

The Araqnid Window

by Charles L. Harness

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1. Archeology 411

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Every morning, for many years, right after he turned off the alarm clock, and whether he was on campus or in the field, Professor Speidel had permitted himself a brief visionary moment.

He saw a list of names:

Jean Champollion, Rosetta Stone, 1822.

Sir Henry Layard, Nineveh, 1845.

Heinrich Schliemann, Troy, 1870.

Sir Flinders Petrie, Egypt, 1880.

Sir Arthur Evans, Knossos, 1900.

Sir Leonard Woolley, Ur, 1922.

Hon. Jacques Derain, Ferria, 2095.

DR. REITER SPEIDEL, Araqnia, 21-- .

Yes!

He might have doubts and reservations about some things. He doubted that the terrestrial Stone Age stopped and the Bronze Age began sharply at 2,000 B.C. He doubted that Egypt was older than Sumer. He doubted that the Mayan cities had died because of local soil exhaustion. But there was one thing that he knew for certain, and which he did not doubt. And that was that he, and he alone, was destined to discover the home civilization of the elusive Araqnids. The name of Speidel would be entered in the hall of fame along with other archeological greats. And from this fame would come great influence and power, and money. He would wave his hand, and scores of assistants would put together beautifully illustrated texts on Araqnia. The stereo frontispiece would show him leaning modestly on a shovel, beside a complete piece of the most delicate Araqnid statuary, done doubtless in alabaster. The statue would be sitting on a black velvet cloth spread out at the very spot where it had been teased out of the dig site. He would be smiling. It would be a faint, very wise, very confident smile.

Everything was certain but the date. This morning, as he slowly rose from his cot and fished for his slippers, he had a presentiment that he would make it this summer. He had a good group on this field seminar. One or two exceptions; of course, such as he always had in a group this size. But by and large, most were competent. In a couple of weeks he would be finished here at the base line, and he would send them out in several search parties to other likely sites where Araqnid artifacts had already been found. They knew what to look for. Somewhere on this very Earth-like planet of Ferria were the ruins of a city with a technology so advanced that they had visited all the outlying sun systems of the local star cluster over three thousand years ago. But then, very suddenly, they had disappeared, almost without a trace.

It would have to be this year. He was seventy. The Department was going to retire him. Lack-Coeur, the Departmental Head, had told him so, months before the expedition. "No chance of staying on

afterward, Speidel. Nothing in the budget. Sorry."

"But what if I find Araqnia this trip?"

"No. The answer is still the same. Firstly, there's no such thing as Araqnia. Secondly, even if there were, there's still the question of the budget. Thirdly, you are seventy years old."

Well, no matter. He had immediately written all the foundations and museums. Somewhere there must be a place for him. But the replies had come back, one by one, each one a kick in the stomach. Every few days he got another one. "Our staff full for the coming season."

God, it was hell to be old. Thirty years ago, when he had yet to write the first edition of Comparative Archaeology, he had got a dozen offers when he closed up his first expedition. There was still hope, of course. He had yet to hear from Interstellar Geographic. They had financed Derain, the discoverer of this planet, fifty years ago. He should have a TX from them any day now. He had given them three proposals of varying scope and expense, all directed to finding the lost city. The third and cheapest proposal was simply to toss up an orbiting satellite to make a combination photo-sonar scan of the entire planet, with computerized enhancements. Geographic was his last hope.

He switched the tent light on, shaved and dressed quickly, and got out his notes for the morning lecture. A few minutes later the twin suns of Algol burst over the horizon like a nuclear explosion. From down the camp street he could hear the chattering begin. Why did young people have to make so much noise?

The youngsters seemed to feel a duty to make a racket day and night. With the lights-out signal, when sane people should be composing themselves for slumber, the camp put on a new burst of energy. Night brought out the guitars, the concertinas, the singers, and the two moons. One big moon and one little moon, skipping and dancing as it orbited the big one. And there was giggling, music, and waltzing on the sward for all hours, probably with liquor. At night he buttoned his tent flap tight and refused to inquire as to what might be going on out there. God knows what all they did. But they looked fresh and bright in the morning. That was what counted. He did not really care what they did so long as they were ready for another good day's work at the dig.

They made him think back to his own student days. He thought of girls, beer, and drinking songs. Why had he never married? He was out in the field too much. It would not have been right to ask a woman to share the hard life at the dig site with him. And yet, these young people today... There were plenty of girls in the groups he had brought here, year after year. And several married couples. The Thorins, for example. The girls did not seem to mind the rough life. But of course they would change when the babies started coming. No, archeology was no life for a woman.

He considered the way the young women dressed. Faded blue jeans stretched tightly across their rumps. In his generation it would never have been done. In his student days the girls had worn dresses in the field. Khaki, generally. Occasionally, perhaps a split skirt. Times had changed, but he had not. Did that mean he was truly getting old? He had to turn up something on this trip. Not that it would help him at the University. The course would have a different teacher next summer, no matter what happened. Too bad. He'd taken a group here for twelve years.

Archaeology 411. Excavations on Ferria. Examination of artifacts. Study of parallel evolution of Araqnid-Llanoan culture. 3 credits.

Araqnia, where are you?

He could hear the young voices in the mess tent, half a kilometer away. What were they talking about? Him? Perhaps.

He knew their name for him. Rider the Spider. They thought him a monomaniac. Well, perhaps he was. It was the only way to make a name in this field. Perhaps he was like Captain Ahab in search of the great white whale. He saw good and evil only in terms of what helped or hindered his search for the fabled Araqnia. It permitted a crystal-clear morality. Sometimes he awoke in a sweat at night, dreaming that he had died before he had found the city. Get hold of an obsession and never let go. That was the way the others had done it. And so would he.

He smiled grimly. Let them chirp and chatter, if that is what they had to do. Just so long as they turned up an artifact or two today.

He looked up the camp street. Across the little valley and up in the range of low hills he could make out the scattered buildings of the Wolfram Mining Company. The chief engineer had studied under him, many years ago. Last evening they had sat down to supper together in the crude mining mess hall. The engineer was sympathetic to the professor's problems. "Professor, all you need is to find this city, and then you will have so much fame that every foundation on earth will come looking for you. Maybe you are not digging fast enough. Maybe you should borrow one of my blastavators for a couple of days. Goes through solid rock like butter."

Speidel had laughed. "I appreciate it, Zachary. Truly I do. But I'll have to pass up the offer. If we dig faster than a centimeter an hour, we're sure to miss something."

