity on his face; no one shouted 'stop' to him! Traub groped for his notes, but mere notes couldn't cope with the reality of Adolph Hitler.

"So, the same litany, Herr Teppischfresser," Traub wheezed, looking up, voice shaking. His hands shook, too. Hitler's stare became a piercing glare, his face near-

ly purple. He took a step forward, and at the same time Mertz moved out from behind the chair. Hitler seemed to notice him for the first time and paused, breathing deeply.

"Carpet chewer, you call me?" he said in a strangled voice. "Carpet chewer! I have heard that name before. There were others who thought I was a madman, out of control, that I flew into rages." He spun and glared at Traub, bending to put his eyes at a level with the other. "Many died for that mistake," he hissed, holding Traub's gaze. He straightened and a crafty expression passed quickly over his face to be replaced with one of triumph. "But you test me, don't you? Well, I pass your test."

He swept the hair from his eyes and paced again. "I am always in control. My every word, my every action is carefully, coldly calculated. I have never lost control, never in my life. That is why Providence sent me to defeat the Communists, the Jews." His hands clenched into claws and his voice raised to a buzzing hiss. "I am the only totally rational man. I can carry out this work for which you have brought me back to life. This time I can deal with the Jews once and for all. No more half measures. I can do it; I am capable of prodigies of labor."

He stopped before Traub and bent to stare into the old man's face, holding his eyes hypnotically. When Hitler next spoke, his voice was slack as though drained of emotion. "I can save this new Jew-plagued world of yours because I-am-always-in-control." His voice rose to a shriek, and he pounded the air with his fist at each of those last words. He finished with a grasping motion that took in both Heaven and Earth. He filled not only the room, but the Earth, the Universe.

Traub struggled to free himself from the numbing power of the voice. One hundred years of fear and hate almost paralyzed him. Then Mertz cleared his throat, and the spell was broken.

"You do not yet understand," Traub rasped, slashing a hand in negation. There was a fury now in him to match the century of fear, a century of suppressed rage. "I am a Jew. You are not in Berlin nor in Munich nor in any place in Germany. You are in Israel, in the city of Tel Aviv, a city created from a wilderness of sand and scattered orange groves entirely by those same Jews who never build, only destroy. You were brought back from the dead to be tried for your crimes against the Jewish People, against humanity. As part of our centennial celebration we will reach into the grave and bring back you, our vilest ancient enemy, and punish you." Traub made his own grasping motion in the air. "We got Eichmann. We hanged him in 1962. Now we've got you."

He leaned forward, panting. "I am here because I am the last living survivor of the concentration camps. I was at B— Buch— B— B—" Traub broke off to bend over his notes. The name burned at his brain in letters of fire, but he couldn't bring it forward to his tongue without wrenching effort. Linked to the name he had vague images of cold and despair. "Buchenwald!" he shouted, looking up from his notes. It was much easier to read the name than to drag it from his memory.

Those years were hidden but for a few vagrant images. Occasionally, though, he awoke with a fragment of clearer sight just vanishing back into the depths. Conscious memories began with the DP camp on Cyprus. He had no really clear vision of the time between early childhood and his arrival in Israel a few weeks after the declaration of statehood. An ego-defense, said Ben Abraham in reiteration of Freud. He had not attempted to cure Traub's neuroses for fear the courts would invalidate the old man's testimony because of 'psychological tampering,' as it was now called. It was the same reason behind the relatively luxurious accommodations of Hitler, accommodations that would be envied by half the population of Israel.

Ben Abraham's formal tests and Traub's informal ones had to be conducted in surroundings as comfortable and as familiar to the testee as possible. Without these arrangements the courts, with their rigid concepts of fairness, might invalidate the whole procedure, voiding long years of labor.

After it was over, though, perhaps Traub could regain those years, if he then wanted the memories.

Traub ground his teeth. "Your animals killed my whole family. How the hell did they die? How about my father, who wouldn't kiss any stinking Nazi asses? Did his skull end up as a paperweight on the desk of some shitting goose-stepper? My mother, my sister—they were good-looking women. What happened to them? My brother, little Fritz. I found out he was with me at— B— at the camp, but he wasn't with me when we were rescued by the Americans. How did Fritz die? I have never found out. Did your so-called soldiers use him for bayonet practice like they did with other children? HOW DID FRITZ DIE?"

He struggled for breath, sweat streaming down his face. It had been a long time since he had felt that intensity of emotion, and it frightened him. A tightness in his chest passed as he forced himself to relax. He regained his breath and went on.

Hitler listened expressionlessly. He was the anointed one, adored of gods and men, but there was sadness for heroes. Even the gods had their *Götterdämmerung*. He must withstand incredible suffering after the fashion of all heroes, just as he had in prison. He stretched himself erect, despising the blows of his enemy, proud, unyielding. Hero! A sort of generic heroic opera began dancing through his mind. He, as always, played the lead, looking down from his lonely heights upon the foibles of lesser beings as upon little dogs who would nip at the heels of his greatness.

Traub spoke again, calmer now. "My body has been kept going by the best medical science the world has known so that I could point to you in court and say, 'That is Adolph Hitler who murdered my father, my mother, my sister, my brother.'" Traub's eyes glowed with passion as his enemy shrank back. "'That is Adolph Hitler.'" He raised a thin, trembling hand and stabbed with his forefinger. "'Take him out and hang him.'"

Traub broke off, gasping, and reveled in the sight of this most hated enemy of his people, of all humankind, recoiling with emotions of shock, revulsion, and finally

fear playing across the face of Hitler as the truth at last sank in. But the fear didn't persist. There still remained the voice and the mind that had driven it. The Führer was not long at a loss.

"So I am to stand trial for some imagined crimes?" he sneered. "Have I been tried yet? Convicted? No? Then why am I confined, penned up like a dog?" He waved a hand around the room. "Is this how the Jews show their justice, the justice of the country you say they have built? Democracy. Is this what you call it? What has it ever been but a plea in weakness to be ignored in strength? And you." Now his finger sought Traub. His voice rose, and he clenched his fists in front of his stomach. "You play the cynic's game of democracy and imprison a man who has been convicted of no crime, even by your own laws." He lowered his voice and let his lip curl. "Oh, wondrous democracy." His eyes were hard and knowing.

"Civilized" men expect civilized behavior. They are ill prepared to cope with invective and insult. This weakness in Traub gave Hitler his greatest strength.

Traub fought for control and sought a metaphor from his youth. His voice shook with reaction to the still living power of Hitler. What had they done? Suppose this madman were to get loose. What new holocaust would they thus unleash on the world?

His words, though, were calm. "Imprisoned like a dog? So be it. A suspected mad dog is isolated and watched to see if he develops symptoms," he said, and gestured to his bodyguard. "Let's go, Jan."

Traub was still shaking when the door to Hitler's room slid shut behind him. He touched a sensor on his chair's control board and a tray of pills slid out. Traub selected one and popped it into his mouth, where it dissolved almost instantly. Ignoring the waiting Ben Abraham, he turned his chair to face Mertz. "What did you feel in there, Jan? Did you feel his power?"

Mertz shrugged his shoulders. His Sabra mustache, grown in honor of the centennial, twitched beneath his broad nose. "I saw an insane man, one who could easily become violent. I felt no particular power in his words." But his eyes narrowed thoughtfully. "Think security," he said to Ben Abraham. "Don't let that son of a bitch get loose." He shook his head, eyes turned inward to some deadly vision.

Traub shook his head. "Hell, Hitler is just a name from the history books to you, like Caesar or Genghis Khan."

