

WE, IN SOME STRANGE POWER'S EMPLOY, MOVE ON A RIGOROUS LINE

Samuel R. Delany

—for R. Zelazny

One

Only the dark and her screaming.

First: sparks glint on her feet, and crack and snap, lighting rocks, dirt. Then no screams. She almost falls, whips erect. Silver leggings: Pop-pop-pop. Light laces higher, her arms are waving (trying to tell myself, "But she's dead already—"), and she weaves like a woman of white and silver paper, burning on the housing of the great ribbed cable exposed in the gully we'd torn from the earth.

"Thinking about your promotion?"

“Huh?” I looked up on Scott, who was poking at me with a freckled finger. Freckles, dime-sized and penny-colored, covered face, lips, arms, shoulders, got lost under the gold hair snarling his chest and belly. “What’s it feel like to be a section-devil? I’ve been opting for it two years now.” Freckled fingers snapped. “Pass me up and take you!” He leaned back in his hammock, dug beneath his tool belt to scratch himself.

I shook my head. “No, something else. Something that happened awhile back. Nothing, really.”

Night scoured our windows.

The Gila Monster sped.

Light wiped the panes and slipped away.

Scott suddenly sat up, caught his toes, and frowned. “Sometimes I think I’ll spend the rest of my working life just a silver-suited line-demon, dancing along them damned strings.” He pointed with his chin at the cross-section, sixteen-foot cable chart. “Come thirty-five, when I want to retire—and it’s less than ten years off—what’ll I be able to say? I did my job well?” He made a fist around the hammock edge. “I didn’t do it well enough to make anything out of it.” Hand open and up. “Some big black so-and-so like you comes along and three years later—section-devil!”

“You’re a better demon than I am, Scott.”

“Don’t think I don’t know it, either.” Then he laughed. “No, let me tell you: a good demon doesn’t necessarily make a good devil. The skills are different skills. The talents aren’t the same. Hall, Blacky, you’d think, as your friend, I’d spare you. Say, when do you check out of this cabin? Gotta get used to somebody else’s junk. Will you stay on at the old Monster here?”

“They said something about transferring me to Iguana. What with the red tape, it won’t happen for a couple of weeks. I’ll probably just give Mabel a hand till then. She gave me a room right over the tread motor. I complained about your snoring, and we agreed it would be an improvement.”

That rated a swing; he just nodded.

I thought around for something to say and came up with: “You know I’m due an assistant, and I can choose—”

“Hell!” He flung himself back so I could only see his feet. (Underneath the hammock: one white woolen sock [gray toe], magazine, three wrenches.) “I’m no clerk. You have me running computers and keeping track of your confusion, filing reclamation plans and trying to hunt them out again—and all that for a drop in salary—”

“I wouldn’t drop your salary.”

“I’d go up the wall anyway.”

“Knew that’s what you’d say.”

“Knew you’d make me say it.”

"Well," I said, "Mabel asked me to come around to her office."

"Yeah. Sure." Release, relief. "Clever devil, Mabel. Hey. You'll be screening new applicants for whoever is gonna share my room now you been kicked upstairs. See if you can get a girl in here?"

"If I can." I grinned and stepped outside.

Gila Monster guts?

Three-quarters of a mile of corridors (much less than some luxury ocean liners); two engine rooms that power the adjustable treads that carry us over land and sea; a kitchen, cafeteria, electrical room, navigation offices, office offices, tool repair shop, and cetera. With such in its belly, the Gila Monster crawls through the night (at about a hundred fifty k's cruising speed) sniffing along the great cables (courtesy the Global Power Commission) that net the world, web evening to night, dawn to day, and yesterday to tomorrow.

"Come in, Blacky," Mabel said at my knock.

She brushed back silver hair from her silver collar (the hair is natural) and closed the folder. "Seems we have a stop coming up just over the Canadian border."

"Pick up Scott's new roommate?"

"Power Cadet Susan Suyaki. Seventeen years old. Graduated third in her class last summer."

"Seventeen? Scott should like that."

"Wish she had some experience. The bright ones come out of school too snooty."

"I didn't."

"You still are."

"Oh, well. Scott prefers them with spirit."

"They're flying her in by helicopter to the site of our next job."

"Which line broke?"

"No break. It's a conversion."

I raised an eyebrow. "A rare experience for Miss Suyaki. I've only been through one, during my first couple of months on Salamander. That was a goodly while ago."

Mabel gave me a super-cynical-over-the-left-cheekbone. "You haven't been in the Power Corps a goodly while. You're just brilliant, that's all."

"It was a goodly while for me. Not all of us have had your thirty years experience, ma'am."

"I've always felt experience was vastly overrated as a teacher." She started to clean her nails

with a metal rule. "Otherwise, I would never have recommended you for promotion." Mabel is a fine devil.

"Thankee, thankee." I sat and looked at the ceiling map. "A conversion." Musing. "Salamander covered most of Mongolia. A little village in Tibet had to be connected up to the lines. We put cable through some of the damnedest rock. They were having an epidemic of some fever that gave you oozy blisters, and the medical crew was trying to set itself up at the same time. We worked twenty-four hours a day for three days, running lines, putting in outlets, and hooking up equipment. Three days to pull that primitive enclave of skin huts, caves, and lean-tos into the twenty-first century. Nothing resembling a heater in the whole place, and it was snowing when we got there."

Over joined fingertips Mabel bobbed her chin. "And to think, they'd been doddering along like that for the last three thousand years."

"Probably not much more than two hundred. The village had been established by refugees from the Sino-Japanese War. Still, I get your point."

"They were happy when you left?"

"They were happi-er," I said. "Still, you look at the maps—you trace cables over the world, and it's pretty hard to think there are still a few places that haven't been converted."

"I'm not as dreamy as you. Every couple of years Gila or Iguana stumbles over a little piece of the planet that's managed to fall through the net. They'll probably be turning them up a hundred years from now. People cling to their backwardness."

"Maybe you're—the border of Canada!"

"That is the longest take I've ever seen. Wake up, boy. Here I've been telling everybody how bright you are, recommending you for promotion—"

"Mabel, how can we have a conversion on the border of Canada? You convert villages in upper Anatolia, nameless little islands in the Indian Ocean—Tibet. There's no place you could lay another cable in the Americas. A town converted to Global Power along there?"

Mabel bobbed some more. "I don't like conversions. Always something messy. If everything went by the books, you'd think it would be one of our easiest maneuvers."

"You know me. I never go by the books."

She, musing this time: "True, doll. I still don't like 'em."

"The one I was telling you about in Tibet. We had a bad accident."

Mabel asked what it was with her eyebrows.

"A burning. Middle of the night, when somebody had wandered down into the trough to troubleshoot one of the new connections. She was climbing up on the housing, when the power went on. Some sort of high amperage short. She went up like the proverbial moth."

Mabel stopped bobbing. "Who was she?"

“My wife.”

“Oh.” After a moment she said, “Burnings are bad. Hell of a waste of power, if nothing else. I wondered why you chose to room with Scott when you first came on the Gila Monster rather than Jane, Judy, or—”

“Julia was the young lady out for my tired brown body back then.”

“You and your wife must have come straight out of the academy together. In your first year? Blacky, that’s terrible...”

“We had, that’s right, and it was.”

“I didn’t know.” Mabel looked adequately sincere.

“Don’t tell me you didn’t guess?”

“Don’t joke... well, joke if you want.” Mabel is a fine woman. “A conversion just over the Canadian border.” She shook her head. “Blacky, we’re going to have a problem, you and I.”

“How so, ma’am?”

“Again: you are going to have a problem with me. I am going to have a problem with you.”

“Pray, how, gentle lady?”

“You’re a section-devil now. I’m a section-devil. You’ve been one for just under six hours. I’ve been one for just over sixteen years. But by the books, we are in equal positions of authority.”

“Fair maid,” I said, “thou art off thy everloving nut.”

“You’re the one who doesn’t go by the books. I do. Power of authority divided between two people doesn’t work.”

“If it makes you feel any better, I still consider you boss. You’re the best boss I ever had too. Besides, I like you.”

“Blacky—” she looked up at the skylight where the moon, outside the frame, still lit the tessellations—“there is something going on out there just across the border that I guess I know more about than you. You only know it’s a conversion; and where it is, is odd. Let me warn you: you will want to handle it one way. I will want to handle it another.”

“So we do it your way.”

“Only I’m not so sure my way is best.”

“Mabel—”

“Go, swarthy knight. We meet beyond the Canadian borders to do battle.” She stood up looking very serious.

“If you say so.”

“See you in the morning, Blacky.”

I left the office, wondering at knights and days. Oh well, however, anyway: Scott was snoring, so I read until the rush of darkness outside was drifting gray.

Two

The dawning sky (working top to bottom):

Sable, azure, gules—

—mountains dexter, sinister a hurst of oak, lots of pines, a few maples. The Gila Monster parked itself astride a foamy brook below a waterfall. I went outside on the balcony and got showered as leaves sprinkled the stainless flank of our great striding beast.

“Hello? Hey, hello!”

“Hi.” I waved toward where she was climbing down the—whoops! Into the water to her knee. She squealed, climbed back up the rock, and looked embarrassed.

“Cadet Suyaki?”

“Eh... yes, sir.” She tried to rub her leg dry. Canadian streams at dawn are cold.

I took off my shirt, made a ball, and flung it to her. “Section-devil Jones.” (She caught it.) “Blacky’ll do. We’re pretty informal around here.”

“Oh... thank you.” She lifted her silver legging, removed her boot to dry a very pretty ankle.

I gave the stairway a kick.

Clank-chchchc-thud!

The steps unfolded, and the metal feet stamped into pine needles. I went down to the bank.

“Waiting long?”

She grinned. “Oh, I just got here.”

And beyond the rocks there was a corroborative roar and snapping; a helicopter swung up through the trees.

Cadet Suyaki stood quickly and waved.

Somebody in the cockpit waved back till copper glare wiped him out.

“We saw you getting parked—” She looked down the length of Gila Monster.

I have said, or have I?

Cross an armadillo with a football field. Nurse the offspring on a motherly tank. By puberty: one Gila Monster.

“I’ll be working under you?”

“Myself and Mabel Whyman.”

She looked at me questioningly.

“Section-Devil Whyman—Mabel—is really in charge. I was just promoted from line-demon yesterday.”

“Oh. Congratulations!”

“Hey, Blacky! Is that my new roommate?”

“That,” I pointed at Scott, all freckled and golden, leaning over the rail, “is your pardner. You’ll be rooming together.”

Scott came down the steps, barefoot, denims torn off mid-thigh, tool belt full of calipers, meters, and insulation spools.

“Susan Suyaki,” I announced, “Scott Mackelway.”

She extended her hand. “I’m glad to meet—”

Scott put a big hand on each of little Miss Suyaki’s shoulders. “So am I, honey. So am I.”

“We’ll be working very close together, won’t we?” asked Susan brightly. “I like that!” She squeezed one of his forearms. “Oh, I think this’ll work out very well.”

“Sure it will,” Scott said. “I’m...” Then I saw an open space on his ear pinken. “I sure hope it does.”

“You two demons get over to the chameleon nest!”

Scott, holding Sue’s hand, pointed up to the balcony. “That’s Mabel. Hey, boss! We going any place I gotta put my shoes on?”

“Just scouting. Get going.”

“We keep the chameleon over the port tread.” Scott led Sue down the man-high links of the Monster’s chain drive.