Zachary Stone shook his head. "Well, if you change your mind, just let me know. I will send a machine anywhere you say, anywhere on the planet."

"I--" Speidel sneezed suddenly, then fished for his handkerchief.

"Gesundheit!" declared the engineer, looking at him narrowly. "Professor, you are catching something."

"Nonsense. It's just the afternoon mistral. Starts up on the Plateau of Sylva. Flows down the valley every afternoon." He blew his nose, then buttoned his jacket carefully around his throat.

"Sylva? The volcano?"

"That area, yes. The cone has been extinct for centuries. The lava flows made the plateau. It's all forested over, now. There's nothing there."

"Maybe we should send a 'vator up. Plow around in the lava a little."

"Not worth it. Araqnia is not on Sylva. All the signs point elsewhere. We've picked up artifacts in a dozen places, but nothing on Sylva."

"Maybe it's there, just buried."

"Then it's no good to me. I've got to locate and catalog things I can find quickly. Unless I get something from Interstellar Geographic, this is my last trip. I've got to show results, and I've got to send the kids out where I know they can find something."

"Sure, Professor. It's your show. Just let me know if I can help."

It was good to have friends. But there was nothing the engineer could do for him. At least not at this dig.

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2. Four Hundred Mounds

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After breakfast he wound up his morning lecture from the little dais in the mess tent.

"Our topic this morning is the Four Hundred Mounds, located two kilometers north of our camp. As we know, these mounds are lined up neatly in rows, twenty by twenty, and consist mostly of iron oxide, Fe_2O_3 . And that was why the great Derain named this planet Ferria. and there the mystery begins. For there were suspicious percentages of other metals along with the iron. Nickel was there, and cobalt, tungsten, molybdenum, chromium. Metals such as are found in our own ferrous metal structures. Our machinery. Our landcraft. Our seacraft. And, most intriguing of all, our spacecraft. Had these rust heaps once been proud ships, challengers of the deeps of space? I am almost certain they were. But the great number troubles me. Had every ship in the Araqid fleet been caught on the ground by some terrible disaster? Ah, what we would give to know! And somewhere here the answer is waiting for us.

"It has been proposed that this area was indeed the lost city, and that these piles were the houses. Impossible. Iron houses? No. And only four hundred houses? Not acceptable. And not storage sheds or warehouses, either. No, these were space-ships. How do we know this? Next to the area of the four

hundred mounds is a concrete apron, several hectares in extent. Like all of this area, it is covered with fifteen centimeters of volcanic ash. Last year we borrowed a remote-control blastavator from the Wolfram Company and scraped off the overburden on a two-meter path, right down to the concrete pads. We took skin samples from the concrete and picked up some nice radioisotopes of alkaline earth silicates. So we are even able to identify their nuclear fuel mix. And not only that, from the isotopic residues we can date their last blast-off. The radiology lab at the University gives it as three thousand plus or minus three hundred years B.P.-- before the present. This coincides nicely with data from the other known landing sites on the four other planets, including two on Earth, which is to say, one in the North Sahara and one in California. Students, just imagine those marvelous explorations of thirty centuries ago. They blasted off from this very place, just a few kilometers away, and they landed on our own home planet. You can almost see them. And then..." His voice dropped uncertainly. "And then, they disappeared. No more flights to Earth, no more explorations anywhere. Overnight, they vanished. Why? What terrible disaster struck them? Well, perhaps on this trip we shall find out.

"Now then, enough talk. Let's get to work!"

Nevertheless, within the hour the professor found himself making another speech.

"It has been said-- " (And here the professor deliberately quoted himself.) "-- that archaeology is a process of destruction."

The circle of seminarists dropped spade and sieve and assembled around the savant.

"Destruction, yes," the professor continued grimly. "But we mean *informed* destruction. And don't forget the modifier. Is *this*-- " (he pointed to John Thorin's trench) "-- *informed* destruction?"

The class looked at the young student in secret sympathy. It was going to be a bad day.

"The Llanoans," continued the professor, "built a wall here. A wall of sunbaked clay bricks. Then the wall crumbled, as such walls do. The desert moved in and covered everything. And now Mr. Thorin comes along with his spade, some four thousand years later, and digs a fine trench. And runs it right through the wall. Mr. Thorin, this is destruction, but it is not informed destruction. May I ask, sir, why your trench did not stop when it came to the wall?"

"I guess, sir, because the wall texture was the same as the soil. I just did not see the line where the soil stopped and the wall began. The bricks were made from the desert soil in the first place, and I guess they sort of weathered back into soil."

"So that you should have been specially careful, eh, Mr. Thorin? Well, then, can you now show the class the wall which you have zoomed right through with such enthusiasm?"

Thorin flushed. Forced to rub his nose in it. Thank God the light was just right. He could barely pick out a band of something about one decimeter thick. But he knew that if the professor had not told him it was there, he would have missed it. He knelt and pointed at the boundary.

"Very good. And now let's trade." He took the spade gently from the student's hands and gave him a digging knife. "You will now proceed to define the wall. Carry on, class."

Thorin sighed. He hoped this wasn't going to set the pattern for the field trip. He was glad his wife had not been present to witness his humiliation. Fortunately, Coret was busy today typing reports in the administration tent.

And that bit with the knife. As though to tell him he couldn't be trusted with anything so gross as a shovel.

He set his jaw philosophically and began to hack away. Just how he was going to run a trench a meter wide down the full length of the wall using only a handknife, he did not know. The shovel was the only way to do it. But he wasn't going to risk the shovel again. The professor might send him home. Even though he was majoring in instrumentation, he needed this 3-hour credit in ark. He had to finish this field trip. No, he could not risk antagonizing the professor.

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Digging alternated with lectures.

"On a rock in Tassili, in the northern Sahara, on our home planet, is carved a line drawing of a figure in

a space suit. Who were these creatures?" The professor looked across the assembled group, sitting on the ground around the camp fire, and his eye fell on John Thorin.

Thorin knew his lines by heart. "Most likely the Araqnids," he mumbled.

"Most definitely the Araqnids, Mr. Thorin. And there are similar markings in the Tulare region of California. And where did the Araqnids come from, Mr. Thorin?"

Thorin bore it in patience. "Here on Ferria, somewhere."

