The Four-Hour Fugue

Alfred Bester

Fear carries a scent with it that most humans can't detect. Most, but not all.

By now, of course, the Northeast Corridor was the Northeast slum, stretching from Canada to the Carolinas and as far west as Pittsburgh. It was 'a fantastic jungle of rancid violence inhabited by a steaming, restless population with no visible means of support and no fixed residence, so vast that censustakers, birth-control supervisors and the social services had given up all hope. It was a gigantic raree -show that everyone denounced and enjoyed. Even the privileged few who could afford to live highly-protected lives in highly-expensive Oases and could live anywhere else they pleased never thought of leaving. The jungle grabbed you. There were thousands of everyday survival problems but one of the most exasperating was the shortage of fresh water. Most of the available potable water had long since been impounded by progressive industries for the sake of a better tomorrow and there was very little left to go around. Rainwater tanks on the roofs, of course. A black market, naturally. That was about all. So the jungle stank. It stank worse than the court of Queen Elizabeth, which could have bathed but didn't believe in it. The Corridor just couldn't bathe, wash clothes or clean house, and you could smell its noxious effluvium from ten miles out atsea. Welcome to the Fun Corridor. Sufferers near the shore would have been happy to clean up in salt water, but the Corridor beaches had been polluted by so much crude oil seepage for so many generations that they were all owned by deserving oil reclamation companies. Keep Out! No Trespassing! And armed guards. The rivers and lakes were electrically fenced; no need forguard's, just skull and crossbones signs and if you didn't know what they were telling you, tough.

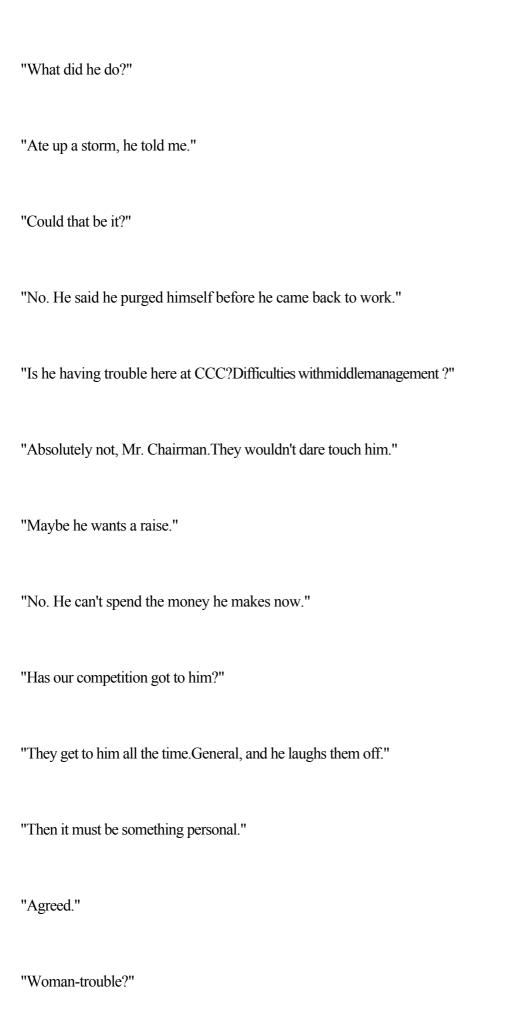
Not to believe that everybody minded stinking as they skipped merrily over the rotting corpses in the streets, but a lot did and their only remedy was perfumery. There were dozens of competing companies producing perfumes but the leader, far and away, was the Continental Can Company, which hadn't manufactured cans in two centuries. They'd switched to plastics and had the good fortune about a hundred stockholders meetings back to make the mistake of signing a sales contract with and delivering to some cockamamie perfume brewer an enormous quantity of glowing neon containers. The corporation went bust and CCC took it over in hopes of getting some of their money back. That take-over proved to be their salvation when the perfume explosion took place; it gave them entree to the most profitable industry of the times.