Thought: some twenty-four hours by, if Mabel had yelled, “You two demons...” the two demons would have been Scott and me.

She came, all silver, down the steps.

“You smile before the joust, Britomart?”

“Blacky, I’m turning into a dirty old woman.” At the bottom step, she laid her forefinger on my chest, drew it slowly down my stomach and finally hooked my belt. “You’re beautiful. And I’m not smiling, I’m leering.”

I put my arm around her shoulder, and we walked the pine needles. She put her hands in her silver pockets. Hip on my thigh, shoulder knocking gently on my side, hair over my arm, she pondered the ferns and the oaks, the rocks and the water, the mountains and the flank of our Gila Monster couchant, the blaze of morning between the branches. “You’re a devil. So there are things I can say to you, ostensibly that would be meaningless to the others.” She nodded ahead to where Scott and Sue were just disappearing around the three-meter hub.

“I await thy words most eagerly, Lady.”

Mabel gestured at the Monster. “Blacky, do you know what the Monster, and the lines he prowls, really are?”

“I can tell you don’t want an answer out of the book from your tone of voice, Miss Rules-and-Regulations.”

“They’re symbols of a way of life. Global Power Lines keep how many hundreds of thousands of refrigeration units functioning around the equator to facilitate food-storage; they’ve made the Arctic habitable. Cities like New York and Tokyo have cut population to a third of what they were a century ago. Back then, people used to be afraid they would crowd each other off the planet, would starve from lack of food. Yet the majority of the world was farming less than three percent of the arable land, and living on less than twenty percent of the world’s surface. Global Power Lines meant that man could live any place on dry land he wanted, and a good number of places under the sea. National boundaries used to be an excuse for war; now they’re only cartographical expedients. Riding in the Monster’s belly, it’s ironic that we are further from this way of life we’re helping to maintain than most. But we still benefit.”

“Of course.”

“Have you ever asked yourself exactly how?”

“Education, leisure time,” I suggested, “early and sliding retirements…”

Mabel chuckled. “Oh, much more, Blacky. So much more. Men and women work together; our navigator, Faltaux, is one of the finest poets writing in French today, with an international reputation, and is still the best navigator I’ve ever had. And Julia, who keeps us so well fed and can pilot us quite as competently as I can, and is such a lousy painter, works with you and me and Faltaux and Scott on the same Maintenance Station. Or just the fact that you can move out of Scott’s room one day and little Miss Suyaki can move in the next with an ease that would have amazed your great-great ancestors in Africa as much as mine in Finland. That’s what this steel egg-crate means.”

“Okay,” I said. “I’m moved.”

We came around the hub. Scott was heaving up the second door of the chameleon’s garage and pointing out to Sue where the jack and the graphite can were kept.



“Some people,” Mabel went on as I dropped my arm from her shoulder, “don’t particularly like this way of life. Which is why we are about to attempt a conversion here on the Canadian border.”

“A conversion?” Sue popped up. “Isn’t that when you switch an area or a dwelling to Global—”

At which point Scott swung at Mabel. He caught her upside the head. She yelled and went staggering into the leaves.

I jumped back, and Sue did a thing with her Adam’s apple.

Something went Nnnnnnnnnnnn against the hub, then chattered away through the ferns. Ferns fell.

“Look!” Sue cried.

I was staring at the eight-inch scratch in the Gila Monster’s very hard hide, at about the level where Mabel’s carotid had been a moment back.

But across the water, scrambling up the rocks, was a yellow-headed kid wearing a little less than Scott.

Sue ran through the weeds and picked up the blade. “Were they trying to kill somebody?”

Mabel shrugged. “You’re Cadet Suyaki? We’re going to explore the conversion site. Dear me, that looks vicious.”

“I used to hunt with a bolo,” Sue said warily. “At home. But I’ve never even seen one of these... ?” Two blades were bolted in a twisted cross, all four prongs sharpened.

“My first too. Hope it’s my last.” Mabel looked around the clearing. “Am I ever optimistic. Pleased to meet you, Suyaki. Well, come on. Crank up Nelly. And for Pete’s sake, let’s get in.”

The chameleon, ten feet long, is mostly transparent plastic, which means you can see sea, sunset, or forest right through.

Scott drove with Mabel beside him.

Me and Sue sat in back.

We found the chewed-up asphalt of an old road and crawled right along up the mountain.

“Where are... we going, exactly?” Sue asked.

“Honey,” Mabel said, “I’ll let you know when we get there.” She put the throwing blade in the glove compartment with a grunt. Which does a lot of good with transparent plastic.

Three

Sue leaned against the door. "Oh, look! Look down!"

We'd wound high enough and looped back far enough on the abominable road so that you could gaze down through the breaks; beyond the trees and rocks you could see the Gila Monster. It still looked big.

"Eh... look up," suggested Scott and slowed the chameleon. A good-sized tree had come up by the roots and fallen across the road.

The man standing in front of it was very dirty. The kid behind, peering through the Medusa of roots, was the one who had tried to decapitate Mabel.

"What... are they?" Sue whispered.

"Scott and Sue, you stay right here and keep the door open so we can get in fast. Blacky, we go on up."

The man's hair, under the grease, was brass-colored.

Some time ago his left cheek had been opened up, then sewn so clumsily you could see the cross-stitching. The lobe of his left ear was a rag of flesh. His sleeve-ripped shirt hung buttonless and too short to tuck in, even if he'd had a mind to. A second welt plowed an inch furrow through chest hair, wrecked his right nipple, and disappeared under his collar.

As we came up, Mabel took the lead. I overtook her; she gave me a faint-subtle-nasty and stepped ahead again.

He was a hard guy, but the beginning of a gut was showing over the double bar and chain contraption he used to fasten his studded belt. At first I thought he was wearing mismatched shoes: one knee-high, scuffed, and crack-soled boot. The other foot was bare, a length of black chain around the ankle, two toes, little and middle, gone.

I looked back at his face to see his eyes come up to mine.

Well, I was still sans shirt; back at the chameleon Sue's pants leg was still rolled up. Mabel was the only one of us proofed neat and proper.

He looked at Mabel. He looked at me. He looked at Mabel. Then he bent his head and said, "Rchht-ah-pt, what are you doing up here, huh?" That first word produced a yellow oyster about eight inches north of Mabel's boot toe, six south of his bare one. His head came up, the lower lip glistening and hanging away from long, yellow teeth.

"Good morning." I offered my hand. "We're..." (He looked at it.) "... surveying."

He took his thumb from his torn pocket; we shook. A lot of grease, a lot of callus, it was the hand of a very big man who had bitten his nails since he was a very small boy.

“Yeah? What are you surveying?”

He wore a marvelous ring.

“We’re from Global Power Commission.”

Take a raw, irregular nugget of gold—

“Figured. I saw your machine down the road.”

—a nugget three times the size either taste or expediency might allow a ring—

“We’ve had reports that the area is underpowered for the number of people living here.”

—punch a finger-sized hole, so that most of the irregularities are on one side—

“Them bastards down in Hainesville probably registered a complaint. Well, we don’t live in Hainesville. Don’t see why it should bother them.”

—off center in the golden crater place an opal, big as his—as my thumbnail—

“We have to check it out. Inadequate power doesn’t do anybody any good.”

—put small diamonds in the tips of the three prongs that curved to cage the opal—

“You think so?”

—and in the ledges and folds of bright metal capping his enlarged knuckle, bits of spodumene, pyrope, and spinel, all abstract, all magnificent.

“Look, mister,” I said, “the Hainesville report says there are over two dozen people living on this mountain. The power commission doesn’t register a single outlet.”

He slipped his hands into his back pockets. “Don’t believe I have seen any, now you mention it.”

Mabel said, “The law governs how much power and how many outlets must be available and accessible to each person. We’ll be laying lines up here this afternoon and tomorrow morning. We’re not here to make trouble. We don’t want to find any.”

“What makes you think you might?”

“Well, your friend over there already tried to cut my head off.”

He frowned, glanced back through the roots. Suddenly he leaned back over the trunk and took a huge swipe. “Get out of here, Pitt!”

The kid squeaked. The face flashed in the roots (lank hair, a spray of acne across flat cheek and sharp chin), and jangling at her hip was a hank of throwing blades. She disappeared into the woods.

As the man turned, I saw, tattooed on the bowl of his shoulder, a winged dragon, coiled about and gnawing at a swastika.

Mabel ignored the whole thing:

“We’ll be finished down the mountain this morning and will start bringing the lines up here this afternoon.”

He gave half a nod—lowered his head and didn’t bring it up—and that was when it dawned on me we were doing this thing wrong.

“We do want to do this easily,” I said. “We’re not here to make problems for you.”

His hands crawled from his knees back to his waist.

“You can help us by letting people know that. If anyone has any questions about what we’re doing, or doesn’t understand something, they can come and ask for me. I’m Section-Devil Jones. Just ask for Blacky down at the Gila Monster.”

“My name’s Roger...” followed by something Polish and unpronounceable that began with Z and ended in Y. “If you have problems, you can come to me. Only I ain’t saying I can do anything.”

Good exit line. But Roger stayed where he was. And Mabel beside me was projecting stark disapproval.

“Where do most of the folks around here live?” I asked, to break the silence.

He nodded up. “On High Haven.”

“Is there somebody in charge, a mayor or something like that I could talk to?”

Roger looked at me like he was deciding where I’d break easiest if he hit. “That’s why I’m down here talking to you.”

“You?” I didn’t ask. What I did say was: “Then perhaps we could go up and see the community. I’d like to see how many people are up there, perhaps suggest some equipment, determine where things have to be done.”

“You want to visit on High?”

“If we might.”

He made a fist and scratched his neck with the prongs of his ring. “All right.” He gestured back toward the chameleon. “You can’t get that any further up the road.”

“Will you take us, then?”

He thought awhile. “Sure.” Then he let a grin open over the yellow cage of teeth. “Get you back down too.” Small victory.

“Just a moment,” Mabel said, “while we go back and tell the driver.”

We strolled to the chameleon.

“You don’t sound very happy with my attempt to make peace.”

“Have I said a word?”

“Just what I mean. Can you imagine how these people live, Mabel, if Roger there is the head of the Chamber of Commerce?”

“I can imagine.”

“He looks as bad as any of those villagers in Tibet. Did you see the little girl? This, in the middle of the twenty-first century!”

“... just over the Canadian border. Scott,” Mabel said, “take me and Sue back down to the Monster. If you are not back by noon, Blacky, we will come looking for you.”

“Huh? You mean you’re not going with me? Look,” I told Scott’s puzzled frown, “don’t worry, I’ll be back. Sue, can I have my shirt?”

“Oh, I’m terribly sorry! Here you are. It may be damp—”

“Mabel, if we did go up there together—”

“Blacky, running this operation with two devils admittedly presents problems. Running it with none at all is something else entirely. You’re a big devil now. You know what you’re doing. I even know. I just think you’re crazy.”

“Ma-bel—”

“On up there with you! And sow as much goodwill as you can. If it avoids one tenth the problems I know we’re going to have in the next twelve hours, I will be eternally grateful.”

Then Mabel, looking determined, and Sue and Scott, looking bewildered, climbed into the chameleon.

“Oh.” She leaned out the door. “Give this back to them.” She handed me the throwing blade. “See you by noon.” The chameleon swayed off down the road. I put my shirt on, stuck the blade in my belt, and walked back to Roger.

He glanced at it, and we both thought nasty-nasty-evilness at one another. “Come on.” He climbed over the tree. I climbed over after.