"Yes. Very definitely. Somewhere here on this very planet. We have already detected several of their rocket sites here. We have found their artifacts here, and fragments of their statues. We have a fair idea of what they looked like. A rather small spider-like people, with tentacles. And just as we ride horses, they rode furry bipeds,-- the Llanoans. We have established this in drawings on pottery. We postulate a home city for them, which I have named Araqnia. Our prime objective for this seminar is to find Araqnia."

"Good," thought the instrumentalist. "He is off on Araqnia. Nobody will get chewed out for the rest of the lecture."

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3. The Wind

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Next day, the professor said to Thorin, "I am assigning you to the sifting screen. The excavators will bring you the soil they have dug up, one wheelbarrow after another. They will help you shovel it onto the screen bed. You press the button, here, and the machinery will vibrate the screen. The soil will drop through. Potsherds, small artifacts, anything the shovels missed, will be retained on the screen. When you see anything, pick it up right away and put it on the collection table. This is very simple. A child could do it. Do you think you will have any trouble?"

"Of course not, sir."

"Don't say 'of course not.' I am taking a chance on you. Just do it."

"Yes, sir."

As he expected, there was nothing to it. The hours passed, and the wheelbarrows kept rolling up. He helped them unload. The waste dropped through the sieve into the little mining car, which moved off down the slope to dump its burden, and then rolled back again. Once in a while he caught an over-size pebble on the screen. That was all.

After lunch, it became hotter, but the afternoon breeze from the plateau got stronger and kept the perspiration stripped from his body. The breeze felt fine. He shifted around to windward of the sieve to keep the loess from blowing over him.

At this point an unfortunate thing happened. Coret had wheeled up a load of soil. Together they had shoveled it onto the screen. Then she had turned the wheelbarrow around, and he had switched the shaker on and was watching her push the barrow back down the boarded path. The wind was gusting sharply, and she had to stop for a moment to retie her kerchief about her hair. The bare hint of her jasmine perfume brushed his nostrils. As he faced back to the sifter, there was Professor Speidel, frantically picking things out of the sieve box.

"Turn it off!" cried the professor.

Thorin turned it off. "What's the matter?"

"Do you know what you have just shaken to pieces?" He held up a handful of shards.

"No, sir," gulped Thorin. "What?"

"A pollen box!"

"A pollen box, sir?"

"Yes, 'a pollen box, sir.' Pollen was a delicacy the Araqnids fed their Llanoan mounts, just as we feed pieces of sugar to a horse. They kept it in little pottery boxes. Such as this used to be."

"Well, sir, I will be happy to restore it. I can glue the pieces back together."

"I'd never trust you with it. And even if you knew how, the pollen is gone, totally blown away. The box was full of it. When the box broke, the wind completely scattered it. Not a grain left. Nothing to give our botanists. They could have identified the plants." He studied Thorin glumly, "I am being punished. But why? What have I don't to deserve this?" He shook his head and stalked away.

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4. The Pack

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At the evening lecture the professor expounded on practical matters. "The competent archeologist carries a knapsack into the field. This knapsack should contain the necessary working tools, nothing more. You will need a small folding shovel: the so-called trench shovel. And a mason's pointing trowel. A small hoe. You can make one by sawing off most of the handle of a small garden hoe. Next, a small camp ax. A jackknife. And for cleaning the artifact, a small paint brush. If the artifact is fragile, you may want to strengthen it immediately with celluloid-acetone solution before you even take it from its matrix. We had a case this afternoon..." He looked over at John Thorin severely.

The instrumentalist squirmed. The pollen box was all over the camp, now. Was the professor going to bring it up again in front of everybody?

But the professor had other ideas. "Mr. Thorin, do you have a knapsack?"

"Yes, sir. Sort of."

"Sort of?"

"I made my own back-pack, sir."

"It has, of course, the things I just mentioned?"

"Well, perhaps not all of them, sir."

"Could you demonstrate your pack, Mr. Thorin?"

"Well, I guess so. Just a moment, sir, while I get it."

Perhaps this was an opportunity to redeem himself. Actually, he was rather proud of his pack. There were some pieces of special equipment in it that he had made in the tool shop back at the museum. He ran all the way to the tent and back.

"Here, sir." He put it on the lecture table. "It zips open here."

"Yes. And what is this?"

"A coverall, sir. Very light. Folds to a very small size, as you can see. There are gloves, and wrappers for the feet. Covers the body from head to toe."

"Why would one want to cover the body from head to toe, Mr. Thorin?"

"Well, rain, sir?"

"Do you know the last recorded rainfall in this area, Mr. Thorin?"

"No, sir."

"It was before you were born. Well, now. What is this?"

"It is a polarizer, sir. It measures stress in transparent or translucent objects."

"Does it have any significance for an archeologist?"

"Well, suppose he found a piece of glass, or something like that, and he wanted to find out if it was in a stressed condition ..."

"Next item, Mr. Thorin."

"Well, this is an orientor."

"A compass?"

"No, sir. Actually, it is more than a compass. It is a tiny recording gyroscope. Once you set it you can go on a very winding path, even in three dimensions, and it will record all the twists and turns and guide you back when you are ready to return."

"A compass is much more reliable, Mr. Thorin. But what have we here?"

"A sonar device, sir. It sends sound pulses into rooms and chambers that you can't get into, and it will give the position of things in the chamber."

"Indispensable, I am sure. And this?"

"I call it a flexiscope. It's a periscopic, extensible probe. An advanced model of the type that Carlo Lericci used to lower into Etruscan graves in the twentieth century."

"Well, possibly. And what's this?"

"Infra-red scope, sir. You can shine it on any surface, and it will reflect back a heat image of anything warm that has recently touched the surface."

"I am sure we have many warm-blooded creatures underground who will appreciate your interest in them. And what have we here?"

"As you can see, sir, it is a pistol."

"A weapon? My God!" The professor struck his palm to his forehead. "You think the mummies will rise up and attack you? That perhaps the Araqnid skeletons will go after you with their tentacles? How long do you think the government would permit us to continue to excavate if we came out of the digs each morning wearing a gun like your ancient cowboy gangsters? Get that thing out of here! The whole pack!"

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After Thorin had slunk away the professor continued his lecture. "It is a great mystery. The Araqnids certainly achieved interplanetary and interstellar travel thousands of years before we did. Their culture and technology was vastly ahead of ours. And when we find their ruins, we may be the first to establish a great archeological paradox: The buried culture is more advanced than that of the diggers. It has never happened before, and even now it is difficult to imagine. For if they were that far advanced, they should have been able to recover from earthquakes, flood, disease, even nuclear warfare." The professor sneezed violently, then blew his nose. "The mistral has given me a cold, students. Take care you keep yourselves warm when you are out in the wind." He returned to his theme.