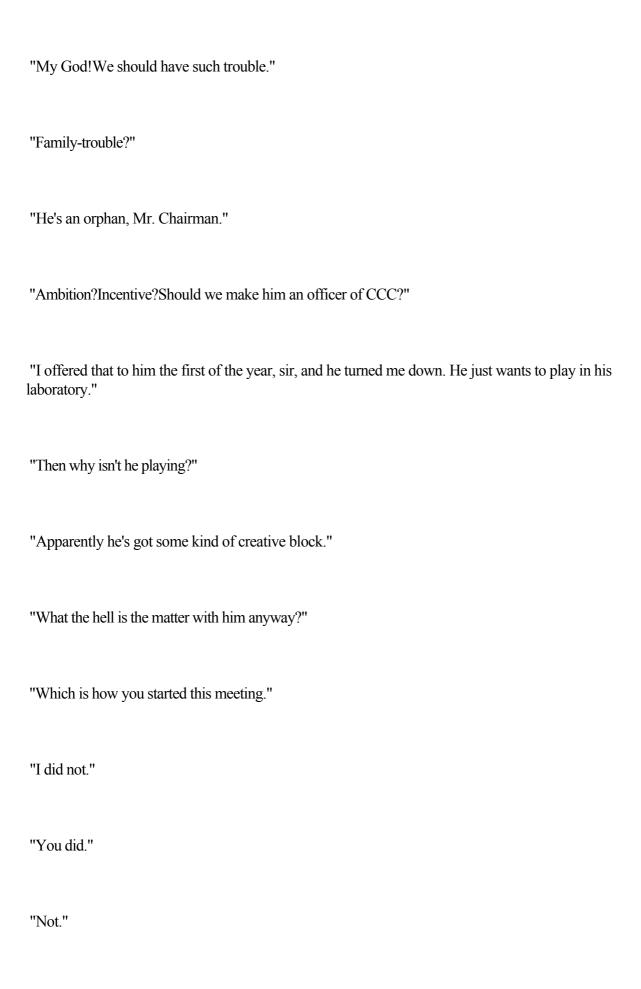
But it was neck-and-neck with the rivals untilBlaiseSkiaki joined CCC; then it turned into a runaway. BlaiseSkiaki, Origins; French, Japanese, Black African and Irish, Education; BA, Princeton; ME, MIT; PhD. Dow Chemical, (It was Dow that had secretly tipped CCC thatSkiaki was a winner and lawsuits brought by the completion were still pending before the ethics board.) BlaiseSkiaki; age, thirty-one; unmarried, straight, genius.

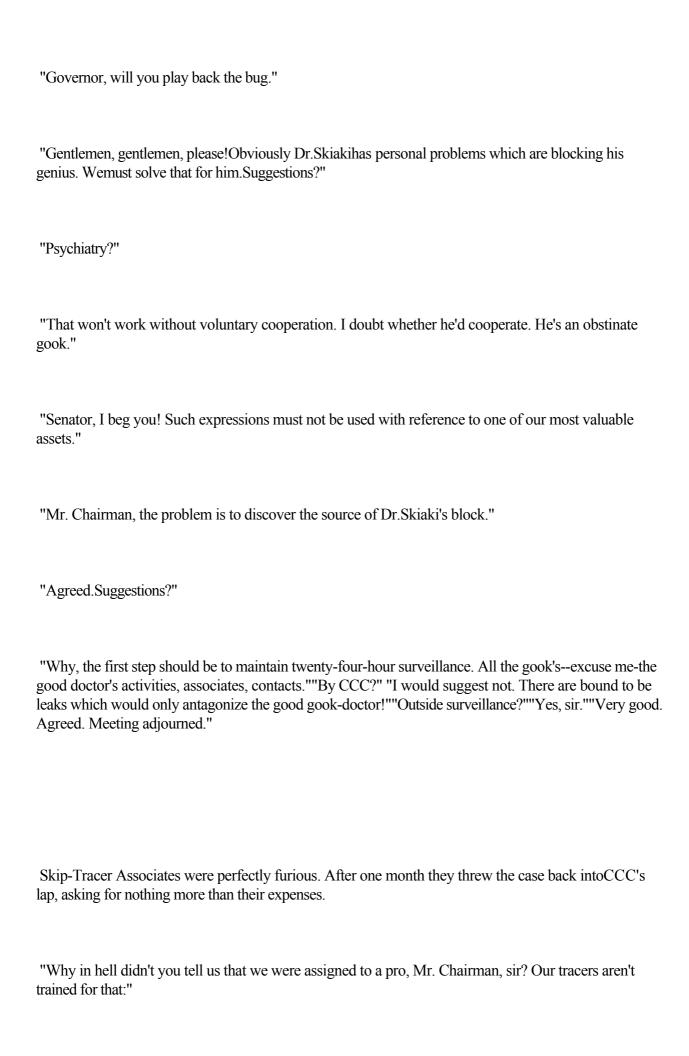
His sense of scent was his genius, and he was privately, referred to at CCC as "The Nose." He knew everything about perfumery; the animal products, ambergris, castor, civet, musk; the essential oils distilled from plants and flowers; the balsams extruded by tree and shrub wounds, benzoin , opopanax , Peru, Talu , storax , myrrh; the synthetics created from the combination of natural and chemical scents, the latter mostly the esters of fatty acids.