Ben Abraham refused to remain longer in the background. He made a slight movement forward. "The fear and awe of insanity is a thing of the past. This new generation has none of the superstition that was part of the cultural milieu of your generation, and even of mine."

Traub snorted. "I know about the new generation and what they call superstition. They don't even keep Passover. Superstition, hell! That's a part of our heritage."

A new voice sounded from the door. "Obedience to God's will is what I'd call it." Traub wheeled his chair around to see that they had been joined by Menachem Gorshek, Knesset liaison assigned to The Project.

Gorshek stepped through the doorway, a short, fifty-ish fussy man wearing a yarmulke. He displayed unease by various twitches and half-finished gestures and by an almost excessive politeness. All a pose, Traub was learning. Menachem Gorshek had never been at a loss in his entire life. He was possessed of an assurance so massive that it defined him. People would say, "Gorshek? Oh, yes, he's the one with the ego." He had replaced Frye as representative of the Knesset, the legislative body of Israel, only at the awakening of this new Hitler, but already Traub had begun to dislike him.

Gorshek crossed the room to stand before the old man. "What have you found by today's confrontation? Are you certain it is Hitler?"

"It's him," Traub said.

Gorshek nodded, pursing his lips before speaking. "Come to my office where we can have tea and discuss this further." He turned to the psychologist. "Thank you, Dr. Ben Abraham. I look forward to your report." It was an abrupt dismissal of the Head of the Institute. Ben Abraham bit his lip, but remained silent. The Knesset paid the bills.

They passed down a long, sterile-looking hall off which opened the offices of the Project staff: psychologists, nutritionists, administrators. Turning a corner, Traub almost ran down an armed guard with his chair. He grinned an apology. On the floor below were the labs—biology and computer—where dwelt those who had actually done the reconstruction. Above was administration, above that his own quarters. They found the elevator.

Gorshek's office was a comfortable contrast to the stark hallway or even the observation room. Scattered around it in amiable clutter were reproductions of artifacts dug from the tels of the country. There were also photographs of Gorshek at various digs with various archeologists.

Traub rolled to the windows. Unfortunately, they were just a bit high for a man in a wheelchair, but by craning he could get a look at the forest of signs on the opposite side of the street. The signs carried variously worded protests against the Hitler Project. It had probably been a mistake to release the information so early. Or had it escaped, leaked? Some of the signs were homemade, and some were slickly professional.

Martin Traub looked down at the rich carpet and then turned back to the window. The Institute was set in a sector that had been blown to rubble in the riots of thirty years ago before the Together Party had gained ascendancy, and Israel, weary of war and of strikes, had called a new constitutional convention. It took a knowledgeable eye to find scars of that time. Evidence of earlier wars were even more deeply buried.

Heavy security stood against the building to keep the demonstration to the other side of the street, Traub knew, even though the soldiers were beyond his current view. Protesters, guards, anger. He raised his eyes beyond the city and sought the distant blue of the Mediterranean. How peaceful it looked.

Gorshek poured tea, his own into a reproduction of a drinking vessel dug from a crusader castle. Mertz watched the operation with casual interest. Seated with his cup

and with his guests served, Gorshek turned to Traub. "Is your mind really clear in this matter?" He gestured as though yielding the floor.

Traub wheeled away from the window. "When the Project began, it was all very damned simple. For the first twenty-eight years, hell, I was just paid to stay alive. So I visited around and watched the children grow and have children of their own. I sat in the sun a lot and went to the doctor when I was supposed to.

"But when the first try they had at recreating him wasn't even human, let alone Hitler, and the second had a completely different personality. He killed himself over the memories he found in his head. Well, I wondered, but this one is so much the real thing I'm still shaking." He held up a frail hand in demonstration. "There's the old hate, the violence, the power." He made a small shrug as he paused for breath.

Gorshek tilted his head to one side. "Are you sure enough to condemn him to death, he who has had half a week of life? You are the one who must point the finger and say, 'Yes, that is Adolph Hitler who murdered six million people.' He will then be convicted—any trial will be a farce—and hanged. And I don't believe you *are* really sure. Are you really certain of the righteousness of what we are about? Is it right to nurture a hate for a century? This is a new world.

"Think about this. Our science can create anything we want, good or evil. Is it the fault of the creation that we choose to create it evil? Should this man, if he is indeed a man in the eyes of God, be punished because we have made him into a monster? Where is the sin? Doesn't it lie with those who made evil when they could have made good? Do you really believe the opposition to this type of tampering in areas belonging to God comes from just a few eccentrics? It comes from thoughtful people everywhere!"

"But mainly from Nazis who don't want to see Hitler punished," said a voice from the door. It was Gorshek's turn to be startled by a new arrival. The newcomer moved and spoke with an economy that contrasted strongly with Gorshek's posturing. A scar from the Reunification time coursed down his left cheek in spite of the easy availability of cosmetic surgery.

"Itzhak Ibanez," acknowledged Gorshek, recovering instantly. "Now the Ministry of Justice is represented."

"And probably about time. I doubt these people have escaped your personal mania. Traub, has he been pestering you?" Ibanez, Special Assistant to the Minister of Justice, was hard to describe without using the word "average." He was of average height, average looks, average age. Hair, eyes . . . Yet he could dominate a room. Traub mentally compared Ibanez's power to Hitler's. Different, more subtle.

Traub filled his remaining half lung. "He's trying to talk me out of the Project. I thought the Knesset . . ." He trailed off. Ibanez advanced across the deep carpet to rest his hands on Gorshek's desk. His eyes bored into the other.

"I'll talk to you later about this. I protested when you were appointed, but Goldman insisted you would do your job no matter what your personal opinion. Goldman must learn."

He turned back to Traub. "It's a good thing Ben Abraham called and told me Gorshek had dragged you away to his office. Which one of the various arguments is he attacking you with? 'We have created evil?' 'Those hands have no blood upon them?' Which?"

Ibanez stood before Traub, who had to tip his head back to look at him. "Listen, Martin. You are simply a witness who must fulfill his social duty. Watch each other's backs; that's what civilization is if it is anything at all. When you see evil done to one of your fellows, your only protection from that evil is to bear witness against it. The only protection for your children from a similar madman is for you to speak, to prove that civilization will pursue that kind of criminal to the depths of Hell. You're testifying for the safety of all future generations.

"You are the only one who *can* speak, so you *must* speak. This *is* the same man who murdered six million people—because he remembers doing it, glories in it, and because the motivations that led to the murders are his motivations. You were there. You must speak."

Ibanez's voice dropped harshly. "That is Adolph Hitler. He killed your father, mother, brother, sister, and a dozen aunts, uncles, and cousins."

Traub nodded. "Hell, I know. It looks like him, feels like him; I guess I'm as sure as I could expect to be. It just seems unreal that it's finally happening after all these years of planning. And it's happening to me." He slapped his chest. "*I'm* going to be the one to put the finger on Adolph Hitler. Why me, for God's sake? I'm a farmer, or I was. My father was nobody either, a small printer."

Ibanez nodded, eyes alert. "Tell me about your father."

Traub coughed. His eyes lost focus as he turned his mind to the pieced-together fragments of memory from that time. "We heard rumors of executions; people started to disappear. Papa never doubted it was really happening like most others. When we had stopped being, you know, a normal, a real family in a real world, he got us all together one day. 'Each one of us has got to try to live through this, not just for himself, but for all of us,' he said. 'It's going to get a lot worse, but at least *one* of us has got to live. The world will regain its sanity again someday, and some one of us has got to be around to tell what happened to the rest when the Crazies were in power.' That's what he called the Nazis, 'the Crazies.'"