"We have been able to study at first hand certain of our primitive arrested cultures which exist today as they did five thousand years ago. For example, the Australian aborigines, the Eskimo, the Bedouin, the bird-raisers of the planet Avia, the sea-harvesters of the planet Thallassa. But these cultures have been limited, generally devoid of writing skills, permanent dwellings, or specialized professions. All men were hunters or shepherds, for example. And so it is a bitter irony that these primitive cultures have survived, and the marvelous civilizations of Memphis, Rome, and Araqnia have long vanished. Ah, what were the sounds and smells in the Piraeus on an average day, and what was the chant of the slave gangs that raised the great blocks of Cheops? What were the Araqnids like-- the scientists, their women, their families? All is lost, except in our imaginations."

John Thorin had meanwhile crept back, and was listening on the fringes of the circle. The professor was not poetic by nature, and Thorin conjectured that the archeologist must have read this somewhere. No matter. It was all true.

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5. The Peculiar Holes

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The next morning, while Thorin was scraping (very very carefully) on the soil in his allotted grid, he uncovered a small hole, which seemed to slant tortuously down into the ground. It was about two centimeters in diameter. An animal burrow? He thought not. Rather too small for that, unless of course it was a very small animal indeed. More likely, an insect burrow. Well, he would soon know. He continued to scrape, removing a plane of soil about one centimeter thick at a time, in the approved fashion. And then he uncovered another hole. And then two more. Well, now, the thought, a while family of whatever it is. We are getting somewhere. I will bet these lead to some sort of central nest. He scraped cautiously. Ah, there it was. The burrows all converged into a larger chamber, somewhat larger than his head. He bent over and peered into this hole. And there seemed to be an even larger cavity below this one. Well, he would soon get to the bottom of the matter. He continued to scrape. In another fifteen minutes he was able to remove completely the dirt defining the upper chamber, and he was well into the lower chamber. At one point he stopped and peered down into the lower hole. To his surprise, it seemed to have four burrows slanting downward from it. More and more interesting. He wondered for a moment whether he should call the professor. But the professor might scold him for the interruption. After all, it was still just a hole. It wasn't as though he had uncovered the top of an artifact.

Just then a shadow fell on him. He looked up. It was the professor. Thorin smiled uncertainly. Then, as he studied the professor's face, his smile vanished. "Is something wrong, Professor?"

"What is it?" asked the professor hoarsely.

"A hole, sir, that's all. Just a hole."

The professor climbed down into the excavation with him and squinted into the little chamber. After a time he shifted his position and peered down again. "I need more room, please get out for a moment. Do it as carefully as you can."

"Of course."

The professor pulled a handlight from his side pocket, got down on his hands and knees, and made a final examination of the hole. Then he stood up laboriously, pressed a hand to the small of his back, and asked, "There was a chamber just above this one?"

"Yes, sir," said Thorin uneasily.

"And four burrows leading down into that one?"

"Yes, sir. How did you know that?"

The professor groaned. It was a mournful, heartrending sound. Afterwards he was silent for a time.

A cluster of students had now gathered curiously around the pit. Coret put her arm protectively around her husband's waist.

A tear began a zigzag course slowly down the furrows of the professor's cheek. "It is true," said the professor sadly, "archeology is a destruction. But as I have already explained to all of you, it is a controlled, informed, and educated destruction. We destroy the matrix of loess, mud, and gravel in order to recover the primitive skull, the objet d'art, the bronze brooch."

"But I didn't destroy anything," protested Thorin. "There was this hole in the subsoil, about one meter down, and I--"

"This hole," said the professor, dignified, but white-faced, "was where an Araqnid statue used to be. Alabaster is slowly soluble. It had been leached away by ground water, probably centuries ago. Only the empty outline was left."

"But surely, the hole wasn't any good," said Thorin.

"Good heavens," whispered the professor.

"You were supposed to fill it up with plaster of paris, dear," said Coret. "That would give you the exact shape of the original statue."

"It would probably have been the first complete reproduction of an Araqnid on his Llanoan mount,"

said the professor heavily. "Worth the cost of the expedition."

Coret walked her husband back to the tent, so that the professor would not be tempted to do anything foolish.

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6. The Fall of Civilizations

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Next morning, the professor opened his breakfast lecture with his inevitable theme. "The Araqnid-Llanoan mergence took place about four thousand years B.P. Prior to this time the Araqnids had advanced approximately to the state of our own Egyptian or Mesopotamian cultures, of say three thousand B.C. They had spears, the crossbow, the battle-ax. They fought battles in chariots. They cultivated plants equivalent to our wheat, corn, and barley, and they had fruit orchards. Curiously enough, the Llanoans were beginning to develop their own very primitive culture. In the preceding hundred thousand years they had evolved from a furry quadruped to a furry biped, although we may speculate that they still had a somewhat shuffling gait and might from time to time touch the ground with their knuckles. Although the Llanoans had no agriculture, they had a varied diet. They ate wild berries and fruits, they trapped and ate small animals. Their only weapons were improvised clubs. The evidence suggests that before the mergence of the races, the Araqnids and the Llanoans were about the same size and build. After the mergence, the Araqnids shrank in size and the Llanoans became taller and heavier. That, of course, was to be expected. The Araqnids became totally parasitical on the Llanoans. We lack concrete evidence as to the mechanism of the Araqnid body structure that permitted this parasitism to function. We speculate, however, that when the Araqnid was mounted on the Llanoan, two or more tubular probes were thrust into the spinal column and the bloodstream of the mount. This system permitted the Araqnid to dispense in large part with a digestive system. In evolving in this direction they might well have lost fifty kilos. In their final form, they must have been mostly head and tentacles.

"It was a strange symbiosis. Exact analogies are lacking in our own terrestrial history. As pairs, we think of *homo sapiens* and *equus*, but the analogy is inexact. The horse never had any culture of its own, and of course there was no blood-to-blood contact between the two animals.