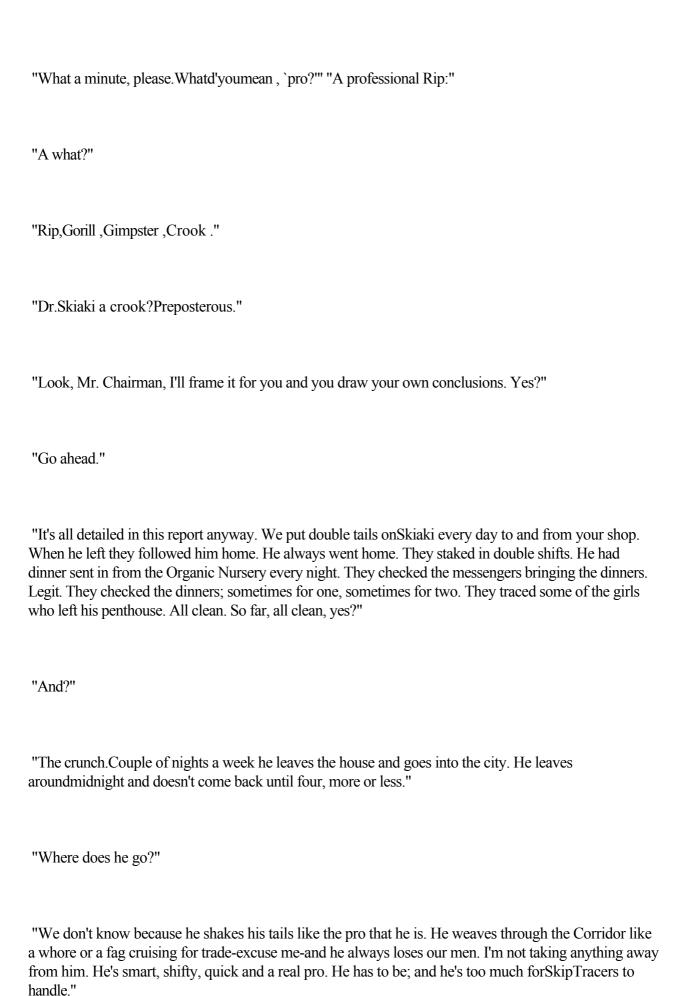
He had created for CCC their most successful sellers: "Vulva," "Assuage," "Oxter" (a much more attractivebrand name than "Armpitto"), "Preparation F," "Tongue War," et cetera. He was treasured by CCC, paid a salarygenerous enough to enable him to live in an Oasis and, best of all, granted unlimited supplies of fresh water. No girl inthe Corridor could resist the offer of taking a shower with him. But he paid a high price for these advantages. He could never use scented soaps, shaving creams, pomades or depilatories. He could never eat seasoned foods. He could drink nothing but pure water. All this, you understand; to keep The Nose pure and uncontaminated so that he could smell around in his sterile laboratory and devise new creations. He was presently composing a rather promising unguent provisionally named "Correctum," but he'd been on it for six months without any positive results and CCC was alarmed by the delay. His genius had never before taken so long. There was a meeting of the top-level executives, names withheld on the grounds of corporate privilege.

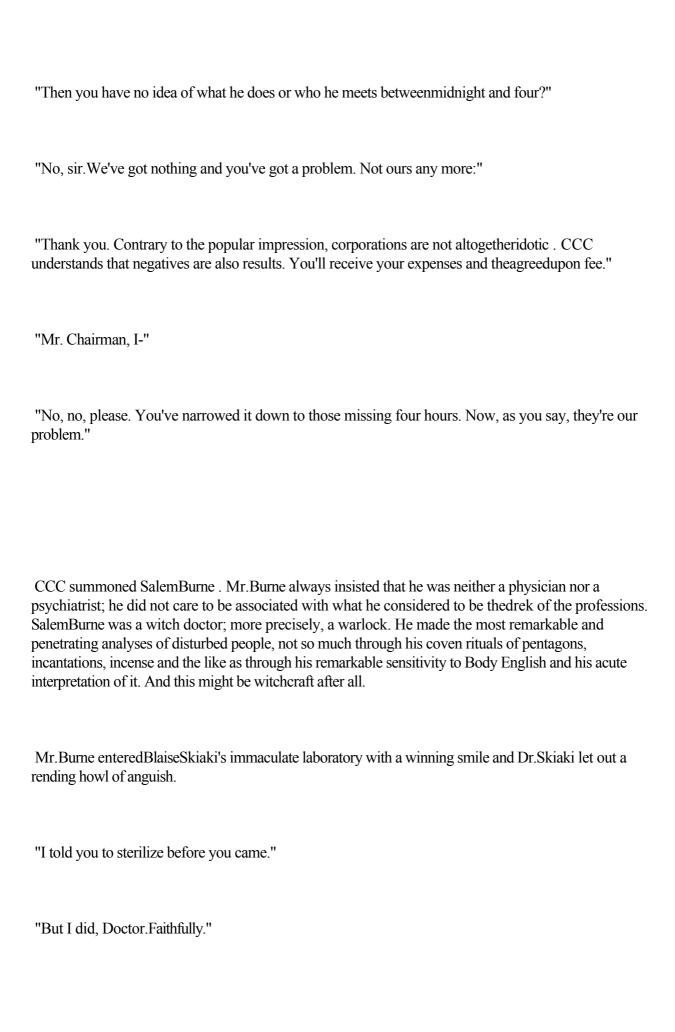
"What's the matter with him anyway?"
"Has he lost his touch?"
"It hardly seems likely;"
"Maybe he needs a rest."
"Why, he had a week's holiday last month:











"You did not. You reek of anise, ilang-ilang and methylanthranilate. You've polluted my day. Why?" "Dr.Skiaki . I assure you that I-" Suddenly SalemBurne stopped. "Oh my God!" he groaned. "I used my wife's towel this morning." Skiakilaughed and turned up the ventilators to full force. "I understand. No hard feelings. Now let's get your wifeout of here. I have an office about half a mile down the hall. We can talk there." They sat down in the vacant office and looked at each other. Mr. Burne saw a pleasant, youngish man with cropped black hair, small expressive ears, high telltale cheekbones, slitty eyes that would need careful watching and graceful hands that would be a dead giveaway. "Now, Mr.Burne, how can I help you?" Skiaki said while his hands asked, "Why the hell have you come pestering me?" "Dr.Skiaki, I'm a colleague in a sense; I'm a professional witch doctor. One crucial part of my ceremonies is the burning of various forms of incense, but they're all rather conventional. I was hoping that your expertise might suggest something different with which I could experiment" "I see.Interesting. You've been burningstacte ,onycha , galbanum,frankincense ... that sort of thing?" "Yes.All quite conventional." "Most interesting. I could, of course, make many suggestions for new experiments, and yet-." HereSkiaki stopped and stared into space. After a long pause the warlock asked, "Is anything wrong, Doctor?"

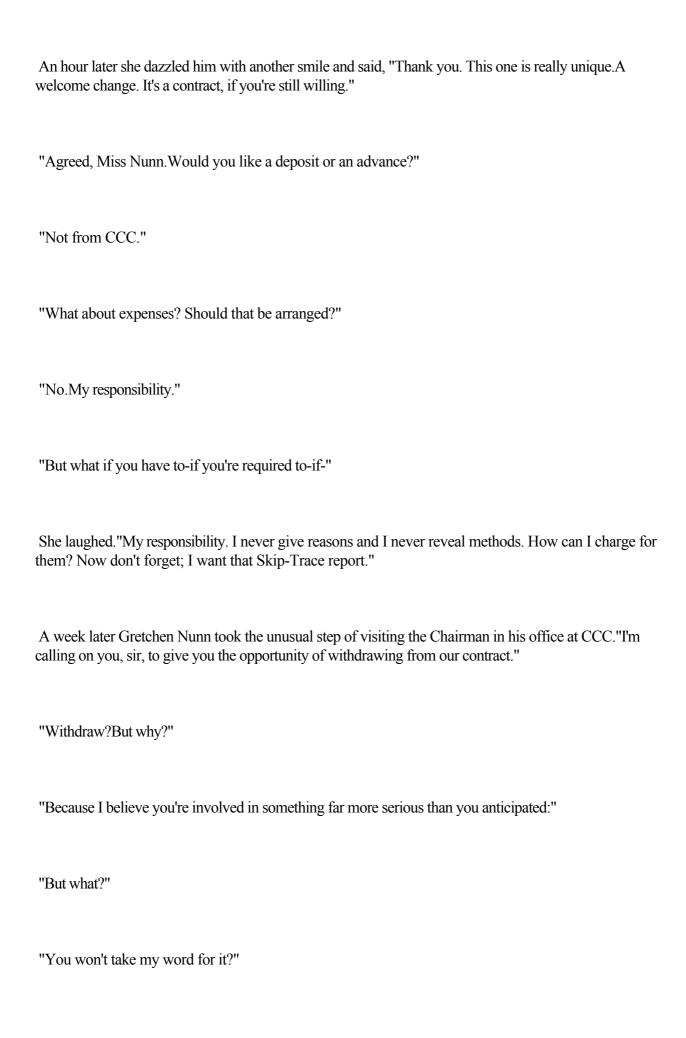
"Look here," Skiaki burst out. "You're on the wrong track. It's the burning of incense that's conventional and old-fashioned, and trying different scents won't solve your problem. Why not experiment with an altogether different approach?"