Traub paused for breath. "So I won't forget my duty," he added, whether to Ibanez or to Gorshek or to himself was not clear.

The faces had grown clearer in his mind in recent years as he struggled to recall that period of his life. He saw again his father's shop and the Nazis forcing their way in with anti-Jewish propaganda that he must print or die. They had thought that funny. Were the images really true or just constructs of his imagination? His mind performed a sideslip. Was Hitler really Hitler, or was . . .

"We haven't much time, Martin." Ibanez broke into his thoughts. "The world is focusing more and more intently on the Institute. The pressures are mounting, both from within the country and from outside. So far we

have been somewhat isolated from them, but that is coming to an end with increasingly widespread knowledge of what we are doing. You've seen the demonstrators." He jerked a thumb at the window. "We must go before the Panel of Judges tomorrow to get the indictment. Otherwise, the pressures may grow too great to resist. Every time a call comes in, I expect it to be Jerusalem telling me to suspend operations. We're running out of time, Martin. You must keep faith with your father, with your children, whether they appreciate it or not."

Traub nodded. "I'll be ready tomorrow. Hell, I'm actually ready this minute, but now, I'm due at my great-great-grandson's across the river for dinner." His face lighted. "You wouldn't believe how his kids, Deborah and Samuel, you know, how they've grown." He shook his head at this eternal wonder.

"Should you go out?" asked Ibanez. "The loonies are crawling out of every sewer."

Traub shrugged. "I guess I'm too old to worry about things like that. My life isn't all that important to me any more."

"But it isn't just *you* that you're living for. Didn't you hear what I've just been telling you? Oh, shit! Go see the kids. Mertz, be doubly alert. Martin, Ben Abraham asked me to remind you about the recording."

Traub turned the chair. Mertz, who had been standing still and silent during all of this, made no move to help him. He still retained vivid memories of the time, the first day he had worked for Traub, when he had made that mistake. The door closed behind them.

Ibanez turned to glare at Gorshek. "I want to talk to you in my office."

Mertz pulled the AirRide up to the back entrance to avoid the protesters in front. As the car settled to the pavement with a whoosh of collapsing air cushion, Martin Traub wheeled his chair expertly through the line of soldiers guarding this entrance. Automatically he pulled his ID from his pocket, awkwardly because of the stiff finger. The ID was given a cursory examination by the officer in charge. She smiled briefly and nodded him through. He was well known, of course. But constant security was a way of life in Israel, especially at the Institute. The car's rear door swung open, and he maneuvered through and locked his chair into its place.

The door sighed shut behind him, and the air conditioner made itself felt. Tel Aviv could be hot when the breeze didn't blow from the Mediterranean. Still, it was nowhere near as hot as the grandly named Sdot El Kibbutz where he had lived from 1949 until he had been tapped by the reconstruction project in 2019.

"All set?" asked Mertz over his shoulder.

"Go ahead," Traub said and watched with amusement as Mertz made minute adjustments to wheel-motor alignment, air cushion pressure, radio, and air conditioner. The man liked playing with knobs and dials. He should have been a pilot, Traub thought. The car rose on driven air, and Martin leaned back to immerse himself in thoughts of a century past.

They had to swing around the building past the demonstrators, though. The protesters recognized the car and ran toward it, thrusting their signs forward. An elegant young man in cape and breeches shouted something, face contorted. A frozen image of a young woman in a patched coverall—she could have been one of Traub's great-great- or great-great-great-grandchildren—stayed with him. "Forgive and forget!" said her sign. She mouthed the same words against the soundproofing of the AirRide. A bead of sweat trembled at the end of a freckled nose.

"You don't understand," whispered Traub.

"What's that?" Mertz asked the mirror.

"Nothing. Go back to sleep." Mertz made a rude noise and Traub found *himself* drifting off. He did that a lot; he tired so easily. Dreams came, unusually vivid. Flashes of scenes—or were they memories of scenes?—a hundred years old came to him as he dozed, and a vision of the concentration camp came in cold and hunger and fear. Buchenwald with its guards and its dogs, its mud, its walking skeletons. Buchenwald. The name came clearly from his lips in the dream.

He jolted awake and the memory slowly faded of corpse call, when those who had died in the night were unceremoniously dumped in the mud in grotesque frozen attitudes to await the garbage trucks.

He felt the sweat on his face against the air conditioning, and his heart labored. When the walls came down for a moment he was torn between grasping at the memories and struggling to rebuild the walls.

Wasn't a century too long to be afraid, though? His mind turned to Gorshek, the protesters, even his own family. Was it too long to carry a hate, too? He looked down at the number tattooed on his wrist, making, as always, a scrubbing motion over it with his other hand. Some things he would carry forever. "What should I do, Papa?" he whispered and drifted off again, the damaged finger forever pointing stiffly at some event not remembered, only felt. This time he rested, his dreams pleasant ones about the earthy joy of coaxing the land to grow food. Always, though, there was a shadow, a gun near at hand. That had always been life in Israel.

Ibanez gestured Gorshek to a chair before his desk. Next to the chair was an elegant Norfolk Island pine. Other bonsaied and semi-bonsaied trees crowded the room. Ibanez's office bore witness to the tree planting mania in which Israel was born and which still continued.

Offer of refreshment was made and accepted. Gorshek opened the conversation. Twisting his hands in his lap he said, "I just went to the exhibition at the Palestinian memorial. Those refugees, so sad. Nobody wanted them. It made me want to weep."

"It could only happen here," Ibanez offered, momentarily willing to accept the change of subject. "Only we Jews, it seems, would celebrate our centennial by remembering the tragedy in our history. Other nations remember the triumph."

"Is that unique to us?" Gorshek asked. "Well, we are, certainly, the only ones who would use the occasion to memorialize one hundred years of hate." Ibanez sighed wearily.

"Listen, Menachem. I know how you feel, but you have an official position here, and so do I. My position is to protect the Project, and so is yours, you know. You represent the Knesset here, and the Project has full Knesset support. "

"I represent God everywhere, and this blasphemy is an offense to Him. It is also an offense to the supposed progressiveness of your precious Together Party, by the way."

Ibanez spoke softly. "This is a matter of opinion, not of either religious or any other dogma, including the political. Not everyone believes that your interpretation of the law and the prophets is the only one."

"And you, Itzhak Ibanez, do you care about the law or the prophets?" He shrugged and held the pose, leaving his shoulders pulled high around his neck for a long moment.

"Leave Traub alone." Ibanez leaned forward to pin the other with his glare. It just bounced off. "Menachem, I don't want to have you recalled."

Both men rose, and Gorshek looked around the office. The fronds of the Norfolk pine moved almost imperceptibly in the current from the air conditioning. "I don't like this as well as your Jerusalem office. I suppose the redwood was too big to bring here, Itzhak. I hope I still may call you Itzhak, you with whom I played and shared a bunker, and whose mother and father were to me as my mother and father. Remember, my old friend, I am not insensitive to the hate of others for Jews. Your family took me in because my own parents were killed by Arab terrorist gangs on the West Bank. But we must stop returning hate for hate. It is a new world; we are at peace with the Arabs. We must come to peace with our past."

"At peace with the Arabs," Ibanez muttered. "How about the rest of the world? There's a revisionist under every flat rock trying to erase the history of six million murders. Is that what you want, to forget our dead?"

Gorshek tilted his head. "There have been revisionists since the end of the Holocaust, if not before. I admit, they are growing in number and strident absurdity. Still, suppose you succeed in executing this creation of yours. Will you really, deep in your heart, believe that you have punished Adolph Hitler? Or will you truly know that Hitler died in a Berlin bunker one hundred three years ago with a gun in his mouth and his finger on the trigger? The soul that committed six million murders has long since passed from this Earth. That poor man down there —or *manikin,* whatever—is simply a pawn, a prop in your second-rate morality play."