"The Araqnid-Llanoan relationship was unique. Its potentials were immediately recognized by the Araqnids. All manual labor, all menial tasks, were done by their mounts. The master race was freed to think, to create, and to invent. In one thousand years they had steam-powered vehicles. A few hundred years later they were in space. We know they visited several planets in the local sun cluster. And then they vanished. They must have had a great city, with tall buildings and several million inhabitants. But it has vanished without a trace. Civilizations have come to an end before, of course. The Babylonians destroyed Nineveh in 612 B.C., and it never rose again. But at least the ruins are still there. Rome destroyed Carthage, but at least we know the site, and how it happened. Knossos fell beneath a combined earthquake and tidal wave. Angkor Wat has been deserted for a thousand years, but we know where the city is. The Mayan cities of the Yucatan are long deserted, but at least we know they are there, and we can see and touch the buildings and temples. Not only do we not know where Araqnia is, we don't know why it disappeared. Was it flood? War?" He coughed raucously and blew his nose. "Disease? Some nasty virus such as I have? (God protect them!) It might well have been a genocidal epidemic.

"Yes, an epidemic. As we know, the population of Easter Island was wiped out in the early nineteenth century by exposure to Europeans. The Mediterranean area was ravaged by a brand-new disease brought back from the New World by Columbus's sailors. Today we know it as syphilis. Whole tribes of

North American Indians have been destroyed by a single exposure to variole, which used to be our mildest form of smallpox." He wiped at his nose. "And even a little thing like the common cold was fatal to thousands of Eskimos when they were first exposed to it by the early explorers looking for the Northwest Passage. As a matter of fact, if I and my cold were transported back into Araqnia of three thousand years ago, I myself might be a contributing cause to their destruction. To them the common cold might be a lot worse than the Black Plague was to Europe in the Middle Ages.

"So much for disease and the fall of civilizations. Next week we shall divide the group into search parties of two or three students, and we will all look for the lost city. And we shall find it. Have no doubts about that. Just think. We shall stand there, looking out into a street that once was filled with these remarkable beings. In our inner ear we shall hear the ordinary street noises of an ordinary Araqnid day. We shall watch their wonderful cars and vehicles moved at tremendous speed up and down the airways of the city."

The professor looked dreamily off into the distance. "What we need is a window on the past. A sort of time machine that rolls back a couple of thousand years, and lets us see the natives as they really were, what they wore, how they talked, and the million details of their everyday living."

At this point, unbeknownst to his listeners, he had a momentary flashback into his own past. For he had stood on the steps of the Acropolis and looked down on Athens. He had stood on the steps of the Roman Forum and had looked out on the Via Flaminia. He had looked out on the Egyptian desert from the temple of Karnak. He had stood on the great tragic Mount Masada and looked down on the Dead Sea. He had gazed forth from a ziggurat in Babylon, and from the Temple of the Sun near Mexico city. From all these places he had let the times of the structure take over. The hoverbuses and modern buildings and people in their twenty-second-century clothing had vanished, the millennia had rolled away, and he had seen the ordinary people and carts and wagons and animals of bygone times. And he would do the same here. He would find Araqnia, and a window in Araqnia, and he would look forth upon the remains of the lost city, and for him it would come to life again. And when this happened, it would not matter whether he had found a new post, or whether he would have to take his little University pension and disappear. If he ever found the right window, he just might walk through it and be gone forever.

The professor sighed, then became embarrassed. "Well then, let's be off. All of us have work to do. Dismissed!"

John Thorin looked covertly at his wife. "Nutty as a fruitcake."

"Don't talk like that. He loves his work."

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7. Poolside

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Next day the sub-groups were named and assigned their search areas.

Thorin and Coret were named as one group. Their assignment was the Plateau of Sylva.

"But Professor, sir!" protested Thorin. "That's the only place on the planet where no Araqnid artifacts have been found!"

"Exactly," said the professor grimly. "It is up to you to remedy the lack."

"But, sir, I need to collect material for my thesis. The plateau is a thousand square miles of virgin forest. Where do I start to dig?"

"Consider it a challenge, young man. Look harder. And since you have so little time, I suggest you start immediately."

"Sir, if it's the Llanoan wall, I can explain-- "

"Perhaps you can find another wall, Mr. Thorin."

"And I'm truly sorry about the pollen box, and the holes, or whatever you call it. I'll be very careful, if only you can switch my assignment."

"Check back with me as soon as you turn up something, Mr. Thorin. Someone will be on the TX at all times."

"Yes, sir." Thorin backed out of the tent. This was the end.

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Pompeii Jones let the skiff hover over an open place in the forest. "There's a stream, and a pool. You might as well have a decent campsite."

"It's pretty," said Coret gamely. "Take us down, Pom-pom."

"Say a hundred meters or so from the pool," said Thorin. "We don't want to be in the path of animals coming down to drink."

The staff man helped them get their gear out of the luggage rack. "Need any help with your tent?"

"No. It's a pushbutton."

"Don't forget to file your evening report."

"Yeah."

"Well then, see you in a couple of weeks."

"Yeah."

"Sorry, old friend."

"Yeah."

* * *

At sunset the instrumentalist filed a nonchalant TX with the professor. "Camping in clearing near pool. Coordinates A26, Q19. Biosensored area for one kilometer diameter. Numerous small avians and herbivores. Nothing dangerous. No trace intelligent life past or present."

That night they cooked over a primitive campfire, and later Thorin got out his concertina and they sang mournful songs by the light of the dying embers.

Finally they yawned, zipped up the electroscreen, and got into their sleeping bags.

Thorin had just dozed off when Coret awakened him. "John, there's something out there."

He listened but heard nothing. "Probably an Araqnid. Go to sleep."

"I'm not sleepy."

"Well, I am. Goodnight."

"With the moving and all, I didn't get a shower all day."

"So? I haven't had one this week."

"You don't mind being dirty. I do."

"You can get one in the morning. In the pool. You'll have it all to yourself."

"You're sure there's nothing out there?"

"Just an Araqnid."

"Don't be funny. They're extinct."

"Yeah. Goodnight, Coret."

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8. The Creature

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It was morning, and he was barely awake when he heard the scream. He squirmed from his sleeping bag and grabbed the pack. Even as he ran out of the tent he began fumbling in the side pocket that held the pistolet. "Coret! I'm coming!"

But there were no more screams. Nothing, until he reached the edge of the pool where Coret had gone for her morning bath.

He saw her at the same instant he got the gun out. She was naked, and running and stumbling up the path away from him. There was something horrid and bristly on her back.

He stood there transfixed for the briefest fraction of a second, as the color left his face. "My God," he whispered. But within the time it took him to set the pistolet to 'stun,' his wife had disappeared around the bend of the path.