Parked behind the trunk was an old twin-turbo pteracycle. Roger lifted it by one black and chrome bat-form wing. The chrome was slightly flaked. With one hand he grasped the steering shaft and twisted the choke ring gently. The other hand passed down the wing with the indifference we use to mask the grosser passions. “Hop on my broomstick and I’ll take you up to where the angels make their Haven.” He grinned.

And I understood many things.

So:

## Small Essay

on a phenomenon current some fifty years back when the date had three zeroes. (Same time as the first cables were being laid and demons were beginning to sniff about the world in silver armor, doctoring breaks, repairing relays, replacing worn housings. Make the fancy sociological connections, please.) That's when pteracycles first became popular as a means of short-(and sometimes not so short-)range transportation. Then they were suddenly taken up by a particularly odd set of asocials. Calling themselves individualists, they moved in veritable flocks; dissatisfied with society, they wracked the ages for symbols from the most destructive epochs: skull and bones, fasces, swastika, and guillotine. They were accused of the most malicious and depraved acts, sometimes with cause, sometimes without. They took the generic name of angels (Night's Angels, Red Angels, Hell's Angels, Bloody Angels, one of these lifted from a similar cult popular another half century before. But then most of their mythic accouterments were borrowed). The common sociological explanation: they were a reaction to population decentralization, the last elements of violence in a neutral world. Psychological: well, after all, what does a pteracycle look like?—two round cam-turbines on which you sit between the wings, then this six-foot metal shaft sprouting up between your legs that you steer with (hence the sobriquet "broomstick") and nothing else but goggles between you and the sky. You figure it. Concluding remarks: angels were a product of the turn of the century. But nobody's heard anything serious about them for thirty years. They went out with neon buttons, the common cold, and transparent vinyl jockey shorts. Oh, the teens of siècle twenty-one saw some dillies! The End.

I climbed on the back seat. Roger got on the front, toed one of the buttons on the stirrup (for any fancy flying you have to do some pretty fast button-pushing; ergo, the bare foot), twisted the throttle ring, and lots of leaves shot up around my legs. The cycle skidded up the road, bounced twice on cracks, then swerved over the edge. We dropped ten feet before we caught the draft and began the long arc out and up. Roger flew without goggles.

The wind over his shoulder carried a smell I first thought was the machine. Imagine a still that hasn't bathed for three months. He flew very well.

"How many people are there in High Haven?" I called.

"What?"

"I said, how many people are there in—"

"About twenty-seven!"

We curved away from the mountain, curved back.

The Gila Monster flashed below, was gone behind rocks. The mountain turned, opened a rocky gash.

At the back of the gorge, vaulting the stream that plummeted the mountain's groin, someone had erected a mansion. It was a dated concrete and glass monstrosity from the late twentieth century (pre-power lines). Four terraced stories were cantilevered into the rock. Much of the glass was broken. Places that had once been garden had gone wild with vine

and brush. A spectacular metal stairway wound from the artificial pool by the end of the roadway that was probably the same one we'd ridden with the chameleon, from porch to porch, rust-blotched like a snake's back.

The house still had much stolid grandeur. Racked against a brick balustrade were maybe twenty pteracycles (what better launch than the concrete overhang, railing torn away). One cycle was off the rack. A guy was on his knees before it, the motor in pieces around him. A second, fists on hips, was giving advice.

A third guy shielded his eyes to watch us. A couple of others stopped by the edge of the pool. One was the girl, Pitt, who had been down with Roger before.

"High Haven?"

"What?" Pteracycles are loud.

"Is that High Haven?"

"Yeah." We glided between the rocks, skimmed foaming boulders, rose toward glass and concrete. Cement rasped beneath the runners, and we jounced to a stop.

A couple of guys stepped from a broken window. A couple more came up the steps. Someone looking from the upper porch disappeared, to return a moment later with five others, another girl among them.

There was a lot of dirt, a lot of hair, a number of earrings. (I counted four more torn ears; I'd avoid fights if I were going to wear my jewelry that permanent). A kid with much red hair—couldn't quite make a beard yet—straddled the cycle rack. He pushed back the flap of his leather jacket to scratch his bare belly with black nails. The dragon on his chest beat its wings about the twisted cross.

I got off the cycle left, Roger right.

Someone said: "Who's that?"

A few of the guys glanced over their shoulders, then stepped aside so we could see.

She stood by the dawn-splashed hem of glass at the side of the broken wall-window.

"He's from the Global Power Commission." Roger shoved a thumb at me. "They're parked down the mountain."

"You can tell him to go back to hell where he came from."

She wasn't young. She was beautiful though.

"We don't need anything he's selling."

The others mumbled, shuffled.

"Shut it," Roger said. "He's not selling anything."

I stood there feeling uncomfortably silver, but wondering that I'd managed to win over

Roger.

“That’s Fidessa,” he said.

She stepped through the window.

Wide, high facial bones, a dark mouth and darker eyes. I want to describe her hair as amber, but it was an amber so dark only direct sunlight caught its reds. The morning fell full on it; it spread her shoulders. Her hands were floured, and she smeared white on her hips as she came toward me.

“Fidessa?” All right. I’m not opposed to reality imitating art if it doesn’t get in the way.

“He’s okay,” Roger said in response to her look.

“Yeah?”

“Yeah. Get out of the way.” He shoved her. She nearly collided with one of the men, who just stepped out of the way in time. She still gave the poor guy a withering noli me tangere stare. Kept her stuff, too.

“You want to see the place?” Roger said and started in. I followed.

Someone who looked like he was used to it picked up Roger’s cycle and walked it to the rack.

Fidessa came up beside us as we stepped into the house.

“How long has this bunch been here?” I asked.

“There’s been angels on High for forty years. They come; they go. Most of this bunch has been here all summer.”

We crossed a room where vandals, time, and fire had left ravage marks. The backs of the rooms had been cut into the rock. One wall, wood-paneled, had become a palimpsest of scratched names and obscenities: old motors and motor parts, a pile of firewood, rags, and chains.

“We don’t want power up here,” Fidessa said. “We don’t need it.” Her voice was belligerent and intense.

“How do you survive?”

“We hunt,” Roger said as the three of us turned down a stone stairwell. The walls at the bottom flickered. “There’s Hainesville about ten miles from here. Some of us go over there and work when we have to.”

“Work it over a little too?” (Roger’s mouth tightened.) “When you have to?”

“When we have to.”

I could smell meat cooking. And bread.



I glanced at Fidessa's powdered hips. They rocked with her walking: I didn't look away.

"Look." I stopped three steps from the doorway. "About the power installation here." Light over my uniform deviled the bottom of my vision.

Roger and Fidessa looked.

"You've got over two dozen people here, and you say there have been people here for forty years? How do you cook? What do you do for heat in winter? Suppose you have medical emergencies? Forget the law. It's made for you; not us."

"Go to hell," Fidessa said and started to turn away. Roger pulled her back by the shoulder.

"I don't care how you live up here," I said because at least Roger was listening. "But you've got winter sitting on your doorstep. You use liquid fuel for your broomsticks. You could have them converted to battery and run them off rechargeable cells for a third of the cost."

"Storage cells still give you about a hundred and fifty miles less than a full liquid tank."

Fidessa looked disgusted and started downstairs again. I think Roger was losing patience because he turned after her. I followed again.

The lower room was filled with fire.

Chains and pulley apparatus hung from the ceiling. Two furnaces were going. Two pit fires had been dug into the floor. The ceiling was licked across with inky tongues. Hot air brushed back and forth across my face; the third brush left it sweaty.

I looked for food.

"This is our forge." Roger picked up a small sledge and rattled it against a sheet of corrugated iron leaning on the wall. "Danny, come out here!"

Barefoot, soot-smear'd, the smears varnished with sweat: bellows and hammers had pulled the muscles taut, chiseled and defined them, so that each sat on his frame apart. Haircut and bath admitted, he would have been a fine-looking kid—twenty, twenty-five? He came forward knuckling his left eye. The right was that strange blue-gray that always seems to be exploding when it turns up (so rarely) in swarthy types like him.

"Hey there! What you doing?" Roger grimaced at me. "He's nearly deaf."

Danny dropped his fist from his face and motioned us into the back.

And I caught my breath.

What he'd been rubbing wasn't an eye at all. Scarred, crusted, then the crust broken and drooling; below his left eyebrow was only a leaking sore.

We followed Danny between the fires and anvils to a worktable at the back. Piles of throwing blades (I touched the one in my belt) were at varied stages of completion. On the pitted boards among small hammers, punches, and knives, were some lumps of gold, a small pile of gems, and three ingots of silver. About the jeweler's anvil lay earrings, and a buckle with none of the gems set.

"This is what you're working on now?" Roger picked up the buckle in greasy fingers already weighted with gold.

I bent to see, then pointed from the buckle to Roger's ring, and looked curious. (Why are we always quiet or shouting before the deaf?) Roger nodded.

"Danny does a lot of stuff for us. He's a good machinist too. We're all pretty good turbo mechanics, but Danny here can do real fine stuff. Sometimes we fly him over to Hainesville, and he works there."

"Another source of income?"

"Right."

Just then Pitt came between the flames. She held half a loaf of bread. "Hey, Danny!" in a voice for the deaf, "I brought you some—" saw us and stopped.

Danny looked up, grinned, and circled the girl's shoulder with one arm, took the bread in the other hand, and bit.

His smile reflected off Pitt's.

The elastic fear loosened on her face as she watched the one-eyed smith chewing crust. She was very close to pretty then.

I was glad of that.

Danny turned back to the bench, Pitt's shoulder still tucked under his arm. He fingered the rings, found a small one for her, and she pulled forward with, "Oh..." and the gold flickered in her palm. The smile moved about her face like flame. (The throwing blades clinked on her hip.) Silent Danny had the rapt look of somebody whose mind was bouncing off the delight he could give others.

Fidessa said: "Have they got all of the first batch out of the ovens?" She looked at the bread and actually snarled. Then she sucked her teeth, turned, and marched away.

"Say," I asked Pitt, "do you like it up here?"

She dropped the ring, looked at me; then all the little lines of fear snapped back.

I guess Danny hadn't heard me, but he registered Pitt's discomfort. As he looked between us, his expression moved toward bewildered anger.

"Come on." Roger surprised me with a cuff on the shoulder. "Leave the kids alone. Get out of here." I was going to object to being pushed, but I guess Roger just pushed people. We left.

"Hey," Roger said, watching his feet as he walked, "I want to explain something to you." We left the fires. "We don't want any power up here."

"That has come across." I tried to sound as sincere as he did. "But there is the law." Sincerity is my favorite form of belligerence.

Roger stopped in front of the window (unbroken here), put his hands in his back pockets, and watched the stream spit down the gorge.

It was, I realized, the same stream the Gila Monster was parked across a mile below.

"You know I'm new at this job, Blacky," he said after a while. "I've just been archangel a couple of weeks. The only reason I took over the show is because I had some ideas on how to do it better than the guy before me. One of my ideas was to run it with as little trouble as possible."

"Who was running it before?"

"Sam was archangel before I was, and Fidessa was head cherub. They ran the business up here, and they ran it hard."

"Sam?"

"Take a whole lot of mean and pour it into a hide about three times as ugly as mine: Sam. He put out Danny's eye. When we get hold of a couple of cases of liquor, we have some pretty wild times up here. Sam came down to the forge to fool around. He heated up one end of a pipe and started swinging it at people. He liked to see them jump and holler. That's the kind of mean he was. Danny doesn't like people fooling around with his tools and things anyway. Sam got after Pitt, and Danny rushed him. So Sam stuck the hot pipe into Danny's head." Roger flexed his thumbs. "When I saw that, I realized I was going to have to do something. We rumbled about two weeks ago." He laughed and dropped his hands. "There was a battle in Haven that day!"