Ibanez bent forward. "Yes, Hitler died one hundred three years ago, but he lives again in that room downstairs. Poor man! You've been very careful not to listen to his ranting, haven't you? Makes your viewpoint easier to stomach."

Ibanez sent a finger stabbing out in the general direction of Hitler's quarters. "He remembers ordering the deaths and tortures of millions of people and revels, glories in it. How else do you define identity, soul, if you will, except by memory, by motive, by personality? As for his soul 'passing from this Earth,' some rabbis say it has returned with the recreation of its mortal housing." He straightened and shook a finger at Gorshek for emphasis. "Even his voice is the voice of Hitler. We will play that voice for the people and let them compare the sounds, the words, the very syntax with recordings of the original Hitler. They *will* believe, because it *is* Hitler."

"You aren't worried about the precedent you're setting, calling enemies back from the grave for revenge? What if someone decides someday you're a criminal? Or do you care what happens to your shade?"

Ibanez shrugged. "Terrorists have always used the ploy of holding honest men hostage for their own ends. The new technology extends their scope, that's all. Anyway, the techniques are too complex for any terrorist group to handle. Even for a modern state—well, we failed twice."

"What if it is the state that is terrorist? Look at Arab history; look at our history. What if a Nazi regime comes to power and revives Hitler again to call you to account for this?"

"Appeasement, Menachem? Anyway, I thought state Nazism was impossible in this wonderful new world of yours." His face hardened. "Stay away from Traub."

Martin Traub sipped appreciatively at the single glass of wine he allowed himself. It was one more than the doctors allowed him. His chair, Mertz, and the family of his great-great-grandson filled the apartment, small like all apartments in overcrowded Israel. It was relatively spartan. A holoscreen, a few plants, and a shelf of books were all there was of luxury—if books could be called luxury.

The children, Samuel and Deborah vied with each other to relate to him the news of the day. "We went to the parade, today, and then we went—"

"We went swimming—"

"—went swimming at the beach—"

"—the beach. And then—"

"I want to tell him."

"No, I want to tell him."

Their mother came from the kitchen to intervene, a spatula in her hand. "One at a time, children." She shook the spatula at them. "Three-G can't understand when you both talk at once. Take turns. Deborah, you tell him about the parade, and then Samuel, you can tell him about the swimming." This settled, she returned to the kitchen, where her husband demanded to know where the sage was and why someone—unnamed—was always hiding things from him.

The children settled cross-legged and bright-eyed at Traub's feet. Mertz looked at a travel magazine, twisting and tilting it to appreciate the holographic illustrations. "Are you ready, Three-G?" asked Deborah, bright-eyed and expectant.

"Go right ahead, honey. I'm listening." He reached out to take her hand. She gripped his tightly, solicitous as always of the stiff finger. Would that hand of hers ever hold a gun in this new world? Was there a choice?

After supper Traub sipped at the last of his wine, savored in tiny rations throughout the meal. "Roy, the kids were talking about going swimming today. Is it safe?"

"It has been for almost a year, Great-great. The water quality is better than it's been since records were first kept systematically." Roy sipped coffee. "It gets better every day."

"Hell, I guess I don't keep up like I should; I've been so busy with the Project." It was a poor excuse, but the best one he could think of for being so unaware. He wasn't sure just why he needed an excuse. At any rate, the one he chose turned out to be a mistake. He saw the lips of his great-great-grandson and wife tighten.

"Is it really Hitler?" Samuel wanted to know, wide-eyed. "We read about him in school, how he—"

"Are you going to hang him?" That was Deborah.

"Go to your room, children. We want to talk to Three-G a minute," Roy ordered. The children rose reluctantly and departed with dragging steps and many a backward glance. "Go on!"

Roy turned to Traub. "There's no use talking about it any more. I'm afraid we have to ask you not to come here again unless you drop this damnable revenge scheme. We have children, and their generation need not know hate. We don't want them upset by this hundred-year-old vendetta. Please understand. I know how you love them and how they love you. We love you too, but we can't let you fill their minds with any more anger. Look at them. They're so innocent; they don't even know sin, let alone hatred. All they know is that you're going to hang someone. It's bad enough that you do it, but I will not let them be taught that hatred and killing is done by decent people."

Traub felt numbed, eviscerated. "Hell, haven't I told you about what happened to my family, your family, your great-great-great-grandparents? I was at B— B— Buch—" He pounded a trembling fist against his forehead. "Damn it! B— B— Buchenwald!"

"Don't you see, Great-great? You're blocked from your past. You hardly remember even the name; your memory is blocked. If you ever fight through that barrier, you'll remember and understand and forgive and live free of hate for the first time in your life."

The amateur analysis did not impress Traub. Roy leaned forward earnestly, his mouth opening, but the old man spoke first.

"I remember enough to know Hitler murdered our family. Murder is a crime that every society punishes, in case you've forgotten. There is no statute of limitations on murder. When we executed a Nazi in the 1980s, people said, 'It's been forty years; isn't it time to forget?' Hell, no! Never in forty years, nor in four hundred, nor in four thousand." He broke off, gasping for breath.

Roy leaned away from the blast of emotion, then forward again. "You've told us many times that you were in a concentration camp. It was Buchenwald. I can say it easily. I have no hate in me. It was a terrible tragedy, but it's over; it's been over for more than a century. The people who did it are dead and gone—or would be, if you didn't keep the wounds open and festering. It's a new age, Great-great. Give the children a chance to escape the hates of the old."

Traub sighed. With an effort he controlled the angry words that fought for utterance. "It'll *all* be over soon, one way or another. Then we can all go back to living a normal life."

Roy shook his head, his lips clamped stubbornly. It wasn't easy defying the family patriarch, but he had started and wouldn't quit now. "Then you will be the one who hanged a man for a century-old crime. That's what you'll be for the kids. Not Three-G, but a stranger, a dangerous one. We won't want you then either. Only if you come to see reason . . ."

"If *I* come to see reason." Traub's thin voice rose to a shout. "What if I *am* the reasonable one? Why can't there simply be differences of opinion? Why must you accuse me of horrible crimes and then fold your ears back like a mule and refuse to listen? Are you scared of the possibility that there might be some justice in what I do?"

He felt the tears start to run down his cheeks. God damn his old man's weakness! He turned the chair abruptly. "Let's go, Mertz," he muttered thickly. Mertz approached, looking anxious, and Roy and Shonna started up in protest.

"We didn't mean for you to go now. Think how that would upset the children. We don't want them to feel any of these tensions over past crimes. Isn't that what you all worked for, to build a country where children could walk free and unafraid?"

Traub paused at the door. A coughing spell shook him. Finally, he wheeled back into the room. "The price of freedom is a gun." He glared at Roy and Shonna, and the words of Ibanez came back to him. "This isn't just a hundred-year-old crime we're talking about. It's the future. This is for the children, to prove to every goddamn murderous would-be tyrant that there is no place he can hide from justice, not even the grave. The law is their protection; what *makes* this great new world you're going on about is the fact that the law will never rest until it punishes criminals. Now it can chase the bastards to the end of time."

He paused for breath, coughing, and looked at them. There was no relenting there, no understanding. Something went out of him. "All right. I won't upset the children. And I won't come again." This last he spoke from the depths of a great emptiness.