He picked up the pack by one strap and dashed off after her.

He cursed himself for letting her go down to the pool without him. But yesterday it had all seemed perfectly safe. He had evidently missed a crucial life form. And the omission might well kill his wife.

Coret had now vanished around a turn in the path. But when Thorin arrived there, seconds later, he saw that it was more than a turn. It was a fork. The path branched off to both the right and the left. And another thing. The main path had been open overhead. But the forks were roofed over with some sort of plastic monofilament.

Coret had taken one of the paths. But which one?

He pulled a handlight from the pack and shone it down each of the paths in turn. He could see nothing, except more of this strange garlanding filament. He would have to chance one or the other. He turned again to the right-hand fork.

And now he noticed something strange. It was an odor. Traces of Coret's perfume were coming from the right-hand path! This was the one, of course. And he was about to dash down this passage, when by chance his eye fell on the soft soil floor of the other path. And there was an incomplete impression of a human foot. Just the ball of the left foot. It had to be Coret, running. And the next footprint would be a couple of meters into the left-hand tunnel. But something... someone (the creature?) wanted him to think otherwise, and in fact had immense skills and technology for persuading him. As witness the scent. The realization stunned him. Definitely, the left. But how then could he account for the delicate traces of jasmine wafting eerily from the right-hand fork? A pang of fear shot through his intestines. It was so violent that he bent over for a moment. The... thing...that possessed Coret was emerging as a fantastically cruel and intelligent adversary. Was it possible that it had already got into Coret's cerebral cortex? And even if the creature knew, in some unexplained way, that Coret used a certain perfume, how had it recreated it? Especially from a different tunnel?

The intimations were... appalling. But he refuse to think about it. He had to get moving.

He picked the bag up and started into the left branch. And then he stopped suddenly. Something was hanging from the filament-network. The skeleton of a small winged creature. It had apparently got stuck there, and then something had eaten it. Or most of it. One of the wings, fairly intact, had fallen half a meter to the floor, where it was again stuck in the felted mass. And a couple of meters farther on, a pig-size skeleton was netted to the floor. And beyond that, another. The place was full of bones. Animals had wandered in here, and they had been caught in these strands. And then something had eaten them.

He picked up a dead tree branch from the pathside and jabbed it into one of the strands. It stuck instantly. He pulled at it. The strand yielded a few centimeters, then firmed up. He pulled at the branch with all his strength. His efforts served only to force it into contact with other strands. It was held so tightly now that it stuck out into the air.

And yet, Coret had passed untouched through these ghoulish garlands.

He shook his head dizzily. If he were ever going to see his wife alive again, or vice versa, he would have to get a grip on himself before the strands did.

He had no idea how Coret had managed to evade the filaments. Yet, perhaps he had a few tricks, too. He took his cape, gloves, and shoe-wraps from the pack and pulled them on. The garments had been

treated with a fluorocarbon polymer so that they could be folded without sticking. The anti-stick property might now come in handy as protection against the webbing. The pack had been likewise treated, so that he did not have to worry about losing it to the filaments.

He took a few steps inside, let the cape contact the wall of strands, and pulled it off again readily. There was no adhesion. He was not going to get stuck.

He opened his pack again, set the orientor, and pulled the bag back again on his shoulders. There might be many twists and turns and forks. He did not trust his memory to guide him back. If he ever came back.

He was a hundred meters into the tunnel, with the entrance-light a tiny disk behind him, when he made his second discovery. The tunnel was made of finished stone, laid with mortar.

This place was not just a natural elongated cave in the side of a hill. Intelligent beings (the Araqnids?!) had made it. It led somewhere. And for the life of him, he did not know whether that was good or bad. It would delight Professor Speidel, of course. But just at this moment he felt no great urge to delight Professor Speidel.

As he trotted, he pulled a lead from the fuel cell in his pack and attached it to his handlight. It would save the batteries in the light, which would otherwise last only a few hours. The fuel cell was good for several days. It might be best not to think what would happen when the main cell failed. Even the orientor would go dead.

How far ahead was Coret? And why was she able to move without getting hung up in this ghastly mess? Undoubtedly, that creature on her back was doing it, doing something to the strands so that she could pass. What manner of creature could alter the laws of adhesive chemistry? And it was really worse than that. What was the nature of this monster who had made this web, and could cause it to synthesize and release complicated molecules identical to Coret's perfume?

He fought a sudden animal urge to turn and run out as fast as he could.

But he hitched the packstraps over his shoulders and pressed on.

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9. The Shaft

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The next fork astonished him. It was not a right-and-left fork. The bifurcation was vertical. He could climb up or he could climb down. Either way he would have to grasp loose loops of webbing with his gloves.

Which way?

A quick survey with the handlight showed no disturbance in either branch, at least as far as he could see with the light.

Well, there was a thing he could try.

He got the polarizer from his pack. This little instrument gave out a pencil beam of light from an ordinary tungsten filament. The beam passed through a slice of calcite, which polarized it, and thence it could be sent through any semi-transparent body, where at least a portion of the beam would be reflected back from the far wall of a body. The reflected beam returned through a receiving lens in the polarimeter, which automatically rotated back and forth seeking a colored path in the object examined. The color would indicate recent stress.

He let the pencil beam dance along the strands of the upper branch. There was no color. Thorin sighed. The upward path might... just might... have led to some ancient rooftop and to free air. But of course it was too much to hope for. He shone the beam downward. Yes, there were several strands

there, definitely stressed. Coret had leaped off the edge of the tunnel lip with great confidence and had caught a strand a good two meters below. And the next stressed strands that he could detect was a good two meters below that one. The thing was barely braking its fall in its flight.

He returned the polarizer to the pack and shone the search beam downward again. All clear. He holstered the pistol, and holding his light so that it would shine downward, began a slow and careful descent.

His thoughts kept returning to the basic mystery of these strange filaments. He had to assume that the creature was in some way able to protect Coret from getting stuck. But how? What was the creature doing that made the girl immune? He speculated that the immunity might well be local and transitory. Even so, it apparently sufficed. The creature was able to force Coret to move with astonishing speed, headlong, pell-mell, whereas he had to feel his way along, meter by meter. And the very haste of Coret's flight was in itself interesting. Perhaps the creature did not wish to risk an encounter with the pistol, even turned down simply to stun. And as he considered that one, the implications confirmed his earlier chilling suspicions. Except through Coret the creature had no way to know that he possessed a weapon, and certainly had no knowledge of its capabilities. Not only had it pierced her spinal cord and seized complete control of her motor nervous system: the thing had very definitely plugged in to her mind and memory.