"What happened?"

He looked at the water. "You know the top porch of Haven? I threw him off the top porch onto the second. Then I came down and hurled him headlong off onto the bottom one." He pointed out the window. "Then I came down and threw him into the river. He limped around until I finally told the guys to take a couple of flaming torches and run him down the rocks where I couldn't see him no more." Behind his back now he twisted his ring. "I can't see him. Maybe he made it to hell... or Hainesville."

"Did... eh, Fidessa go along with the promotion?"

"Yeah." He brought his hands before him. Light struck and struck in the irregularities of metal. "I don't think I would have tried for the job if she hadn't. She's a lot of woman."

"Kill the king and take the queen."

"I took Fidessa first. Then I had to... kill the king. That's the way things go in Haven."

"Roger?"

He didn't look at me.

"Look, you've got a kid back there at the anvil who needs a doctor. You say he's a good part of your bread and butter. And you let him walk around with a face like that? What are you trying to do?"

“Sam used to say we were trying to live long enough to show the bastards how mean we could be. I say we’re just trying to live.”

“Suppose Danny’s eye infection decides to spread? I’m not casting moral aspersions just to gum up the works. I’m asking if you’re even doing what you want to.” (He played with his ring.) “So you’ve avenged Danny; you won the fair damsel. What about that infection—”

Roger turned on me. His scar twisted on his cheek, and lines of anger webbed his forehead. “You really think we didn’t try to get him to a doctor? We took him to Hainesville, then we took him to Kingston, then back to Hainesville and finally out to Edgeware. We carried that poor screaming half-wit all over the night.” He pointed back among the fires. “Danny grew up in an institute, and you get him anywhere near a city when he’s scared, and he’ll try to run away. We couldn’t get him in to a doctor.”

“He didn’t run away from here when his eye was burned.”

“He lives here. He’s got a place to do the few things he can do well. He’s got a woman. He’s got food and people to take care of him. The business with Sam, I don’t even think he understood what happened. When you’re walking through a forest and a tree falls on you and breaks your leg, you don’t run away from the forest. Danny didn’t understand that he was more important in Haven than big Sam with all his orders and bluster and beat-you-to-a-pulp if you look at him wrong: that’s why Sam had to hurt him. But you try to explain that to Danny.” He gestured at the fire. “I understood though.” As he gestured, his eye caught on the points and blades of the ring. Again he stopped to twist it. “Danny made this for Sam. I took it off him on the bottom porch.”

“I still want to know what’s going to happen to Danny.”

Roger frowned. “When we couldn’t get him into a doctor’s office in Edgeware, we finally went into town, woke up the doctor there at two in the morning, made him come outside the town and look at him there. The doc gave him a couple of shots of antibiotics and some salve to put on it, and Pitt makes sure he puts it on every day too. The doc said not to bandage it because it heals better in the air. We’re bringing him back to check it next week. What the hell do you think we are?” He didn’t sound like he wanted an answer. “You said you wanted to look around. Look. When you’re finished, I’ll take you back down, and you tell them we don’t want no power lines up here!” He shook his jeweled finger at me with the last six words.

I walked around Haven awhile (pondering as I climbed the flickering stair that even the angels in Haven have their own spot of hell), trying to pretend I was enjoying the sun and the breeze, looking over the shoulders of the guys working on their cycles. People stopped talking when I passed. Whenever I turned, somebody looked away. Whenever I looked at one of the upper porches, somebody moved away.

I had been walking twenty long minutes when I finally came into a room to find Fidessa, smiling.

“Hungry?”

She held an apple in one hand and in the other half a loaf of that brown bread, steaming.

“Yeah.” I came and sat beside her on the split-log bench.

“Honey?” in a can rusted around the edge with a kitchen knife stuck in it.

“Thanks.” I spread some on the bread, and it went running and melting into all those little air bubbles like something in Danny’s jewelry furnace. And I hadn’t had breakfast. The apple was so crisp and cold it hurt my teeth. And the bread was warm.

“You’re being very nice.”

“It’s too much of a waste of time the other way. You’ve come up here to look around. All right. What have you seen?”

“Fidessa,” I said, after a silent while in which I tried to fit her smile with her last direct communication with me (“Go to hell,” it was?) and couldn’t. “I am not dense. I do not disapprove of you people coming up here to live away from the rest of the world. The chains and leather bit is not exactly my thing, but I haven’t seen anybody here under sixteen, so you’re all old enough to vote: in my book that means run your own lives. I could even say this way of life opens pathways to the more mythic and elemental hooey of mankind. I have heard Roger, and I have been impressed, yea, even moved, by how closely his sense of responsibility resembles my own. I too am new at my job. I still don’t understand this furor over half a dozen power outlets. We come peacefully; we’ll be out in a couple of hours. Leave us the key, go make a lot of noise over some quiet hamlet, and shake up the locals. We’ll lock up when we go and stick it under the door mat. You won’t even know we’ve been here.”

“Listen, line-demon—”

An eighty-seven-year-old granny of mine, who had taken part in the Detroit race riots in nineteen sixty-nine, must have used that same tone to a bright-eyed civil rights worker in the middle of the gunfire who, three years later, became my grandfather: “Listen, white-boy...” Now I understood what granny had been trying to get across with her anecdote.

“—you don’t know what’s going on up here. You’ve wandered around for half an hour, and nobody but me and Roger have said a thing to you. What is it you think you understand?”

“Please, not demon. Devil.”

“All you’ve seen is a cross-section of a process. Do you have any idea what was here five, or fifteen, years ago? Do you know what will be here five years from now? When I came here for the first time, almost ten years back—”

“You and Sam?”

Four thoughts passed behind her face, none of which she articulated.

“When Sam and me first got here, there were as many as a hundred and fifty angels at a time roosting here. Now there’s twenty-one.”

“Roger said twenty-seven.”

“Six left after Sam and Roger rumbled. Roger thinks they’re going to come back. Yoggy might. But not the others.”

“And in five years?”

She shook her head. “Don’t you understand? You don’t have to kill us off. We’re dying.”

“We’re not trying to kill you.”

“You are.”

“When I get down from here, I’m going to do quite a bit of proselytizing. Devil often speak with”—I took another bite of bread—“honeyed tongue. Might as well use it on Mabel.” I brushed crumbs from my shining lap.

She shook her head, smiling sadly. “No.” I wish women wouldn’t smile sadly at me. “You are kind, handsome, perhaps even good.” They always bring that up too. “And you are out to kill us.”

I made frustrated noises.

She held up the apple.

I bit; she laughed.

She stopped laughing.

I looked up.

There in the doorway Roger looked a mite puzzled.

I stood. “You want to run me back down the mountain?” I asked with brusque ingenuousness. “I can’t promise you anything. But I’m going to see if I can’t get Mabel to sort of forget this job and take her silver-plated juggernaut somewhere else.”

“You just do... this thing,” Roger said. “Come on.”

While Roger was cutting his pteracycle out from the herd, I glanced over the edge.

At the pool, Pitt had coaxed Danny in over his knees. It couldn’t have been sixty-five degrees out. But they were splashing and laughing like mud puppies from, oh, some warmer clime.

Four

A Gila Monster rampant?

Watch:

Six hydraulic lifts with cylinders thick as oil drums adjust the suspension up another five feet

to allow room for blade work. From the “head” the “plow,” slightly larger than the skull of a Triceratops, chuckles down into the dirt, digs down into the dirt. What chuckled before, roars. Plates on the side slide back.

Then Mabel, with most of her office, emerges on a telescoping lift to peer over the demons’ shoulders with telephoto television.

The silver crew itself scatters across the pine needles like polished bearings. The monster hunkers backward, dragging the plow (angled and positioned by one of the finest contemporary poets of the French language): a trough two dozen feet wide and deep is opened upon the land. Two mandibles extend now, with six-foot wire brushes that rattle around down there, clearing off the top of the ribbed housing of a sixteen-foot cable. Two demons (Ronny and Ann) guide the brushes, staking worn ribs, metering for shorts in the higher frequency levels. When the silver worm has been bared a hundred feet, side cabinets open, and from over the port treads the crane swings out magnetic grapples.

One of the straightest roads in the world runs from Leningrad to Moscow. The particular czar involved, when asked for his suggestion as to just where the road should run, surprised architects and chancellors by taking a rule and scribing a single line between the cities. “There,” he said, or its Russian equivalent. What with Russia being what it was in the mid-eighteenth century, there the road was built.

Except in some of the deeper Pacific trenches and certain annoying Himalayan passes, the major cables and most of the minor ones were laid out much the same way. The only time a cable ever bends sharp enough to see is when a joint is put in. We were putting in a joint.

Inside, demons (Julia, Bill, Frank, Dimitri) are readying the clip, a U of cable fifteen feet from bend to end. On those ends are very complicated couplings. They check those couplings very carefully, because the clip carries all that juice around the gap while the joint is being inserted.

The cranes start to squeal as, up in her tower, Mabel presses the proper button. The clip rises from the monster’s guts, swings over the gleaming rib with Scott hanging onto the rope and riding the clip like some infernal surfer.

Frank and Dimitri come barreling from between the tread rollers to join Sue outside, so that the half-circle clips slip over the cable right on the chalk mark. Then Scott slides down to dance on the line with a ratchet, Sue with another. On each end of the clip they drive down the contacts that sink to various depths in the cable.

Frank: “She uses that thing pretty well.”

Dimitri: “Maybe they’re teaching them something in the academy after all these years?”

Frank: “She’s just showing off because she’s new—hey, Sue? Do you think she’d go after a neck tourniquet if we sent her?”

The eight-foot prong goes down to center core. Sixty thousand volts there. The seven-foot six-inch goes to the stepper ground. That’s a return for a three-wire high voltage line that boosts you up from the central core to well over three hundred thousand volts. Between those two, you can run all the utilities for a city of a couple or six million. Next prong takes you down to general high-frequency utility power. Then low-frequency same. There’s a layer of communications circuits next that lets you plug into a worldwide computer system: I mean

if you ever need a worldwide computer. Then the local antennae for radio and TV broadcasts. Then all the check circuits to make sure that all the inner circuits are functioning. Then smaller antennae that broadcast directly to Gila Monster and sibling the findings of the check circuits. And so forth. And so on. For sixteen feet.

Scott's ratchet clicks on the bolt of the final prong (he let Sue beat him—he will say—by one connection), and somebody waves up at Mabel, who has discovered they're a minute and a half behind schedule and worries about these things.

Another crane is lowering the double blade. Teeth ratch, and sparks whiten their uniforms. Demons squint and move back.

Dimitri and Scott are already rolling the connecting disk on the sledge to the rim of the trough ("Hey, Sue! Watch it, honey. This thing only weighs about three hundred pounds!")

("I bet she don't make a hundred and ten.")

A moment later the blade pulls away, and the section of cable is lifted and tracked down the monster, and the whole business slips into the used-blade compartment.

The joint, which has the connections to take taps from the major cable so we can string the lines of power to Haven itself, is rolled and jimmied into place. Ratchets again. This time the whole crew screws the lugs to the housing.

And Mabel sighs and wipes her pale, moist brow, having gotten through the operation without a major blackout anywhere in the civilized world—nothing shorted, casualties nil, injuries same. All that is left is for the U to be removed so that things start flowing again. And there's hardly anything that can go wrong now.