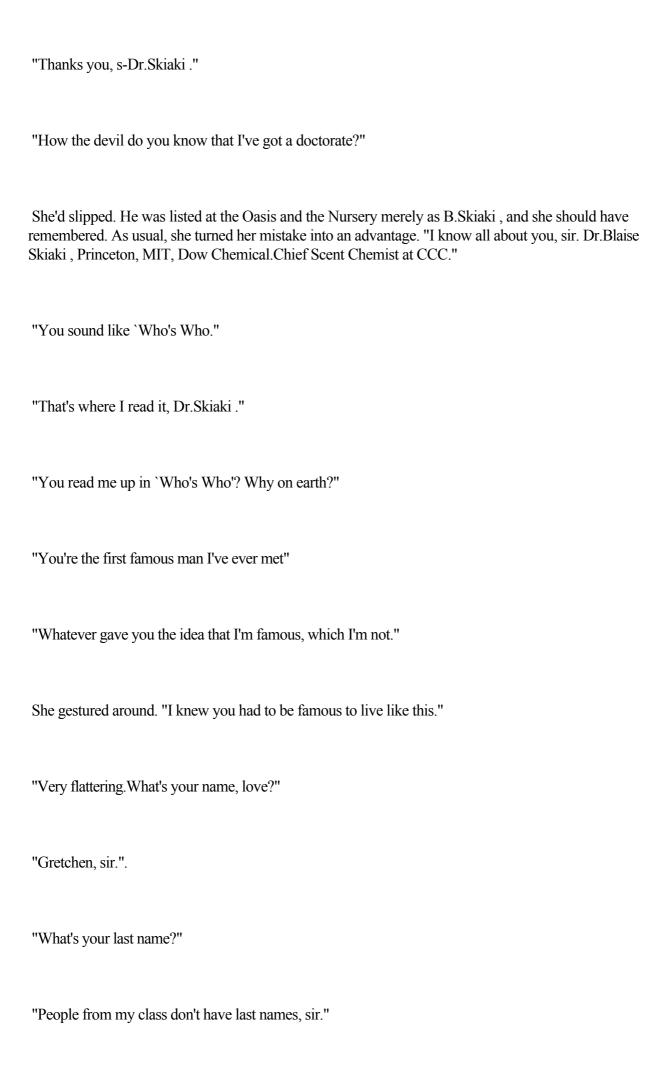
"Only that he is driven by something. I would say that he is possessed by the devil, but that is the cant of my profession. Others may use different terms-compulsion or obsession. The terminology is unimportant. The basic fact is that something possessing him is compelling him to go out nights to do-what? I don't know. All I do know is that this diabolical drive most probably is what is blocking his creative work for you."
One does not summon Gretchen Nunn, not even if you're CCC whose common stock has split twenty-five times. You work your way up through the echelons of her staff until you are finally admitted to the Presence. This involves a good deal of backing andforthing between your staff and hers, and ignites a good deal of exasperation, so the Chairman was understandably put out when at last he was ushered into Miss Nunn's workshop, which was cluttered with the books and apparatus she used for her various investigations.
Gretchen Nunn's business was working miracles: not in the sense of the extraordinary, anomalous or abnormal brought about by a superhuman agency, but rather in the sense of her extraordinary and/or abnormal perception and manipulation of reality. In any situation she could and did achieve the impossible begged by her desperate clients, and her fees were so enormous that she was thinking of going public.
Naturally the Chairman had anticipated Miss Nunn as looking like Merlin in drag. He was flabbergasted to discover that she was aWatusi princess with velvety black skin, aquiline features, great black eyes, tall, slender, twentyish , ravishing in red.
She dazzled him with a smile, indicated a chair, sat in one opposite and said, "My fee is one hundred thousand. Can you afford it?"
"I can.Agreed."
"And your difficulty-is it worth it?"
"It is." "Then we understand each other so far. Yes, Alex?"