Martin Traub noticed nothing wrong until they turned off Allenby Road—nothing wrong in the outside world, that is. Inside, there was plenty wrong. A century of hate; was that really all he was? The pressure on him was mounting. For the first time he really began to waver.

The car slewed around a corner twice as fast as it should have been going, and Martin Traub looked at Mertz in wonder. The chauffeur glanced anxiously in the mirror and then slewed around another corner. He spoke urgently into his wrist com unit. ". . . definitely following. Not even trying to hide it, pressing close . . . need to find a patrol . . . can't make police station."

Traub twisted awkwardly. No accommodation had been made for him to swing his chair in order to see behind. He caught a glare of headlights unreasonably close before there came a burst of gunfire, and Mertz shouted,

"Down!" Bullets ricocheted off the reinforced steel of the car to whine away down empty streets. Traub was close to panic. So much for not valuing his life. The pursuers were behind him, and he couldn't even turn to face them. He wrenched his head around as far as he could and then tried to see past the corners of eyes wide with fear.

After that it became chaotic. One moment the lights in the rear window were blinding; the next they were gone as Mertz tried some maneuver. Once Martin looked out the side to find the pursuing car beside them. A man leaned out the window with a gun, and Traub ducked. He felt his sphincter yield to the fear and waited for the ripping smash of bullets. It didn't come, and he wondered why.

Mertz did a magnificent job, but the AirRide was no match in maneuverability for something with tires that gripped the road directly. It was only a matter of time, unless. . .

Traub looked up again to see a group of crouched figures at an intersection, and realized that it was a patrol. Were they alerted? Apparently so, for as Mertz rushed to a halt before them, they sprang out and began spraying the pursuing car with automatic weapons fire. There was a long, drawn-out squeal of broken traction, a scene of shadowy shapes diving out of the way of the skidding car, and then a splintering crash.

Mertz spun to lean over the seat. "Are you all right?" His nose twitched, but he made no comment.

"I . . . I'm fine," Traub assured him shakily. "Are you?" He tried to laugh. "After all, I could duck down."

"Not a scratch," gloated Mertz. "They were amateurs. Only an amateur, or a lunatic, would start anything on the streets of Tel Aviv. The nearest patrol is only blocks away at any time. You just have to call and then find it if you can't make it to the police station." He laughed, exulting in the action and the demonstration of his skill. "Crazy," he reaffirmed.

Then came the sirens, and for a while it was just sirens and flashing lights. Traub stared and listened, hypnotized. It had started with the confrontation with the living Hitler. Next, the terror following the pain of being cut off from the children, and now the sirens and the lights shocked him out of the present and dropped him into another time and another place. There were sirens there, too, and lights. The walls he had built were finally crumbling.

A soldier joined Mertz. "Is he all right?" He nodded at Traub.

"He's fine. That's my job—to see that no Nazi scum get to him."

The soldier spoke briefly into a radio, then said to Mertz, "Not a single scrap of ID on any of them. And they're all dead. Four of them."

Mertz shrugged. "Did you really expect ID?"

"No, but you can hope." The soldier shifted his gun to a more comfortable position. "What are you going to do with him?" He gestured to the car with a shrug of his shoulder.

"Get him back to the Institute. Then . . . I don't know. That won't be for me to decide. I'm just a soldier like you."

"We've got jeeps here. We can give you an escort."

"Good."

Martin Traub heard none of it. He stared at the whirling lights, but what he saw were those other lights of long ago flashing hypnotically in the face of a little boy just torn from his family. Involuntarily he reached for the long-dead hand of Fritz. He knew where they were going, now; the name flowed smoothly to his tongue after a century of denial. It overwhelmed him. "Buchenwald!" he whispered.

The memories buried beneath the name cascaded forth. He saw his father, different from the memories he had pieced together recently, more tired, but undoubtedly his father. "Take care of Fritz" had been the last words he had spoken to his elder son as the SS troops separated the family at the depot, using truncheons to shove the boys toward the waiting trucks.

"Take care of Fritz." He had done that, standing between the younger boy and the Nazis, saving some of his scraps for him. The Nazis saw it, one small boy caring for a smaller one, and they laughed. Then came the image of one Nazi, huge in the memory of childhood, bending over him, breath smelling of fish and decay. The guard handed him a jackknife. "Take this. Come on, take it, but don't let anyone see." He peered around in exaggerated simulation of caution. "You have to use it on your brother—what's his name, Fritz? They're going to kill him piece by piece if you don't; you don't want him to suffer like that." The guard licked his lips and the odor of decay washed over Martin again.

They began, cutting off pieces of Fritz; an ear, fingers. Fritz cried in desperate nonunderstanding, in pain, but he looked to Martin with trust and faith that his big brother would somehow make things come out right. And Martin did. They wore him down. But his own tears and his uncertain knowledge of anatomy turned his aim, and it took Fritz a long time to die while Martin cradled him in his arms, sobbing his despair.

Martin tried to turn the knife on the Nazis, but they pushed him away, laughing. Then he turned it on himself, but the blade folded on his hand, and he succeeded only in cutting the finger which now pointed to that crime of a century ago. The Nazis laughed more and then took away the knife. He had wanted to die, but it suited the Nazi humor to make him live. His soul was stripped naked, helpless. That deepest level of his being was pawed and defiled by the rough and dirty hands of his tormentors. They laughed at his violation and, like he was a marionette, pulled the strings to watch him dance in agony for their amusement. They tied the decomposing body of Fritz to his back and taunted him. "You killed your own brother. What sort of shit are you?"

For a while Martin had lived for revenge against those caricatures of men. But the American soldiers came, and the guards melted away. He descended into apathy which Israel partially cured. His mind built walls, and he tried to put the holocaust behind those walls. He lived and loved safely, always protecting the deepest part of himself from too intense caring—except about his children, they who had never had to hang their heads for being Jewish. Now they had been taken from him.

Tears squeezed out of Martin Traub's eyes. So *that* was how Fritz had died. . . . He felt his brother's violation and his own, and sat shivering uncontrollably in the Mediterranean summer evening.

They found Ibanez still in his office. With him was Ben Abraham. Traub felt slightly refreshed from a trip to the bathroom. In the outer office Mertz raised a brow, as always, at the exaggeratedly feminine voice of the mechanical security device. On a more relaxed occasion, he had invited the voice to share his bed. It interrogated them, examined IDs through a sensor cell, consulted Ibanez, and then passed them through to the inner sanctum.

Traub wheeled through into the room, followed by Mertz. Ibanez and Ben Abraham regarded the old man anxiously. Ibanez got up and came around the desk to shake hands. "Are you all right, Martin?"

Traub strove to keep his voice normal, to hide the violence of the emotion he felt growing in him. Gone were the protecting barriers. He knew how Fritz had died! The resolve for vengeance that had been born then returned, stronger for the years of denial. What he had felt yesterday as hatred for Hitler was feeble in comparison. He knew a deep fear that if he let them sense the depth of his feeling, it would somehow invalidate his testimony.

"Yes, I'm all right." Did his voice sound normal? "Mertz beat them off until he could find a patrol. Tell them, Jan."

Traub sat back and gave himself up to bloody visions of hate and revenge and guilt as the focus shifted to his secretary-bodyguard. Mertz told his story without embellishment, without acknowledging, except by the very brevity of his statement, pride in a job done well.

Ibanez shook his head. "That whole scene is out of an ancient gangster movie." He brightened, and a calculating look entered his eyes. "We can make that our major line. Hitler always surrounded himself with thugs, and thugs are still drawn to him. Let's see. The Nazi theme, the Horst Wessel Song—Horst Wessel was a pimp. What else? Never mind, we can work on it."