Roger got me back just as they were removing the U. I came jogging down the rocks, waved to people, bopped on up the stairs, and played through the arteries of the beast. I came out on the monster's back, shielding my eyes against the noon.

The shadow of Mabel's office swung over me. I started up the ladder on the side of the lift, and moments later poked my head through the trapdoor.

"Hey, Mabel! Guess what's up on High Haven."

I don't think she was expecting me. She jumped a little. "What?"

"A covey of pteracycle angels, straight from the turn of the century. Tattoos, earrings, leather jackets and all—actually I don't think most of them can afford jackets. They're pretty scroungy."

Mabel frowned. "That's nice."

I hoisted to sitting position. "They're not really bad sorts. Eccentric, yes. I know you just got through connecting things up. But what say we roll up all our extension cords and go someplace else?"

"You are out of your mind." Her frown deepened.



“Naw. Look, they’re just trying to do their thing. Let’s get out of here.”

“Nope.”

“They look on this whole business as an attempt to wipe them—why not?”

“Because I want to wipe them out.”

“Huh? Now don’t tell me you were buzzed by angels when you were a little girl and you’ve carried feud fodder ever since.”

“Told you we were going to argue, Blacky,” She turned around in her chair. “The last time I had a conversion, it was a vegetarian cult that had taken refuge in the Rockies. Ate meat only once a year on the eve of the autumnal equinox. I will never forget the look on that kid’s face. The first arrow pinned his shirt to the trunk of an oak—”

“Happy Halloween, St. Sebastian. Ehhh! But these aren’t cannibals,” I said, “Mabel.”

“The conversion before that was a group of utopian socialists who had set up camp in the Swiss Alps. I don’t think I could ever trace a killing directly to them—I’m sorry, I’m not counting the three of my men who got it when the whole business broke out into open fighting. But they made the vegetarians look healthy: at least they got it out of their systems. The one before that—”

“Mabel—”

“I assume you’re interrupting me because you’ve gotten my point.”

“You were talking about ways of life before. Hasn’t it occurred to you that there is more than one way of life possible?”

“That is too asinine for me even to bother answering. Get up off the floor.”

I got up.

“If we are going to begin our argument with obvious banalities, consider these: hard work does not hurt the human machine. That’s what it is made for. But to work hard simply to remain undernourished, or to have to work harder than you’re able so that someone else can live well while you starve, or to have no work at all and have to watch yourself and others starve—this is disastrous to the human machine. Subject any statistically meaningful sample of people to these situations, and after a couple of generations you will have wars, civil and sovereign, along with all the neuroses that such a Weltanschauung produces.”

“You get an A for obviousness.”

“The world being the interrelated mesh that it is, two hundred million people starving in Asia had an incalculable effect on the psychology and sociology of the two hundred million overfed, overleisured North Americans during the time of our grandparents.”

“B for banality.”

“Conclusion—”

“For which you automatically get a C.”

“—there has not been a war in forty years. There were only six murders in New York City last year. Nine in Tokyo. The world has a ninety-seven percent literacy rate. Eighty-four percent of the world population is at least bilingual. Of all the political and technological machinations that have taken place in the last century to cause this, Global Power Lines were probably the biggest single factor. Because suddenly people did not have to work to starve. That problem was alleviated, and the present situation has come about in the time it takes a child to become a grandparent. The generation alive when Global Power began was given the time to raise an interesting bunch of neurotics for a second generation, and they had the intelligence and detachment to raise their bunch healthy enough to produce us.”

“We’ve gone about as far as we can go?”

“Don’t be snide. My point is simply that in a world where millions were being murdered by wars and hundreds of thousands by less efficient means, there was perhaps some justification for saying about any given injustice, ‘What can I do?’ But that’s not this world. Perhaps we know too much about our grandparents’ world so that we expect things to be like that. But when the statistics are what they are today, one boy shot full of arrows to a tree is a very different matter.”

“What I saw up there—”

“—bespoke violence, brutality, unwarranted cruelty from one person to another, and if not murder, the potential for murder at every turn. Am I right?”

“But it’s a life they’ve chosen! They have their own sense of honor and responsibility. You wouldn’t go see, Mabel. I did. It’s not going to harm—”

“Look, Teak-head! Somebody tried to kill me this morning with that thing you’ve still got in your belt!”

“Mabel—!” which exclamation had nothing to do with our argument.

She snatched up the microphone, flicked the button. “Scott, what the hell are you doing!” Her voice, magnified by the loudspeakers, rolled over the plates and dropped among demons.

What Scott Had Done:

He’d climbed on the U to ride it back up into the monster. With most of the prongs ratcheted out, he had taken a connector line (probably saying to Sue first, “Hey, I bet you never seen this before!”) and tapped the high voltage and stuck it against the metal housing. There’s only a fraction of an ampere there, so it wasn’t likely to hurt anything. The high voltage effect in the housing causes a brush discharge the length of the exposed cable. Very impressive. Three-foot sparks crackling all over, and Scott grinning, and all his hair standing up on end.

A hedge of platinum—

A river of diamonds—

A jeweled snake—

What is dangerous about it and why Mabel was upset is (One) if something does go wrong with that much voltage, it is going to be more than serious. (Two) The U clip's connected to the (Bow!) gig-crane; the gig-crane's connected to the (Poo!) crane-house; the crane-house is anchored to the (Bip!) main chassis itself, and hence the possibility of all sorts of damage.

"Goddamn it, Scott—"

The least dangerous thing that could have gone wrong would have been a random buildup of energies right where Scott had stuck the wire against the housing. Which I guess is what happened because he kept reaching for it and jerking his hand away, like he was being tickled.

Mabel got at the controls and pulled the arm of the rheostat slowly down. She has a blanket ban on all current, and could walk it down to nothing. (All the voltage in the world won't do a thing if there're no amps behind it.) "They know damned well I don't like to waste power!" she snapped. "All right, you silver-plated idiots," she rumbled about the mountain, "get inside. That's enough for today."

She was mad. I didn't pursue the conversation.

Born out of time, I walked eye-deep in Gila droppings. Then I sat for a while. Then I paced some more. I was supposed to be filling out forms in the navigation office, but most of the time I was wondering if I wouldn't be happier shucking silver for denim to go steel wool the clouds. Why grub about the world with dirty demons when I could be brandishing my resentments against the night winds, beating my broomstick (as it were) across the evening; justifying the ways of angels, if not gods, to... only all my resentments were at Mabel.

A break on the balcony from figure flicking.

And leaning on the rail, this, over-looked and -heard:

Sue and Pitt stood together on the rim of the trough.

"Well, I'll tell you," Sue was saying, "I like working here. Two years in the Academy after high school and you learn all about Power Engineering and stuff. It's nice 'cause you do a lot of traveling," Sue went on, rather like the introduction to the Academy Course of Study brochure. Well, it's a good introduction. "By the way," she finished, and by the way she finished, I knew she'd been wondering awhile, "what happened to your friend's eye?"

Pitt hoofed at the dirt. "Aw, he got in a fight and got it hurt real bad."

"Yeah," Sue said. "That's sort of obvious." The two girls looked off into the woods. "He could really come out here. Nobody's going to bother him."

"He's shy," Pitt said. "And he doesn't hear good."

"It's all right if he wants to stay back there."

"It would be nice to travel around in a healer monster," Pitt said. "I'd like that."

“You want to go inside—?”

“Oh, no! Hey, I gotta get back up on High Haven.” And Pitt (maybe she’d seen me on the balcony) turned and ran into the trees.

“Good-bye!” Sue called. “Thank your friend for riding me all around the mountain. That was fun.” And above the trees I saw a broomstick break small branches.

I went back into the office. Mabel had come in and was sitting on my desk, looking over the forms in which I’d been filling.

I sorted through various subjects I might bring up to avoid arguing with the boss.

“It takes too much energy to sort out something we won’t argue about,” Mabel said. “Shall we finish up?”

“Fine. Only I haven’t had a chance to argue.”

“Go on.”

“You go on. The only way I’ll ever get you is to let you have enough cable to strangle yourself.”

She put the forms down. “Take you up on that last bit of obvious banality for the day: suppose we put the outlets and lines in? They certainly don’t have to use them if they don’t like.”

“Oh, Mabel! The whole thing is a matter of principle!”

“I’m not strangling yet.”

“Look. You are the boss. I’ve said we’d do it your way. Okay. I mean it. Good night!” Feeling frustrated, but clean and silver, I stalked out.

Frank Faltaux once told me that the French phrase for it is *l’esprit d’escalier*—the spirit of the backstairs. You think of what you should have said after you’re on the way down. I lay in the hammock in my new room fairly blistering the varnish on the banister.

Evening shuffled leaves outside my window and slid gold poker chips across the pane. After much restlessness, I got up and went outside to kibitz the game.

On the stream bank I toed stones into the water, watched the water sweep out the hollows, and ambled beside the current, the sound of the falls ahead of me; behind, laughing demons sat on the treads drinking beer.

Then somebody called the demons inside, so there was only the evening and water.

And laughter above me...

I looked up the falls.

Fidessa sat there, swinging her sneaker heels against the rock.

“Hello?” I asked.

She nodded and looked like a woman with a secret. She had jumped down and started over the rocks.

“Hey, watch it. Don’t slip in the—”

She didn’t.

“Blacky!”

“Eh... what can I do for you?”

“Nothing!” with her bright brown eyes. “Do you want to come to a party?”

“Huh?”

“Up on High Haven.”

Thought: that the cables had not gone up there this afternoon had been mistaken for a victory on my part.

“You know I haven’t won any battles down here yet.” Oh, equivocating “yet.” I scratched my neck and did other things that project indecision. “It’s very nice of you and Roger to ask me.”

“Actually, I’m asking you. In fact”—conspiratorial look—“why don’t you bring one of your girls along?” For a whole second I thought it was a non-ulterior invitation. “Roger might be a little peeved if he thought I just came down to drag you up to an angel blast.”

Tall, very dark, and handsome, I’ve had a fair amount of this kind of treatment at the hands of various ladies even in this enlightened age.

So it doesn’t bother me at all. “Sure. Love to come.”

My ulterior was a chance to drag Mabel out to see my side (as devils stalked the angels’ porches... I slew the thought).

Then again, I was still feeling pretty belligerent. Hell, who wants to take your debate rival to a party.

I looked back at the monster. Sue sat at the top of the steps, reading.

“Hey!”

She looked up. I made come-here motions. She put down the book and came.

“What’s Scott doing?”

“Sleeping.”

One of the reasons Scott will never be a devil is that he can sleep anywhere, any time. A devil must be able to worry all night, then be unable to sleep because he's so excited about the solution that arrived with the dawn. "Want to go to a party?"

"Sure."

"Fidessa's invited us up to High Haven. You'll have a chance to see your friend Pitt again."

She came into the scope of my arm and settled her head on my shoulder, frowning. "Pitt's a funny kid." The passing wrinkles on a seventeen-year-old girl's face are charming. "But I like her." She looked up, took hold of my thumb, and asked, "When are we going?"

"Now," Fidessa said.

We climbed.

"Ever fly a broomstick?" Fidessa asked.

"I used to fly my wife back and forth to classes when I was at the academy," I admitted. (Interesting I've managed to put that fact out of this telling so long. Contemplate that awhile.) "Want me to drive?"