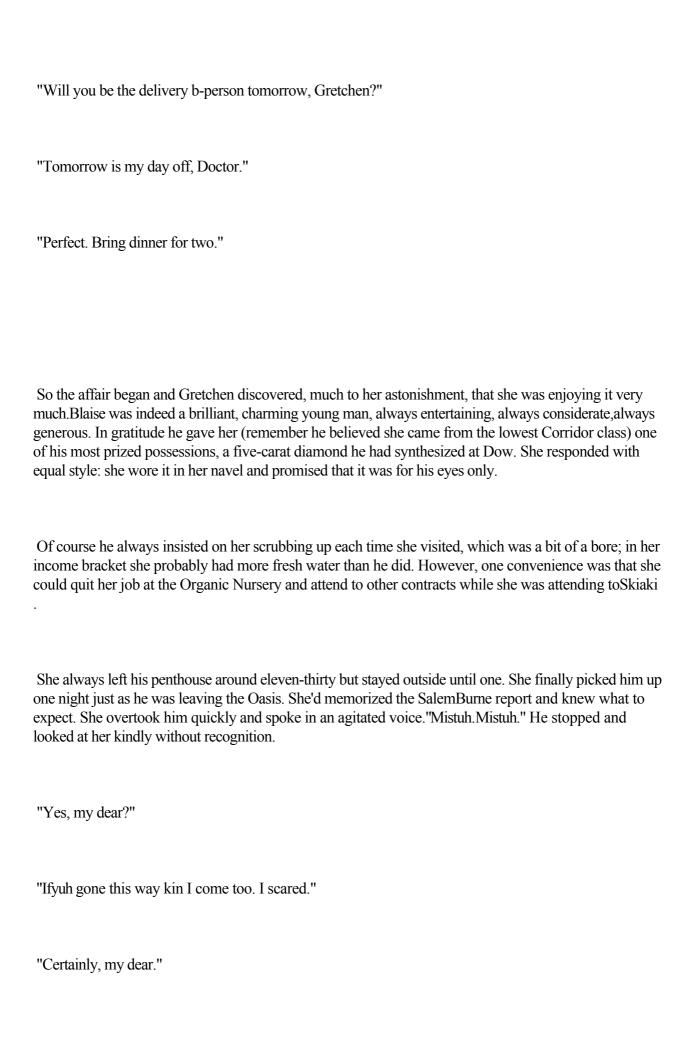


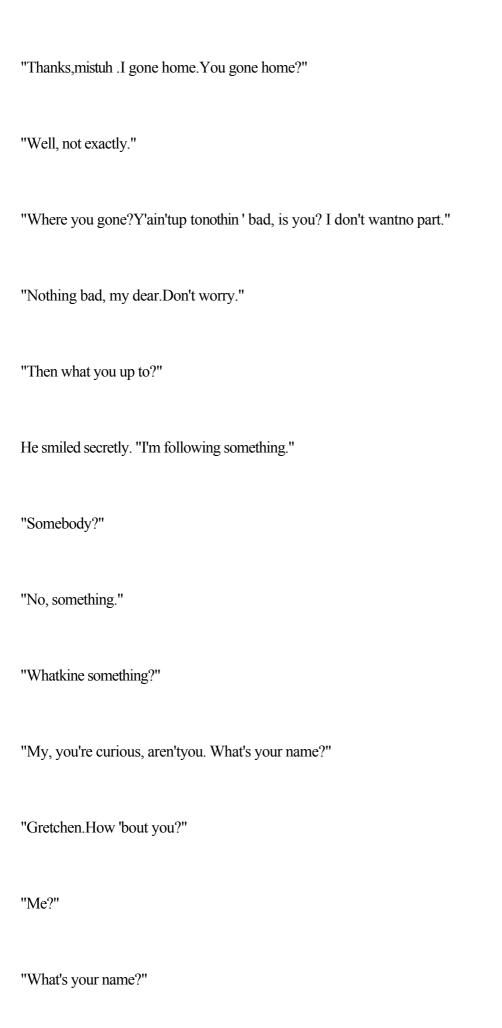


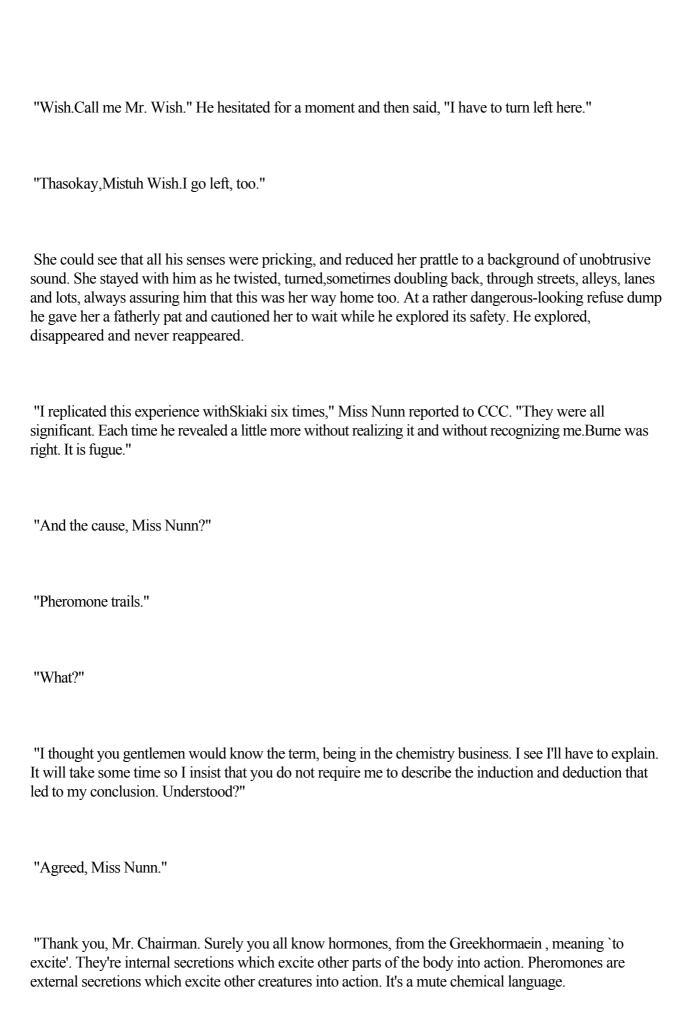








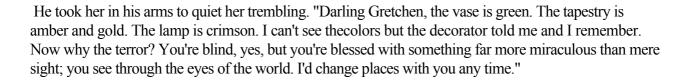












"It can't be true," she cried.
"It's true, love."
"What about when I'm alone?"
"When are you alone? When is anybody in the Corridor ever alone?"
She snatched up a shift and ran out of the penthouse, sobbing hysterically. She ran back to her own Oasis nearly crazed with terror. And yet she kept looking around and there were all thecolors: red,

Back in her apartment she was determined to put the disaster to the test. She dismissed her entire staff with stern orders to get the hell out and spend the night somewhere else. She stood at the door and counted them out, all amazed and unhappy. She slammed the door and looked around. She could still see.

orange, yellow, green, indigo, blue, violet. But there were also people swarming through the labyrinths of

the Corridor as they always were, twenty-four hours a day.

"The lying son-of-a-bitch," she muttered and began to pace furiously. She raged through the apartment, swearing venomously. It proved one thing; never get into personal relationships. They'll betray you, they'll try to destroy you, and she'd made a fool of herself. But why, in God's name, didBlaise use this sort of dirty trick to destroy her? Then she smashed into something and was thrown back. She recovered her balance and looked to see what she had blundered into. It was a harpsichord.

"But . . . but I don't own a harpsichord," she whispered in bewilderment. She started forward to touch it and assure herself of its reality. She smashed into the something again, grabbed it and felt it. It was the back of a couch. She looked around frantically. This was not one of her rooms. The harpsichord. Vivid

Brueghels hanging on the walls, Jacobean furniture, Linenfoldpaneled doors, Crewel drapes.

But . . . this is the . . . theRaxon apartment downstairs. 1 must be seeing through their eyes. I must . . . he was right.I . . : 'She closed her eyes and looked. She saw a melange of apartments, streets, crowds, people, events . She had always seen this sort of montage on occasion but had always thought it was merely the total visual recall which was a major factor in her extraordinary abilities and success. Now she knew the truth.

She began to sob again. She felt her way around the couch and sat down, despairing. When at last the convulsion spent itself she wiped her eyes courageously, determined to face reality. She was no coward. But when she opened her eyesshe was shocked by another bombshell. She saw her familiarroom in tones ofgray . She sawBlaiseSkiaki standing in the open door smiling at her. - "Blaise?" she whispered.

"The name is Wish, my dear. Mr. Wish. What's yours?"

"Blaise, for God's sake, not me! Not me. I left no death-wish trail."

"What's your name, my dear? We've met before?"