The odds against him were growing. For the first time, he felt intimations of hopelessness. There were probably other creatures. They were waiting to attack him. He would be overwhelmed and enslaved, the same as Coret. Perhaps he should get out now, while he could, and call for help. The other exploration teams could join him within a few days. All together, they could explore all of the dozens, or hundreds, or thousands, of branches and forks of this accursed warren. Eventually they would find the creature. Yes, that was the logical way to do it.

And what would happen to Coret meanwhile? Would the thing permit her to eat and drink? He thought of the skeletons hanging in the tunnel entrance, and he shuddered. And then he trembled once more, because he could not accurately speculate as to whether Coret would be the eater, or the eaten. Or perhaps both. He was sure of only one thing. The creature would not go hungry. And that of itself would impose a double burden on Coret's blood and tissues. While she lived. And these filaments undoubtedly were spun spider-like from the body of the creature, who in turn took whatever it needed from its host.

If he did not find her in a couple of days, she would die.

From somewhere floated peal after peal of wild laughter.

He froze against the wall of the shaft. The hair on his neck stood straight out and goose bumps played in ripples over his paralyzed cheeks.

It was Coret, of course. The creature had found her voice.

And then the screams stopped, as suddenly as they had come. The echoes vanished. The black silence returned.

He clenched his teeth and continued downward. But now he was uncertain once more. For he had the eerie impression that the sound had come from above, not from below. Was it possible? Was he on the wrong path, after all? He decided to trust his instruments. His senses had gone awry in this gloomy place.

He continued down.

And now he came to a fork in the shaft. One fork branched downward to the right, one to the left.

He hung onto a ladder-like loop in the main shaft while he flicked the analyzer over the strands in the right-hand shaft. Several of them showed stress. Good. He was about to replace the instrument when he decided to double check his conclusion by shining the little beam into the left-hand branch also.

The strands there also showed stress, in fact, about twice as much stress as those in the right-hand branch.

He was stunned. Had something heavy gone down both branches? He had speculated that other creatures might roam these dark caverns. Was this concrete evidence of their presence? In fact, did the extra tension in the left-hand strands indicate a second and much heavier creature? He shone the search beam uneasily down the left-hand shaft. Nothing moved.

But than a thought occurred to him. He clambered down the left-hand shaft for a few meters and then explored the strands below with the polarizer. None showed any stress.

So. The creature had climbed down here a short distance, then up again, and finally over into the right-hand branch. Just to throw him off the track. That explained the double stress of the first few strands here. They had been stretched as the creature descended, and then stretched again as the thing went up again.

He climbed up once more and lifted himself over the lip of the other shaft. The thing was making full use of Coret's intelligence. It was going to be tricky. The dimensions of his problem had expanded again. As he descended he tried to sort it out. The creature could move faster than he. The creature could sense his coming through the network of filaments, and could always manage to keep out of pistol range. Furthermore, the creature would undoubtedly have opportunities to ambush and attack him. He imagined Coret's pearly teeth at his throat, and the thought chilled him. And then, of course, there might be other creatures, with or without host animals, lurking in the strands, waiting to drop on him, even as this one had dropped on Coret. The fluorocarbon cape was no protection against such assault.

The labyrinth itself was a major problem. Undoubtedly it radiated for many kilometers. And substantial portions of it were in three dimensions. He could expect to be in here for many hours. He had emergency food rations in his pack, and of course the little tank of hydrogen, which combined with the oxygen of the air in his fuel cell to give his drinking water as well as his long-term electrical energy.

The creature, he assumed, was even now parasitically feeding on Coret's blood and tissues. The thing was consuming Coret as though she were a seven-course dinner. He did not want to think about it, but he forced himself to consider it. For in that horrid symbiosis lay the only chance he would have of getting Coret out of this dismal place.

The cruel reality was this: he had food and water; Coret had none. And not only that, she had to nourish that horror on her back. He was in hard physical condition; Coret was not. It added up to this: if he could keep moving, not too far behind Coret, never giving them an opportunity to rest, she would eventually collapse on the cavern floor. On her face, perhaps, with the creatures still fastened to her body. And so he would find them. His mouth twisted grimly. He would not need to moderate the pistol beam. And he was an excellent marksman. He would need only one shot.

But all of this was wishful thinking. It might not happen that way at all.

Nevertheless, he knew his plan was basically sound. What was more to the point, it suited his immediate inclination to keep moving. The thought of sitting down somewhere to try to conjure up a better plan was absolutely intolerable.

He came now to the bottom of the shaft and flicked his search beam cautiously around him. It seemed actually to be the crumbling floor of an ancient stone room. He could make out some of the individual blocks. They appeared to be granite. Undoubtedly this planet had had a geological history similar to that of Earth, and the highly cultured beings who had built this vanished city had made full use of their magmatic heritage in laying these cavernous foundations.

This had to be part of the lost city of Araqnia. What irony! He wished he had never heard of the hell-place. And that creature, then, must be a descendant of the once proud Araqnids.

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10. The Rustlings

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It was then that he heard the rustling. Something was in this room with him. He immediately swept the light toward the sound. There was a dark, shimmering heap in the far corner. Thorin recoiled a step and

in a lightning reflex movement, drew his pistolet from its holster. But he did not fire. He leaned forward. The surface of the thing seemed alive, undulant. Otherwise it did not move. Thorin took a couple of steps toward it. Nothing happened. Then another few steps. The rustling was a little louder. Otherwise, there was nothing.

Whatever it was, it was not Coret.

He would hazard a shot, say a stun cone of about ten centimeters diameter.

He pressed the trigger. The beam formed and vanished instantly.

Thorin flung his arm over his face and fell back. Things hit his protective cape, and then bounced off again. His heart pounded violently as the light jerked about the room.

Tiny shapes were flying around him, and circling overhead up the shaft.

He knew instantly. Beetles! Hundreds of them. Scavengers. A ghastly thought hit him. No, of course it could not be Coret. Not yet, not yet! He walked over to the thing in the corner. It was a smallish quadruped. Patches of black fur still clung here and there to its eroding skeleton. Doubtless one of the creature's prior mounts. So this was their mounts' ultimate fate. To be devoured by insects. He thought of the dermestes beetle that lived on the desiccated flesh of Egyptian mummies, and he shuddered.