With me at the steering shaft, Sue behind me chinning my scapula, and Fidessa behind her, we did a mildly clumsy takeoff, then a lovely spiral—"Over there," Fidessa called—around the mountain's backbone and swung up toward the gorge.

"Oh, I love riding these things!" Sue was saying. "It's like a roller coaster. Only more so!"

That was not a comment on my flying. We fell into the rocky mouth. (One doesn't forget how to ride a bicycle, either.) Our landing on the high porch was better than Roger's.

I found out where they did the cooking I'd smelled that morning. Fidessa led us up through the trees above the house. (Roast meat...) Coming through the brush, hand in hand with Sue, I saw our late cadet wrinkle her nose, frown: "Barbecued pork?"

They had dug a shallow pit. On the crusted, gleaming grill a pig, splayed over coals, looked up cross-eyed. His ears were charred. The lips curled back from tooth and gap-tooth. He smelled great.

"Hey," Roger called across the pit. "You come up here this evening? Good!" He saluted with a beer can. "You come for the party?"

"I guess so."

Someone came scrabbling up the rock carrying a cardboard crate. It was the red-headed kid with the dragon on his chest. "Hey, Roger, you need some lemons? I was over in Hainesville, and I swiped this whole goddamn box of lemons—"

Someone grabbed him by the collar of his leather jacket with both hands and yanked it down over his shoulders; he staggered. The crate hit the edge of the pit. Lemons bounced and rolled.

“God damnit, cut that out—”

Half a dozen fell through the grate. Somebody kicked the carton, and another half dozen rolled down the slope.

“Hey—”

Half a minute into a free-for-all, two cans of beer came across. I caught them and looked up to see Roger, by the cooler, laughing. I twisted the tops off (there was a time, I believe, when such a toss would have wreaked havoc with the beer—progress), handed one to Sue, saluted.

Fidessa had maneuvered behind Roger. And was laughing too.

Sue drank, scowled. “Say, where is Pitt?”

“Down at the house.”

She flashed bright teeth at me. I nodded.

“Call me when food’s on.” She pulled away, skirting tussling angels, and hopped down the rocks.

Where does the mountain go when it goes higher than Haven?

Not knowing, I left the revelers and mounted among the bush and boulders. Wind snagged on pines and reached me limping. I looked down the gorge, surveyed the crowded roofs of Haven, sat for a while on a log, and was peaceful.

I heard feet on leaves behind, but didn’t look. Fingers on my eyes and Fidessa laughing. I caught one wrist and pulled her around. The laugh stilled on her face. She, amused, and I, curious, watched each other watch each other.

“Why,” I asked, “have you become so friendly?”

Her high-cheeked face grew pensive. “Maybe it’s because I know a better thing when I see it.”

“Better?”

“Comparative of good.” She sat beside me. “I’ve never understood how power is meted out in this world. When two people clash, the more powerful wins. I was very young when I met Sam. I stayed with him because I thought he was powerful. Does that sound naive?”

“At first, yes. Not when you think about it.”

“He insisted on living in a way totally at odds with society. That takes... power.”

I nodded.

“I still don’t know whether he lost it at the end. Maybe Roger simply had more. But I made my decision before they rumbled. And I ended up on the right side.”

“You’re not stupid.”

“No, I’m not. But there’s another clash coming. I think I know who will win.”

“I don’t.”

She looked at her lap. “Also I’m not so young anymore. I’m tired of being on the side of the angels. My world is falling apart, Blacky. I’ve got Roger; I understand why Sam lost, but I don’t understand why Roger won. In the coming battle, you’ll win and Roger will lose. That I don’t understand at all.”

“Is this a request for me in my silver long-johns to take you away from all this?”

She frowned. “Go back down to Haven. Talk to Roger.”

“On the eve of the war, the opposing generals meet together. They explain how war would be the worst thing for all concerned. Yet all creation knows they’ll go to war.”

Her eyes inquired.

“I’m quoting.”

“Go down and talk to Roger.”

I got up and walked back through the woods. I had been walking five minutes when:

“Blacky?”

I stopped by an oak whose roots clutched a great rock. When trees get too big in terrain like this, there is very little for them to hold, and they eventually fall.

“I thought I saw you wander off up here.”

“Roger,” I said, “things don’t look so good down at the Gila Monster.”

He fell into step beside me. “You can’t stop the lines from coming up here?” He twisted the great ring on his scarred finger.

“The law says that a certain amount of power must be available for a given number of people. Look. Even if we put the lines up, why do you have to use them? I don’t understand why this business is so threatening to you.”

“You don’t?”

“Like I said, I sympathize...”

His hands went into his pockets. It was dark enough here among the trees so that, though light flaked above the leaves, I couldn’t see his expression.

His tone of voice surprised me: “You don’t understand what’s going on up here, do you? Fidessa said you didn’t.” It was fatigue. “I thought you...” and then his mind went somewhere else. “These power lines. Do you know what holds these guys here? I don’t. I do know it’s weaker than you think.”



“Fidessa says they’ve been drifting away.”

“I’m not out to make any man do what he don’t want. Neither was Sam. That’s the power he had; and I have. You put them lines up, and they’ll use them. Maybe not at first. But they will. You beat us long enough, and we go down!”

Beyond the trees I could see the barbecue pit. “Maybe you’re just going to have to let it go.”

He shook his shadowed face. “I haven’t had it long, so it shouldn’t be so hard to lose it. But no.”

“Roger, you’re not losing anything. When the lines go up here, just ignore—”

“I’m talking about power. My power.”

“How?”

“They know what’s going on.” He motioned to include the rest of the angels in Haven. “They know it’s a contest. And I am going to lose. Would it be better if I came on like Sam? He’d have tried to break your head. Then he’d have tried to bust your tinfoil eggcrate apart with broomsticks. Probably got himself and most of the rest of us in the hoosegow.”

“He would have.”

“Have you ever lost something important to you, something so important you couldn’t start to tell anybody else how important it was? It went. You watched it go. And then it was all gone.”

“Yes.”

“Yeah? What?”

“Wife of mine.”

“She leave you for somebody else?”

“She was burned to death on an exposed power, cable, one night—in Tibet. I watched. And then she was... gone.”

“You and me,” Roger said after a moment, “we’re a lot alike, you know?” I saw his head drop. “I wonder what it would be like to lose Fidessa... too.”

“Why do you ask?”

Broad shoulders shrugged. “Sometimes the way a woman acts, you get to feel... Sam knew. But it’s stupid, huh? You think that’s stupid, Blacky?”

Leaves crashed under feet behind us. We turned.

“Fidessa... ?” Roger said.

She stopped in the half-dark. I knew she was surprised to overtake us.

Roger looked at me. He looked at her. "What were you doing up there?"

"Just sitting," she said before I did.

We stood a moment more in the darkness above Haven. Then Roger turned, beat back branches and strode into the clearing. I followed.

The pig had been cut. Most of one ham had been sliced. But Roger yanked up the bone and turned to me. "This is a party, hey, Blacky!" His scarred face broke on laughter. "Here! Have some party!" He thrust the hot bone into my hands. It burned me.

But Roger, arm around somebody's shoulder, lurched through the carousers. Someone pushed a beer at me. The hock, where I'd dropped it on pine needles, blackened beneath the boots of angels.

I did get food after a fashion. And a good deal to drink.

I remember stopping on the upper porch of Haven, leaning on what was left of the rail.

Sue was sitting down by the pool. Stooped but glistening from the heat of the forge, Danny stood beside her.

Then behind me:

"You gonna fly? You gonna fly the moon off the sky? I can see three stars up there! Who's gonna put 'em out?" Roger balanced on the cycle rack, feet wide, fist shaking at the night. "I'm gonna fly! Fly till my stick pokes a hole in the dark! Gods, you hear that? We're coming at you! We're gonna beat you to death with broomsticks and roar the meteors down before we're done..."

They shouted around him. A cycle coughed. Two more.

Roger leaped down as the first broomstick pulled from the rack, and everybody fell back. It swerved across the porch, launched over the edge, rose against the branches, above the branches, spreading dark wings.

"You gonna fly with me?"

I began a shrug.

His hand hit my neck and stopped it. "There are gods up there we gotta look at. You gonna stare 'em down with me?"

Smoke and pills had been going around as well as beer.

"Gods are nothing but low blood sugar," I said. "St. Augustine, Peyote Indians... you know how it works—"

He turned his hand so the back was against my neck. "Fly!" And if he'd taken his hand away fast, that ring would have hooked out an inch of jugular.

Three more broomsticks took off.

“Okay, why not?”

He turned to swing his cycle from the rack.

I mounted behind him. Concrete rasped. We went over the edge, and the bottom fell out of my belly again. Branches clawed at us, branches missed.

Higher than Haven.

Higher than the mountain that is higher than Haven.

Wind pushed my head back, and I stared up at the night. Angels passed overhead.

“Hey!” Roger bellowed, turning half around so I could hear. “You ever done any sky-sweeping?”

“No!” I insisted.

Roger nodded for me to look.

Maybe a hundred yards ahead and up, an angel turned wings over the moon, aimed down, and—his elbows jerked sharply in as he twisted the throttle rings—turned off both turbos.

The broomstick swept down the night.

And down.

And down.

Finally I thought I would lose him in the carpet of green-black over the mountain. And for a while he was lost. Then:

A tiny flame, and tiny wings, momentarily illuminated, pulled from the tortuous dive. As small as he was, I could see the wings bend from the strain. He was close enough to the treetops so that for a moment the texture of the leaves was visible in a speeding pool of light. (How many angels can dance on the head of a pin?) He was so tiny...

“What the hell is our altitude anyway?” I called to Roger.

Roger leaned back on the shaft, and we were going up again.

“Where are we going?”

“High enough to get a good sweep on.”

“With two people on the cycle?” I demanded.

And we went up.

And there were no angels above us any more.

And the only thing higher than us was the moon.

There is a man in the moon.

And he leers.

We reached the top of our arc. Then Roger's elbows struck his sides.

My tummy again. Odd feeling: the vibrations on your seat and on your foot stirrups aren't there. Neither is the roar of the turbos.

It is a very quiet trip down.

Even the sound of the wind on the wings behind you is carried away too fast to count. There is only the mountain in front of you. Which is down.

And down.

And down.

Finally I grabbed Roger's shoulder, leaned forward, and yelled in his ear, "I hope you're having fun!"

Two broomsticks zoomed apart to let us through.

Roger looked back at me. "Hey, what were you and my woman doing up in the woods?" With the turbos off you don't have to yell.

"Picking mushrooms."

"When there's a power struggle, I don't like to lose."

"You like mushrooms?" I asked. "I'll give you a whole goddamn basket just as soon as we set runners on Haven."

"I wouldn't joke if I was sitting as far from the throttle ring as you are."

"Roger—"

"You can tell things from the way a woman acts, Blacky. I've done a lot of looking, at you, at Fidessa, even at that little girl you brought up to Haven this evening. Take her and Pitt. I bet they're about the same age. Pitt don't stand up too well against her. I don't mean looks either. I'm talking about the chance of surviving they'd have if you just stuck them down someplace. I'm thirty-three years old, Blacky. You?"

"Eh... thirty-one."

"We don't check out too well either."

"How about giving it a chance?"

"You're hurting my shoulder."

My hand snapped back to the grip. There was a palm print in sweat on the denim.

Roger shook his head. "I'd dig to see you spread all over that mountain."

"If you don't pull out, you'll never get the opportunity."

"Shit," Roger said. His elbows went out from his side.

The broomstick vibrated.