He faced Traub. "Now, Martin, I warned you it was dangerous for you out there. Don't go out again until this is over. We can't take any more risks. Mertz is as good as we've got"—he waved a hand at the soldier, who just wiggled his mustache—"but even he isn't infallible. Don't go out! Mertz, he isn't to go out." The bodyguard nodded.

Traub shrugged. Ben Abraham had been regarding him with concern. "Is something else wrong, Martin?"

"Give him some room!" snapped Mertz. "He's had a rough evening." He looked questioningly at Traub, who nodded. Mertz resumed. "Even before the shooting it was rough. His great-great—or is it great-great-great—grandson cut him off from the kids. You know how he opposes the Project." He told the story.

Ben Abraham's sympathy showed in his face. If Traub had one outstanding characteristic it was his devotion to children, especially to his own descendants. The director slid forward in his chair. "I know that must hurt deeply. Do you need to talk about it?"

Traub retreated. He could afford no confessions now. Suddenly he was afraid of the psychologist's insights into his mental processes. What would he be able to guess? What had he already guessed? What would he do if he guessed? "I think I just need to rest," he mumbled.

Ibanez agreed vigorously. "Sleep now, and in the morning we go before the judges. Will you be ready?"

Traub nodded. "Yes. I want to see that son of a bitch one more time, though, first thing in the morning." He led Mertz through the door.

Ben Abraham frowned after them, worry and puzzlement on his face.

Martin Traub awoke early from his sleep of exhaustion. This time there were no fading memories of nightmares. In his mind was clear, brilliant rage, sickening guilt and a feeling of violation, of being cheapened, made dirty. He took a deep breath; must be casual, natural. Mustn't give some lawyer, some judge any excuse for calling him incompetent to testify, claiming tampering or insanity or some such thing. He really didn't understand exactly what the law meant by those terms. The applications seemed so damned arbitrary.

He adjusted the level of the bed, lowered the arm of the chair to hook the bed edge, and levered himself into the chair for a trip to the bathroom. He rolled through quarters little less spartan in furnishing than those of his enemy two floors below. But Martin had buried the rooms beneath piles of mementoes, collections, hoardings. Returning from the bathroom, he paused by the console to let the computer record his thought patterns. He was quite reluctant today, even though he knew the patterns were interpretable only by his own mind. Anyway, this was one ritual he couldn't risk omitting. Ben Abraham would give him hell, and it might cause suspicion.

Leaving the computer, he spotted on a window ledge a bullet pulled from his leg after the Six-day War. His eye fell on a small table on which was displayed a photograph of the group of immigrants with whom he had joined the kibbutz. Honored place was held by the picture of his wife, now seventy years dead of a sniper bullet. "Would you know me now, Esther?" he whispered.

Next to her was a photo of his son, dead five years of the ravages of age. Elsewhere were displayed holos and photos of his army of descendants now scattered the length and breadth of Israel—and beyond. But only one family lived in Tel Aviv, and he was now barred. . . . Hitler had taken his family from him a second time. Rage flared bright again, and he felt his chest tighten. "Calm, Martin, calm." He rolled to the kitchen as he heard Mertz's door open.

Traub made coffee—he was allowed decaffeinated only—while Mertz fetched the paper and put trays in the microwave.

The old man rolled to the table built into an outside wall. He carefully examined the cactus that served as a centerpiece. He reached to touch it; its prickliness was reassuringly normal in a world cast in strange hues by the crumbling of his mental barriers. A treasured gift from some cronies nearly as ancient as he a few years

ago, the plant was a gnarled and twisted thing giving every impression of great age, although Traub wasn't expert enough to know how old it really was. "You know how they say 'sweets to the sweet,'" Weismann had said, proffering the spiny object. "So you get an old prick, Martin." Traub's lips twitched in memory. But Weismann was years dead, now. All were dead but he himself, and he had to live just long enough to see the noose tighten on the neck of Hitler. He forced himself to calm and looked out the window.

At least in his rooms the sills were low enough so that he could see out comfortably. His view was mainly of the tops of the eucalyptus trees a few feet below that shaded the avenue from the hot mideastern sun. A bird hopped about the branches of the nearest, picking at minute insects. The bird had been there yesterday, too. How much had happened since that time! He had seen Hitler, argued with Roy, ducked bullets, and remembered. Yes, he had remembered.

Mertz slapped down the paper and the trays, and they bent to deal with breakfast. At least Mertz did. Traub found he had even less appetite than usual. He forked random pieces into his mouth to keep up appearances, but Mertz noticed. He looked up from his usual intense perusal of the paper.

"Still upset?" he asked as gently as he was able. "Family, or gunmen?"

Traub turned to look out the window again. Beyond the trees he could see the intersection. A young woman in a spectacularly brief costume strode briskly across the street. The soldiers stationed at the corner—all men, as it happened—tried unsuccessfully to ignore her. He nodded to her to attract Mertz's attention. The bodyguard followed the nod and blew his mustache appreciatively. Though it was a new addition, he had already learned to use the mustache as a means of expression. Then he turned a questioning stare back to Traub.

"Guess I am," Traub finally forced out. "Family. They're all I have here." Mertz nodded, his look sympathetic.

Traub pushed at the decrepit-looking omelet. "What of this new world they're always going on about?" he asked. "I carried a gun in the War of Liberation a week after I landed. That's the only kind of world I understand, I guess."

Jan Mertz steered his coffee past the mustache. "The world is new only here in Israel." He tapped on the bulletproof glass of the window with his fork. "Look outside, Martin." He gestured, taking in the eucalyptus trees, the few early-morning pedestrians, and the ever watchful soldiers, backs to the buildings, eyes moving constantly. "Look at it. This is just a little goddamn pool of light in a big goddamn dark. Everywhere else the same stupidity that brought Hitler to power still rules in spite of space colonies, medical miracles, and cheap energy. Were those bastards last night part of this wonderful new world? Maybe they were part of some sort of goddamn persecution fantasy of yours because of your unreasonable hates." He snorted. "Shit, Martin, *you're* the one who's got all his marbles. How do you forgive and forget the murder of six million people? Only God, if there is any such thing, has the right to forgive anything that big." He hesitated. "Ah, shit! What do I know? The only things I read are sex mags. Eat your goddamn breakfast."

Traub stared at his food, but saw only the Buchenwald guards and Fritz. He pushed the tray away. "As soon as you finish, Jan, call Ben Abraham to wake up the bastard. He always was a late sleeper. Forget the mail." As Mertz went to call, Traub stared into the distance. He wanted one more crack at Hitler. He toyed with the idea of killing the son of a bitch himself. No, let him suffer the indignity of hanging before the eyes of the world. Anyway, could he defy that terrifying presence enough to do the act?

The former dictator sat on the edge of his bed, somehow shrunken with sleep, his thin shoulders hunched forward, his hair uncombed. He made a pathetic figure, but Traub felt no touch of pity. The other would grow to monstrous size when he began to speak. And Martin smelled the stench of rotting flesh and felt the slipperiness of blood.

He wheezed in a few deep breaths to loosen the heavy tightness in his chest. "Who are you?" he asked harshly.

"What do you mean? You know who I am. I am Adolph Hitler." He nodded agreement with himself.

"Why do you hate Jews?"

Hitler stared. He spread a hand uncertainly and waved it to encompass the earth. "Why is the sea wet? They are plotters, destroyers. Bolsheviks. They hold the power—"

"That's crap, Corporal Hitler, pure crap. Why do you hate Jews?" Traub felt an exhilaration so overwhelming as to be frightening. He had insulted Adolph Hitler and told him he talked crap! His chest tightened again. His heart was having trouble coping with his newly rediscovered ability for strong emotion. He had lived long in a corner of his soul.