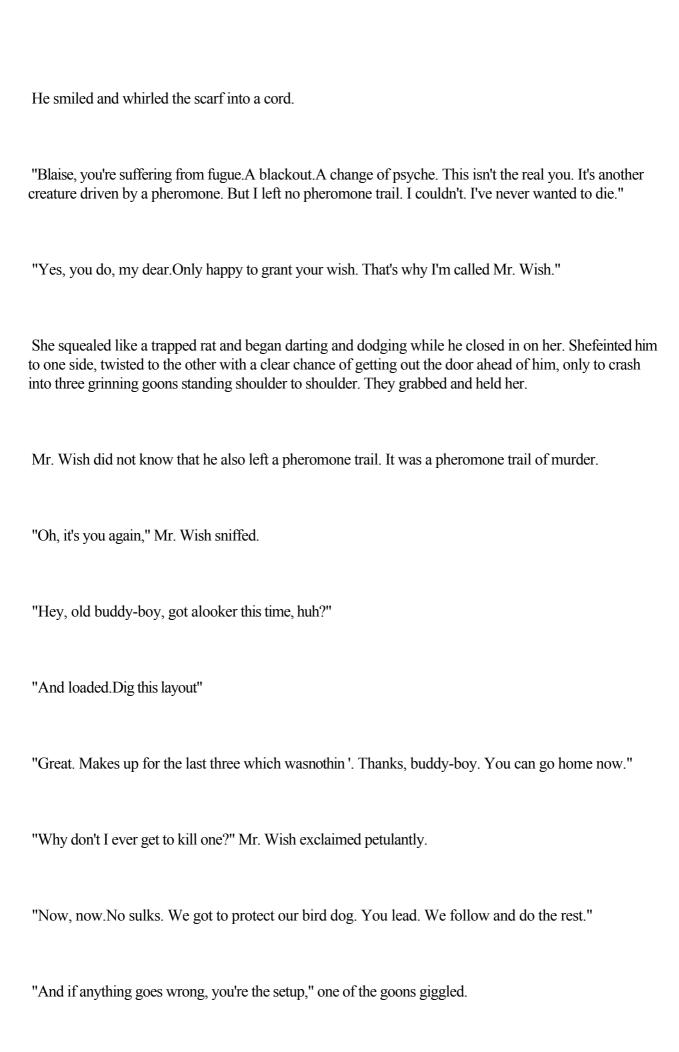
"Gretchen," she screamed. "I'm Gretchen Nunn and I have no death-wish."

"Nice meeting you again, Gretchen," he said in glassy tones, smiling the glassy smile of Mr. Wish. He took two steps toward her. She jumped up and ran behind the couch.

"Blaise, listen to me. You are not Mr. Wish. There is no Mr. Wish. You are Dr.BlaiseSkiaki, a famous scientist. You are chief chemist at CCC and have created many wonderful perfumes."

He took another step toward her, unwinding the scarf he wore around his neck.

"Blaise, I'm Gretchen. We've been lovers for two months. You must remember. Try to remember. You told me about my eyes tonight . . . being blind. You must remember that."



"Go home, buddy-boy. The rest is ours. No arguments. We already explained the standoff to you. We know who you are but you don't know who we are." "I know who I am," Mr. Wish said with dignity. "I am Mr. Wish and I still think I have the right to kill at least one." "All right, all right. Next time. That's a promise. Now blow." As Mr. Wish exited resentfully, they ripped Gretchen naked and let out a huge wow when they saw the five-carat diamond in her navel. Mr. Wish turned and saw its scintillation too. "But that's mine," he said in a confused voice. "That's only for my eyes. I-Gretchen said she would never-" Abruptly Dr.BlaiseSkiaki spoke in a tone accustomed to command: "Gretchen, what the hell are you doing here? What's this place? Who are these creatures? What's going on?" When the police arrived they found three dead bodies and a composed Gretchen Nunn sitting with a laser pistol in her lap. She told a perfectly coherent story of forcible entry, an attempt at armed rape and robbery, and how she was constrained to meet force with force. There were a few loopholes in her account. The bodies were not armed, but if the men had said they were armed Miss Nunn, of course, would have believed them. The three were somewhat battered, but goons were always fighting. Miss Nunn was commended for her courage and cooperation. After her final report to the Chairman (which was not the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth) Miss Nunn received her check and went directly to the perfume laboratory, which she entered without warning. Dr. Skiaki was doing strange and mysterious things with pipettes, flasks and reagent bottles. Without turning he ordered, "Out. Out."

He turned, displaying a mauled face and black eyes, and smiled. "Well, well, well. The famous Gretchen Nunn, I presume. Voted Person of the Year three times in succession."

"No, sir.People from my class don't have last names." "Knock off the sir bit."

"Good morning, Dr.Skiaki ."



"Perfect. Bring two dinners."