Branches stopped coming at us quite so fast. (I could see separate branches!) The force of the turn almost tore me off. I told you before, you could see the wings bend? You can hear them too. Things squeaked and creaked in the roar.

Then, at last, we were rising gently once more. I looked up. I breathed. The night was loud and cool and wonderful.

Miniature above us now, another angel swept down across the moon. He plummeted toward us as we rode up the wind.

Roger noticed before I did.

"Hey, the kid's in trouble!"

Instead of holding his arms hugged to his sides, the kid worked them in and out as though he were trying to twist something loose.

"His rings are frozen!" Roger exclaimed.

Others had realized the trouble and circled in to follow him down. He came fast and wobbling—passed us!

His face was all teeth and eyes as he fought the stick. The dragon writhed on his naked chest. It was the redhead.

The flock swooped to follow.

The kid was below us. Roger gunned his cycle straight down to catch up, wrenched out again, and the kid passed us once more.

The kid had partial control of one wing. It didn't help because whenever he'd shift the free aileron, he'd just bank off in another direction at the same slope.

Branches again...

Then something unfroze in the rogue cycle. His slope suddenly leveled, and there was fire from the turbos.

For three seconds I thought he was going to make it.

Fire raked the treetops for thirty feet; we swooped over a widening path of flame. And nothing at the end of it.

A minute later we found a clearing. Angels settled like mad leaves. We started running through the trees.

He wasn't dead.

He was screaming.

He'd been flung twenty feet from his broomstick through small branches and twigs, both legs and one arm broken. Most of his clothes had been torn off. A lot of skin too.

Roger forgot me, got very efficient, got Red into a stretcher between two broomsticks, and got to Hainesville, fast. Red was only crying when the doctor finally put him to sleep.

We took off from the leafy suburban streets and rose toward the porches of Haven.

The gorge was a serpent of silver.

The moon glazed the windows of Haven.

Somebody had already come back to bring the news.

"You want a beer?" Roger asked.

"No thanks. Have you seen the little girl who came up here with me? I think it's about time we got back."

But he had already started away. There was still a party going on.

I went into the house, up some stairs, didn't find Sue, so went down some others. I was halfway down the flickering steps to the forge when I heard a shriek.

Then Sue flashed through the doorway, ran up the steps, and crashed into me. I caught her just as one-eyed Danny swung round the door jamb. Then Pitt was behind him, scrabbling past him in the narrow well, the throwing blade in her hand halfway through a swing.

And stopping.

"Why doesn't someone tell me what the hell is going on?" I proposed. "You put yours away, and I'll put away mine." Remember that throwing blade I had tucked under my belt? It was in my hand now. Pitt and I lowered our arms together.

"Oh, Blacky, let's get out of here!" Sue whispered.

"Okay," I said.

We backed up the steps. Then we ducked from the door and came out on the porch. Sue still leaned on my shoulder. When she got her breath back, she said: "They're nuts!"

"What happened?"

"I don't know, I mean..." She stood up now. "Dan was talking to me and showing me around the forge. And he makes all that beautiful jewelry. He was trying to fool around, but I mean, really—with that eye? And I was trying to cool him anyway, when Pitt came in..." She looked

at the porch. "That boy who fell... they got him to the doctor?"

I nodded.

"It was the redheaded one, wasn't it? I hope he's all right." Sue shook her head. "He gave me a lemon."

Fidessa appeared at my shoulder. "You want to go down?"

"Yeah."

"Take that cycle. The owner's passed out inside. Somebody'll bring him down tomorrow to pick it up."

"Thanks."

Glass shattered. Somebody had thrown something through one of Haven's remaining windows.

The party was getting out of hand at the far end of the porch. Still point in the wheeling throng, Roger watched us.

Fidessa looked a moment, then pushed my shoulder. "Go on." We dropped over white water, careening down the gorge.

Five

Scott opened an eye and frowned a freckled frown over the edge of his hammock. "Where... [obscured by yawn]... been?"

"To a party. Don't worry. I brought her back safe and sound."

Scott scrubbed his nose with his fist. "Fun?"

"Sociologically fascinating, I'm sure."

"Yeah?" He pushed up on his elbow. "Whyn't you wake me?" He looked back at Sue, who sat quietly on her hammock.

"We shook you for fifteen minutes, but you kept trying to punch me."

"I did?" He rubbed his nose again. "I did not!"

"Don't worry about it. Go to sleep. G'night, Sue."

In my room I drifted off to the whirr of broomsticks remembered.

Then—was it half an hour later?—I came awake to a real turbo. A cycle came near the Monster's roof.

Runners...

Correction: landed on.

I donned silver and went outside on the long terrace. I looked to my left up at the roof.

Thuds down the terrace to the right—

Danny recovered from his leap. His good eye blinked rapidly. The other was a fistful of wet shadow.

"What are you doing here?" I asked too quietly for him to have heard. Then I looked up at the curved wall. Fidessa slid down. Danny steadied her.

"Would you mind telling me what brings you here this hour of the morning?"

After five silent seconds I thought she was playing a joke. I spent another paranoid three thinking I was about to be victim to a cunning nefariousness.

But she was terrified.

"Blacky—"

"Hey, what's the matter, girl?"

"I..." She shook her head. "Roger..." Shook it again.

"Come inside and sit down."

She took Danny's arm. "Go in! Go in, Danny... please!" She looked about the sky.

Stolid and uncomprehending, Danny went forward. Inside he sat on the hammock, left fist wrapped in his right hand.

Fidessa stood, turned, walked, stopped.

"What's the matter? What happened on High Haven?"

"We're leaving." She watched for my reaction.

"Tell me what happened."

She put her hands in her pockets, took them out again. "Roger tried to get at Danny."

"What?"

We regarded the silent smith. He blinked and smiled.



“Roger got crazy after you left.”

“Drunk?”

“Crazy! He took everybody down to the forge, and they started to break up the place... He made them stop after a little while. But then he talked about killing Danny. He said that Sam was right. And then he told me he was going to kill me.”

“It sounds like a bad joke.”

“It wasn’t...” I watched her struggle to find words to tell me what it was.

“So you two got scared and left?”

“I wasn’t scared then.” Her voice retreated to shortness. She glanced up. “I’m scared now.”

Swaying gently, Danny put one foot on top of the other and meshed his toes.

“How come you brought Danny along?”

“He was running away. After the fracas down in the forge, he was taking off into the woods. I told him to come with me.”

“Clever of you to come here.”

She looked angry, then anger lost focus and became fear again. “We didn’t know anywhere else to go.” Her hands closed and broke like moths. “I came here first because I... wanted to warn you.”

“Of what?”

“Roger—I think him and the rest of the angels are going to try and rumble with you here.”

“What... ?”

She nodded.

“This has suddenly gotten serious. Let’s go talk to Boss Lady.” I opened the door to the corridor. “You too.”

Danny looked up surprised, unfolded his hands and feet.

“Yeah, you!”

Mabel was exercising her devilish talents:

Ashtray filled with the detritus of a pack of cigarettes, papers all over everything; she had one pencil behind her ear and was chewing on another. It was three in the morning.

We filed into the office, me first, Fidessa, then Danny.

“Blacky? Oh, hello—good Lord!” (That was Danny’s eye.)

“Hi, Mabel. How’s the midnight oil?”

“If you strain it through white bread, reduce it over a slow Bunsen, and recondense the fumes in a copper coil, I hear you have something that can get you high.” She frowned at Danny, realized she was frowning, smiled. “What happened to that boy’s face?”

“Meet Fidessa and Danny, from High Haven. They’ve just run away and stopped off to tell us that we may be under attack shortly by angels who are none too happy about the lines and outlets we’re putting up tomorrow.”

Mabel looked over the apex of her fingertips. “This has gotten serious,” she echoed. Mabel looked tired. “The Gila Monster is a traveling maintenance station, not a mobile fortress. How have your goodwill efforts been going?”

I was going to throw up my hands—

“If Blacky hadn’t been up there,” Fidessa said, “talking with Roger like he did, they’d have been down here yesterday afternoon instead.”

I projected her an astral kiss.

“What about him?” She nodded at Danny. “What happened to—”

“Where the hell,” Scott demanded, swinging through the door like a dappled griffon, “did you take that poor kid, anyway?”

“What kid?”

“Sue! You said you went to a party. That’s not what I’d call it!”

“What are you talking about?”

“She’s got two bruises on her leg as big as my hand and one on her shoulder even bigger. She said some one-eyed bastard tried to rape—”

Then he frowned at Danny, who smiled back quizzically.

“She told me,” I said, “that he tried to get fresh with her—”

“With a foot and a half of two-by-four? She told me she didn’t want to tell you,”—his mottled finger swung at me—“what really happened, so you wouldn’t be too hard on them!”

“Look, I haven’t been trying to gloss over anything I saw on—”

At which point Mabel stood.

Silence.

You-know-what were passing.

Something clanged on the skylight: cracks shot the pane, though it didn't shatter. We jumped, and Scott hiccupped. Lying on the glass was a four-pronged blade.

I reached over Mabel's desk and threw a switch by her thumb.

Fidessa: "What...?"

"Floodlights," I said. "They can see us, lights or no. This way we can see them—if they get within fifty meters." We used the lights for night work. "I'm going to take us up where we can look at what's going on," I told Mabel.

She stepped back so I could take the controls.

When the cabin jerked, Danny's smile gave out. Fidessa patted his arm.

The cabin rose.

"I hope you know what you're..." Scott began.

Mabel told him to shut up with a very small movement of the chin.

Outside the window, broomsticks scratched like matches behind the trees.

Water whispered white down the falls. The near leaves shook neon scales. And the cable arched the dark like a flayed rib.

Wingforms fell and swept the rocks, shadowed the water. I saw three land.

"That's Roger!"

At the window Fidessa stood at my left, Mabel at my right.

Roger's broomstick played along the still unburied cable, came down in a diminishing pool of shadow directly on the line. I heard runners scrape the housing. Half a dozen or more angels had landed on either side of the trough.

At the far end of the exposed line up near the rocks, dismounted and let his broomstick fall on its side. He started slowly to walk the ribbing.

"What do they want?" Scott asked.

"I'm going to go and see," I said. Mabel turned sharply. "You've got peeper-mikes in here." The better to overhear scheming demons: if they'd been on, Mabel would have been able to foresee Scott's little prank of the afternoon. "Hey! You remember Scott's little prank of the afternoon? You can duplicate it from here, can't you?"

"A high voltage brush discharged from the housing? Sure I can—"

"It'll look so much more impressive at night! I'm going out there to talk to Roger on the cable. If anything goes wrong, I'll yell. You start the sparks. Nobody will get hurt, but it should scare enough hell out of them to give me a chance to get out of harm's way." I flipped on the peeper-mike and started for the trapdoor. An introductory burst of static cleared to angel mumbblings.

Mabel stopped me with a hand on my shoulder. “Blacky, I can make a brush discharge from in here. I can also burn anybody on that line—”

I looked at her. I breathed deeply. Then I pulled away and dropped through to the Gila Monster’s roof. I sprinted over the plated hull, reached the “head” between two of the floods, and gazed down. “Roger!”

He stopped and squinted up into the light. “—Blacky?”

“What are you doing here?”

Before he answered, I kicked the latch of the crane housing and climbed down onto the two-foot grapple. I was going to yell back at Mabel, but she was watching. The crane began to hum, and swung forward with me riding, out and down.

When I came close to the cable, I dropped (floodlights splashing my shoulders); I got my balance on the curved ribbing. “Roger?”