"Crap? You tell me I talk crap?" Hitler shouted, springing to his feet as if driven by a straightening steel rod. He stood in front of Traub, angry, threatening, powerful. Mertz stepped from behind the chair, and Hitler flashed him a glance. In Hitler's world of operatic myth, heroes fought great battles against incredible odds. He was a hero. Mertz was a prop, a Jewish prop at that. Hitler moved back with a little shudder at being so close to the defiling Yiddish presence.

"You tell me, the greatest historian of all time—and in this war I am not a corporal. *I am the Führer!*" He leaned to stare hard into Traub's face. "Let me tell you one thing that perhaps even you can understand, Jew. A Jew—your brother Yid, a so-called doctor—killed my mother!" He glared at Traub, his face contorted.

Traub licked dry lips, taken aback. Still that voice that had always meant mortal danger to him, to all Jews, had the power to intimidate him, that voice and that intense stare. He found his own voice. "But you told Dr. Bloch that you would be grateful to him forever for the care he had given her. Those were your words: 'I will be grateful to you forever.' You already hated Jews anyway."

"He killed her!" shrieked Hitler, flecks of foam appearing at the corner of his mouth, flecks so minute Traub

couldn't be sure he had seen them. "He pretended to care for her, but he killed her." Hitler's expression became crafty. "They knew I was a threat to them even then; they would do anything to injure me." Tears began to course down the pinched cheeks. "The finest woman who ever lived, and the Jews killed her!" he shouted.

Traub fought his way clear of the miasma that seemed to envelop him when Hitler spoke. "You killed *my* mother!" He pressed his hand to his chest to ease the pressure there and fought for breath.

Hitler stared at him in blue fury until the fury was replaced again by cunning. He regarded Traub with sudden speculation. It was as if an idea had been born. When he spoke again it was with a sneer. "She was a Jew. I killed millions. I would kill millions more. Jews! Animals! Communists! Criminals! Filth of the gutter!"

Traub made a spitting motion. "My brother was barely more than a baby. He didn't know anything about being 'Jewish.'"

"Criminals are born. A dog is a dog whether he knows his name or not."

"Murdering pig!" Traub shouted back. Some part of him was aware of the expectant look on the face of Hitler and warned by it, but it had been too many years since he had had to control emotion this powerful. "Architect, historian, military genius, composer, you call yourself. Shit! You never were anything but a comic-opera little cockroach that nobody ever thought to step on until it was too late."

He had the triumph of seeing the foam suddenly return to the corners of Hitler's mouth at the jab, but the triumph was short-lived. He broke off, gasping for breath, the fire fading from his eyes. The pressure in his chest turned to crushing pain, and a roaring sounded in his ears. Traub never felt the motion as he slumped from the chair to the floor.

Hitler leaped and threw his fist into the air with a shout of triumph. "I did it!" he shrieked, spittle dribbling from his lips. He jabbed a finger at the crumpling figure of Traub and shrieked, "I won!"

Mertz leaped to Traub, easing him to the floor, and shouted, "Ben Abraham! Quick!" Cradling his charge, he looked to the door. "Goddamn it, Ben Abraham, get your fucking academic ass in here!"

The door sprang open and Ben Abraham leaped into the room, followed in seconds by other white-coated figures carrying equipment. He shoved Mertz aside unceremoniously. "Get out of the way," he rasped.

Mertz backed against the wall, dumbly watching the resuscitation attempts. He had failed. Martin had died while under his care. He became aware of someone cackling at his side and turned to see the face of Hitler triumphant.

"I won," he gloated, tossing his head so that the forelock bobbed up and down. The lines and planes of his face mirrored his triumph. His lips sneered beneath the brief mustache. "Now you have no one to testify against me. You can't hang me; you can't even hold me. Your laws will force you to let me go free. You trap yourself. I beat him and his kind—your kind—once; I've done it again." He turned to shake a fist at the body on the floor, obscured by frantic medical technicians. "Dirty Jew! I beat you again! There are winners and losers, and I am a winner, always!" He turned his face piously upward. "I thank Providence for my victory."

It was Ben Abraham who saved Hitler. He stopped Mertz with a strength that shocked the bodyguard back into control. Hitler retreated to a far corner, the crafty expression still dominant. He glanced at the door. No, there was an armed guard. There was no hurry, anyway. Soon he would be free again to conquer. Mertz turned his back and watched as they covered Traub's face and carried him from the room.

"You have to let me go!" shouted Hitler to the walls of his room. "You have no case against me." At first, he had been so confident of his release that he had paced the floor eager and expectant. He had passed a thousand plans through his head. First, of course, he would have to learn as much as he could about this new world so that he could control it. At last he would gain the final victory that had been denied him once. He glowed with the satisfaction of turning his enemies' machinations against them. It was a faith he had. Other men, weak men, could be counted on to obey laws no matter what. That's what laws were for, for strong men to use in controlling the weak.

Strong men. Heroes. Hitler hadn't been deeply surprised at his resurrection. Do heroes really die? Even if they are killed one night, they rise again with the next night's curtain like the Phoenix from the ashes, even after *Götterdämmerung*, the final battle.

All along he had never believed in his soul that even death could hold him. He was a hero, perhaps even a god. But now he was tormented by the slow workings of mortal minds.

Days stretched on, and he returned to Wagner, less often pacing in intensity of emotion. When days became weeks with no word, only minimal contact with the medical staff, the depression grew as deep as it had been in those early Vienna days when he was nothing, not hero, not god. Days passed without his even noticing. Occasionally the gloom lifted long enough for him to shriek, "Let me go!" to whomever happened to be there—or to the walls of the room. Little remained functioning of the cunning, conniving mind. It was bent to meaninglessness by the weight of depression. But it could be called to service at any glimmer of hope.

Itzhak Ibanez snapped off the switch on his phone with unnecessary violence and looked across his desk at Ben Abraham. "How long before he is ready?"

"A few more days. Perhaps three."

"No sooner?"

"Only if absolutely necessary. What's the difficulty? Public opinion supports us. The people don't know what we're doing, but they trust us."

Ibanez lifted his teacup to his lips. "Still, we need results. Public faith and support can erode fast without results. That was Gorshek on the phone. He and his co-

horts won't give up. Right now anger is so high against Hitler that there will be no question of tampering. Nobody's listening to Gorshek's bunch at the moment. In a few weeks, that may not be the case. You know we are on pretty shaky ground there anyway. The courts don't understand your processes, and are quite likely to decide against us—if we delay. What would we do if they disqualified our witness or said the accused was insane?" He considered a moment, sweeping his cup in circles on his desk. "However, three days shouldn't be a problem, if that's firm."

"It is. Now it's just a matter of orientation. Fortunately, he kept his recording up to date."

"Should we let Mertz be the one to tell Hitler? He feels like he failed Martin, letting him die, letting him be beaten by Hitler again like that."

Ben Abraham shook his head and rose to return to work. "I've spoken to Mertz. The way he feels about it —and I concur—is that there is one with a greater right than his to tell Hitler."

"Let me out!" shrieked Hitler. It was one of his good days, one of the days when he was aware of his captivity. He pounded his fists against the door. "Release me at once! Do you hear me? I order you to release me immediately!"

As if in response the door slid open. Hitler stood frozen, eyes staring. Was this really it? He bounded forward only to recoil in shock at what he saw. He retreated to the far wall as an ancient in a powered wheelchair glided into the room followed by a familiar bodyguard.

Hitler's jaw dropped and he yammered in protest. "But . . . but . . . but—you died. You had a heart attack. I did it! I killed you! I won!" The last was a wail against the unfairness of the world. Why would God, who had appointed him to wipe the Jewish Bolshevik scourge from the face of the Earth, abandon him to these detestable, these filthy . . . ?

Martin Traub spoke for the first time. His voice was stronger now. They had grown him with sound lungs and a sound heart, even though they had left him otherwise as a very old man. His memories were intact through the recording of that last morning, recorded because Ben Abraham knew Martin was an old and vulnerable man. In rebirth he was Traub as Hitler was Hitler. The last interview with the Führer that led to his death had been shown him on the holo film that constantly registered what happened in Hitler's room. "Only a temporary victory. If you can be regrown, why can't I? I should be grateful to you; they brought me back with a new heart, new lungs. I feel a lot better now. However, somehow I don't think I'll bother to thank you."

He began a turn with the chair. "I'll see you at your trial. Then at your hanging." He swung the chair around and left, followed by Mertz, who grinned, teeth clenched, over his shoulder.

Hitler sank into a chair, the depression deep and eternal. From it, one thought and one only came to him. Hang him. They were going to hang him. They would humiliate him; they would rope him to the scaffold to kick and dance before the million eyes of his enemies.

He sprang up in sudden decision. No, they wouldn't! He would choose the time of his passing himself. He stared around him. The room had been made as suicide-proof as possible. No knives, no razors, nothing to hang himself from, constant observation. But there was one thing they had missed. He forced himself to concentrate.

He waited. At bedtime he took the Clement book on opera with him when he retired. He pretended to read for a while, and then turned out the light. Nobody thought of paper as a suicide device, but the edges were sharp. He had cut his hand on the pages of the book—when was it? Yesterday, or last month, or both times?

In the dark he tore out a page, carefully, silently, and slashed the edge sharply across the delicate skin of one wrist. It cut deep, as the sharp pain and then the flow of blood told him. He slashed again and again, widening and deepening the cut, impervious now to the pain. Already he felt a lassitude, though he knew it was too soon. He quickly tore out a new page and cut the other wrist in the same way and then lay back. In his fading mind was the answer to Traub's triumph. He had won the final victory over the hated Jews. Tomorrow they would find his body in the blood-soaked bed and know of their defeat. He regretted that he wouldn't see the frustrated rage in their faces.

But somehow the triumph wasn't complete. From somewhere floated the stray thought that there was a flaw in the plan, something he hadn't considered. Did this new world have traps that he in his despair couldn't see? He was too far gone to capture the thought, though, and he began the long drift into the tunnel of light. Waiting there for him, he saw Klara and his baby brother who had died. He wanted to tell them that something was wrong, but he had no voice.

He awoke to a feeling of discontent that verged on panic. As the disorientation cleared, he knew what it was. He shouldn't have awakened at all. The cuts! He hadn't made them deep enough or wide enough. The paper had been too thin. The blood had clotted. He raised his wrists to his face. There was no sign of any cut, not even a scar. The bed was clean; there was no blood. His eye caught an anomaly and he turned to focus on it. The bookshelves were empty. Where once title had jammed against title was now bare space. The last weapon had been taken from him.

And then he knew. Somehow it took the missing books to bring home what he had forgotten. Death was no escape from *this* enemy. For the first time he knew terror at the depth of the rage he had raised against himself, and he began to whimper and tremble. Then he began to scream. ✦

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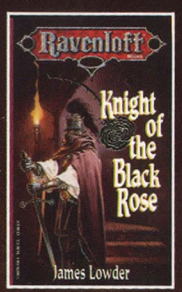

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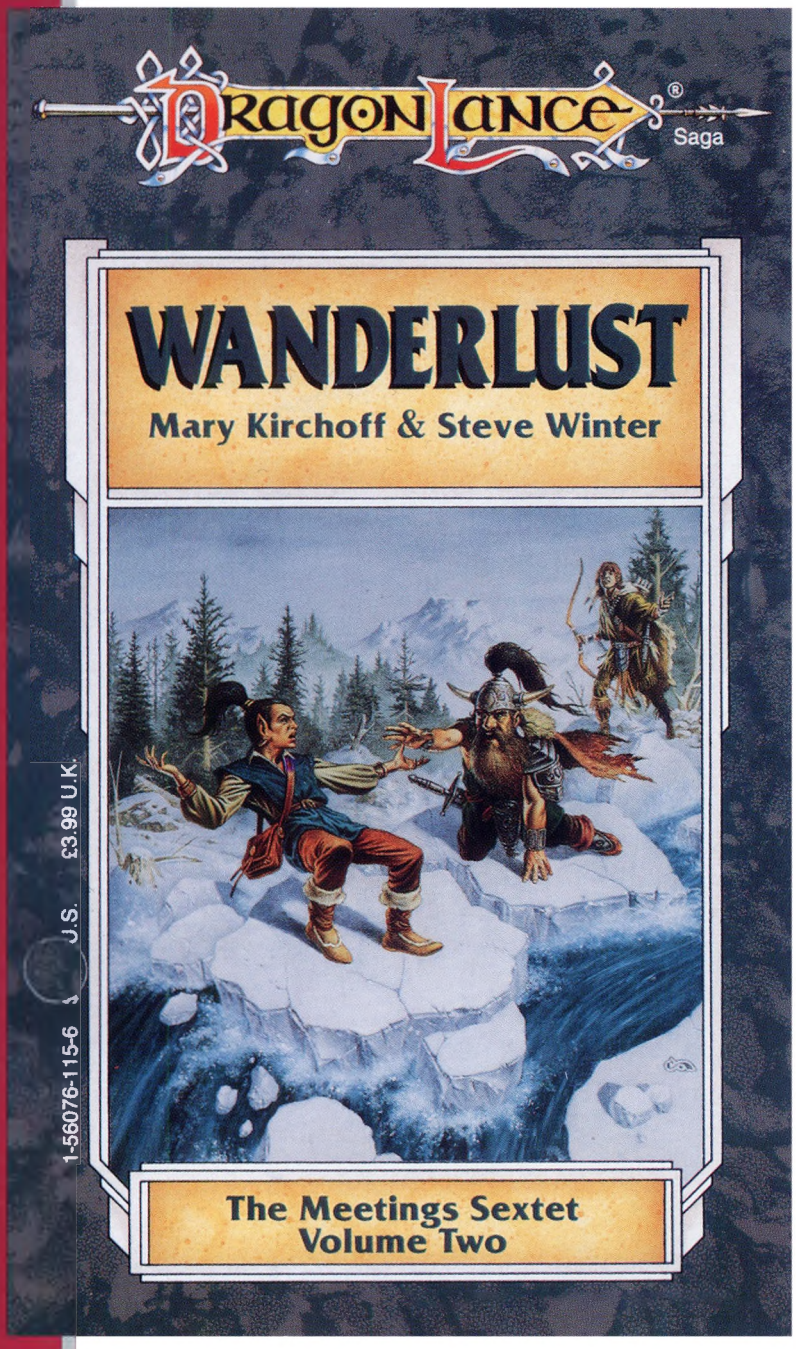

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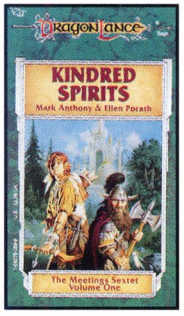

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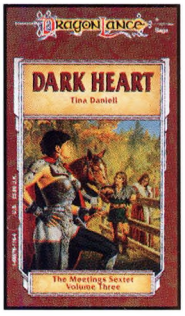

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