“Yeah?”

“What are you doing down here?”

On the dirt piled beside the cable the other angels stood. I walked forward.

“What are you doing? Come on; it’s the third time I’ve asked you.” When the wire is sixteen feet in diameter, a tightrope act isn’t that hard. Still...

Roger took a step, and I stopped. “You’re not going to put up those cables, Blacky.”

He looked awful. Since I’d seen him last he’d been in a fight. I couldn’t tell if he’d won or lost.

“Roger, go back up on High Haven.”

His shoulders sagged; he kept swallowing. Throwing blades clinked at his belt.

“You think you’ve won, Blacky.”

“Roger—”

“You haven’t. We won’t let you. We won’t.” He looked at the angels around us. “IS THAT RIGHT!” I started at his bellow.

They were silent. He turned back and whispered. “We won’t...”

My shadow reached his feet. His lay out behind him on the ribbing.

“You came down here to make trouble, Roger. What’s it going to get you?”

“A chance to see you squirm.”

“You’ve done that once this evening.”

"That was before..." He looked down at his belt. My stomach tightened. "... Fidessa left. She ran away from me." Hung on his cheek scar, confusion curtained his features.

"I know." I glanced over my shoulder where the office swayed above the monster. In the window were four silhouettes: two women and two men.

"She's up... ?" The curtain pulled back to reveal rage. "She came down here—to you?"

"To us. Have you got that distinction through your bony head?"

"Who's up there with her?" He squinted beyond the floodlights. "Danny?"

"That's right."

"Why?"

"She said he was running away anyway."

"I don't have to ask you. I know why."

"They're listening to us. You can ask them if you want."

Roger scowled, threw back his head. "Danny! What you running away from me for?"

No answer.

"You gonna leave Haven and Pitt and everything?"

No answer.

"Fidessa!"

Yes... Roger?

Her voice, so firm in person, was almost lost in the electronic welter.

"Danny really wants to run down here with the devils?"

He... does, Roger.

"Danny!"

No answer.

"I know you can hear me! You make him hear me, Fidessa! Don't you remember, Danny... ?"

No answer.

"Danny, you come out of there if you want and go on back with me."

As Roger's discomfort grew to fill the silence, the kindest thing I could think was that, just as Danny had been unable to comprehend Sam's brutalities, so he could ignore Roger's

generosities.

“Fidessa?”

Roger?

“You coming back up to High Haven with me.” Neither question mark nor exclamation point defines that timbre.

No, Roger.

When Roger turned back to me, it looked like the bones in his head had all broken and were just tossed in a bag of his face.

“And you... you’re putting up them cables tomorrow?”

“That’s right.”

Roger’s hand went out from his side; started forward. Things came apart. He struck at me.

“Mabel, now!”

When he hit at me again, he hit through fire.

The line grew white stars. We crashed, crackling. I staggered, lost my balance, found it again.

Beyond the glitter I saw the angels draw back. The discharge was scaring everybody but Roger.

We grappled. Sparks tangled his lank hair, flickered in his eyes, on his teeth; we locked in the fire. He tried to force me off the cable. “I’m gonna... break... you!”

We broke.

I ducked by, whirled to face him. Even though the other angels had scattered, Roger had realized the fireworks were show.

He pulled at his belt.

“I’ll stop you!”

The blade was a glinting cross above his shoulder.

“Roger, even if you do, that’s not going to stop—”

“I’ll kill you!”

The blade spun down the line.

I ducked and it missed.

“Roger, stop it! Put that blade—” I ducked again, but the next one caught my forearm. Blood

ran inside my sleeve... “Roger! You’ll get burned!”

“You better hurry!” The third blade spun out with the last word.

I leaped to the side of the trough, rolled over on my back—saw him crouch with the force of the next blade, now dug into the dirt where my belly had been.

I had already worked the blade from my own belt. As I flung it (I knew it was going wild, but it would make Roger pause), I shrieked with all rage and frustration playing my voice: “Burn him!”

The next blade was above his head.

Off balance on my back, there was no way I could have avoided it. Then:

The sparks fell back into the housing.

From the corner of my eye, I’d seen Mabel, in the office window, move to the rheostat.

Roger stiffened.

He wove back; snapped up screaming. His arm flailed the blade around his head.

Then the scream was exhausted.

The first flame flickered on his denims.

His ankle chain flared cherry and smoked against the skin.

The blade burned in his hand.

Broomsticks growled over the sky as angels beat retreat. I rolled to my stomach, coughing with rage, and tried to crawl up (the smell of roast meat...), but I only got halfway to the top before my arm gave. I went flat and started to slide down the dirt toward the line. My mouth was full of earth. I tried to swim up the slope, but kept slipping down. Then my feet struck the ribbing.

I just curled up against the cable, shaking, and the only thing going through my mind: “Mabel doesn’t like to waste power.”

Gules, azure, sable—

(Working bottom to top.)

“You sure you feel all right?”

I touched the bandage beneath torn silver. “Mabel, your concern is sweet. Don’t overdo it.”

She looked across the chill falls.

“You want to check out Haven before we go to work?”

Her eyes were red from fatigue. “Yeah.”

“Okay. There’s still a broomstick—aw, come on.”

Just then the chameleon swung up the roadway with Scott, properly uniformed now, driving. He leaned out. “Hey, I got Danny down to town. Doctor looked at his eye.” He shrugged.

“Put it away and go to bed.”

“For twenty minutes?”

“More like a half an hour.”

“Better than nothing.” Scott scratched his head. “I had a good talk with Danny. No, don’t worry. He’s still alive.”

“What did you say?”

“Just rest assured I said it. And he heard it.” He swung the door closed, grinned through it, and drove off toward the hub.

A way of life.

Mabel and I went up on the monster’s roof. Fidessa and Danny had left it there. Mabel hesitated again before climbing on.

“You can’t get the chameleon up the road,” I told her.

The turbos hummed, and we rose above the trees.

We circled the mountain twice. As Haven came into view, I said: “Power, Mabel. How do you delegate it so that it works for you? How do you set it up so that it doesn’t turn against itself and cause chaos?”

“You just watch where you’re flying.”

High Haven was empty of angels. The rack was overturned, and there were no broomsticks about. In the forge the fires were out. We walked up the metal stairway through beer cans and broken glass. At the barbecue pit I kicked a lemon from the ashes.

“The devils gain Haven only to find the angels fled.”

“Sure as hell looks like it.”

On the top porch Mabel said, “Let’s go back down to the Gila Monster.”

“You figure out where you’re going to put in your outlets?”

“Everyone seems to have decided the place is too hot and split.” She looked at her bright toe. “So if there’s nobody living up here, there’s no reason to run power up here—by law. Maybe Roger’s won after all.”



“Now wait a minute—”

“I’ve been doing a lot of thinking this morning, Blacky.”

“So have I.”

“Then give a lady the benefit of your ponderings.”

“We’ve just killed somebody. And with the world statistics being what they are…”

Mabel brushed back white hair. “Self-defense and all that. I still wonder whether I like myself as much this morning as I did yesterday.”

“You’re not putting lines up?”

“I am not.”

“Now, wait. Just because—”

“Not because of that. Because of nothing to do with angels. Because of what angels have taught me about me. There’s nobody up here any more. I go by the books.”

“All right. Let’s go back then.”

I didn’t feel particularly good. But I understood: you have to respect somebody who forces you to accept his values. And in that situation, the less you agree, the more you have to respect.

We flew back down the mountain.

I landed a little clumsily fifty yards up the stream.

“You liked that?”

Mabel just sighed deeply, and grinned at me a little. “I guess I’m just not made for that sort of thing. Coming back?”

I squinted. “You go on. I’ll be down in a few minutes.”

She cocked her silver brows high as though she understood something I didn’t, but grinned again. Then she started away.

What I really wanted to do was take another ride. I also wanted to get the whole thing out of my mind: well, there were a lot more forms to be filled in. Big choice, but it fixed me squarely at the brink of indecision. I stood there toeing stones into the water.

Sound behind me in the leaves made me turn.

Fidessa, tugging at the pteracycle, one leg over the seat, cringed when she saw me. “It’s mine!” she insisted with all the hostility of the first time we’d met.

I’d already jerked my hand back, when I realized she meant the broomstick. “Oh,” I said. “Yeah, sure. You go on and take it. I’ve done my high-flying for the week.”

But she was looking at me strangely. She opened her mouth, closed it. Suddenly she hissed, “You’re a monster! You’re a monster, Blacky; and the terrible thing is you’ll never understand why!”

My reflex was to put my hand behind me again. But that was silly, so I didn’t. “You think I’m some sort of ghou? I’m not trying to steal anything that isn’t mine. I tried to give it back to Danny, but he wouldn’t take—” I reached down to pull it off my finger.

Then I saw Fidessa’s eyes drop and realized with guilt and astonishment that she hadn’t even seen the ring—till now.

I opened my mouth. Excuses and apologies and expressions of chagrin blundered together on my tongue. Nothing came out.

“Monster!” she whispered once more. And the smile of triumph with the whisper made the backs of my thighs and shoulders erupt in gooseflesh.

Fidessa laughed and threw about her black-red hair. Laughing, she twisted at the rings. The laugh became a growl. The growl became a roar. She jerked back on the rod, and the broomstick leaped, like a raging thing. Bits of the forest swirled up thirty feet. She leaned (I thought) dangerously to the side, spun round, and lifted off. Her high wing sliced branch ends and showered me with twigs and more torn green.

I brushed at my face and stepped back as, beyond the leaves, she rose and rose and rose, like Old Meg, like ageless Mab, like an airborne witch of Endor.

Some history here:

I was transferred at the end of the week to Iguana. Six months later word came over the line that Mabel had retired. So Global Power lost another good devil. Iguana lumbers and clanks mainly about Drake’s Passage, sniffing around in Antarctica and Cape Horn. Often I sit late in the office, remembering, while the cold south winds scour the skylight—

Okay, so I forgot to tell you something:

About when I went to look at Roger’s body.

He had fallen by the line. We were going to let the Gila Monster bury him when it buried the cable.

I’d thought the ring might have melted. But that hand had hardly blistered.

I took it off him and climbed out of the trough. As I came over the mound, between the brush and the tree trunks, something moved.

“Pitt?”

She darted forward, changed her mind, and ducked back.

“Do you... want to take this back to Danny?” I held it out.

She started forward again, saw what I held. A gasp, she turned, fled into the woods.

I put it on.

Just then Sue, all sleepy-eyed and smiling, stepped onto the balcony and yawned. “Hello, Blacky.”

“Hi. How do you feel?”

“Fine. Isn’t it a perfectly lovely—?” She flexed her arm. “Sore shoulder.” (I frowned.) “Nothing so bad I can’t [sigh] work.”

“That’s good.”

“Blacky, what was the commotion last night? I woke up a couple of times, saw lights on. Did Mabel send everybody back to work?”

“It wasn’t anything, honey. You just stay away from the trough until we cover it up. We had some trouble there last night.

“Why? Isn’t it a perfectly lovely—?”

“That’s an order.”

“Oh. Yes, sir.”

She looked surprised but didn’t question. I went inside to get Mabel to get things ready to leave.

I kept it.

I didn’t take it off.

I wore it.

For years.

I still do.

And often, almost as often as I think about that winter in Tibet, I recall the October mountains near the Canadian border where the sun sings cantos of mutability and angels fear to tread now; where still, today, the wind unwinds, the trees re-leave themselves in spring, and the foaming gorge disgorges.