He bent over to inspect the death-remnant. A six-inch circle of dead beetles covered one shoulder, where the stun ray had struck. He picked up one and studied it briefly. How were these things able to live here without getting caught on the strands? He fished in his pack, brought out the little spectroscope, and ignited a sample of the wing. There were strong lines of carbon and fluorine. The things were protected by fluorocarbon polymers, of about the same composition as the coating on his cape. Probably they had evolved in this way in millennia past, simply to serve this ghoulish service. They kept the tunnels clean.

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11. A Touch of Warmth

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And now, which way? There were three corridors leading out of this room. He inspected each in turn. Each was stone-floored. Here and there, a few filaments slithered across the floor, and numerous strands hung from the ceilings. There was no moss or vegetation on the floors to catch the print of a bare foot. And the polarimeter showed that none of the strands anywhere had been pressed or stretched or, so far as he could tell, even touched. The creature had not permitted Coret to leave any trace of her passing.

And yet, there had to be... something. He realized now that this was merely his hope. It was not a certainty. There was no reason at all to assume that there was in fact evidence that she had entered any of the passages, or, if there were evidence, that he would be clever enough to find it. And he knew now from experience, that if he found a trace in one corridor, he might well find the same trace in the other two corridors. The real problem was to find something in one that the other two did not have.

He returned to the tunnel on the right, and knelt down and examined the floor. It was well-laid granite. It had been here for thousands of years, and it was strange that it was not covered with dust. But there was little or no dust. The sticky strands, acting very much like nasal mucosa, had caught every particle. And yet...

He pushed the infra-red filter over the lens of his handlight, put the i.r. scope to his eye, and surveyed the floor, foot by foot. Nothing. He retraced his steps and entered the middle corridor. He was a bare meter into the tunnel when he found something. The red blotch in his scope resolved into the ball of a foot, complete with five toes. Coret had been running. This was her route. Still, to be safe, he checked the left-hand tunnel. Nothing. He returned to the middle corridor and began trotting down it.

He was perspiring freely. He wished he could remove his cape, but he knew that was impossible. He would be hung up in the strands in seconds.

He now had an idea how the creature was able to protect Coret from this hideous network. He speculated that the thing was able, by simple touch, to neutralize or "turn off" the adhesive surface of the strands as Coret moved along. Thorin had not got a very good look at the creature in the beginning, but he thought it reasonable that the thing had exterior tentacles, perhaps a meter long, and he could imagine these thin arms reaching out and touching the strands. Perhaps a sort of electrical current passed, which had the effect of altering the surface chemistry of the strands. He carried his speculation further. The strand surface was undoubtedly highly polar. He conjured up several models in his mind. A long-chain linear polymer, certainly. And the simplest kind of high polarity would be oxygen based. Which meant that the polymer probably contained a high percentage of hydroxyl and carbonyl groups. Very sticky indeed. And yet, at the creature's command, these groups were "switched off." How? He visualized a stream of electrons flowing from the creature's arms to a strand. These oxygen groups would thereby be reduced, perhaps for several meters along the strands. The carbonyls would become hydroxyls, and the hydroxyls might lose their oxygen altogether, release it to the air, leaving behind an inert methylene group. It must be something like that. It would seem to follow that the oxygen was very loosely bound to the surface molecules of the strands. A rather mild electrical charge was apparently sufficient to dislodge them and render the strand inert. He turned the thought over in his mind. He would have to figure out a way to verify it. If he ever got a breather, it should be a simple matter to run a C-H-O analysis on a strand fragment before and after passing an electrical current through it. Such a mechanism might explain the jasmine scent at the beginning of the chase. Evidently, the creature could control the entire network of strands from any point within the web, and could generate electrical impulses that released the exact combination of molecules that made up the very complex odor of jasmine.

Well then, suppose he was right, so what? How was it relevant in his battle to recover his wife? That he did not know. Maybe it was not relevant. He was not sure what was relevant and what was not relevant.

The hours wore on. He stopped twice to drink water from his fuel cell, and once he took time to open a tin of emergency rations from his pack. He wasn't hungry, and did it only on principle.

He encountered many more forks. Sometimes the creature tried to deceive him with false trails, sometimes not. He noticed now, when the pursuit led along horizontal runways, that an occasional drop of moisture might be found among Coret's footprints. It showed up as a great bloody blotch in the i.r. scope. This puzzled him. Were these tears? Was Coret weeping? He thought not. The creature probably had sufficient control over her voluntary nervous system to prevent any such emotional display. No, it had to be perspiration. Coret was tiring. In fact, Coret must be very tired indeed. Coret might walk several miles a day in her kitchen, and in cleaning their little apartment, but that was not the kind of exercise that would equip her to run and climb hour after hour. It must eventually happen, as he had foreseen from the beginning: Coret was going to drop. The creature might keep her moving during the initial phases of her exhaustion, by brute application of electrical impulses delivered as overpowering hammer blows to her spinal cord. But finally that would fail. And then he would find her. Dying...? Dead...? He stumbled and nearly fell on his face. Was he going about this in the right way? On the other hand, what other way was there? He set his jaw firmly and plunged on. But now he was thinking even more furiously than before. Alternates! He needed alternates. But there were none.

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12. The Balcony Room

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He was well into the twentieth hour of pursuit, and he had long ago lost track of the numerous twists and turns, ascents and descents. He relied on the orientor to record his route. Otherwise, even if he found Coret, they might wander here for days, and finally starve or die of thirst.

The way now led ever higher. He suspected that he was in a great building, possibly above ground. It was probably covered with lava and vegetation, and that was why the aerial surveys had missed it.

A muted humming, persistent but not unpleasant, seemed to fill the corridor. He was coming to something. Machinery? No, the sound was more like that from great electrical transformers.

The passageway opened into a great circular chamber. Thorin played his handlight briefly over the expansive walls and high ceiling. Glassed bookshelves lined the walls. Tapestry-covered tables and odd-shaped chairs bordered the sides of the room, and cabinets filled the corners. Some sort of electrical apparatus sat on the far cabinet. Ten casket-like boxes with opened lids clustered in an area to his right. Statues, faintly luminous, graced some of the table centers.

Thousands of years ago intelligent beings had lived here. He couldn't really know exactly what the Araqnids looked like. But evidently they required space, and room to work and live, the same as human beings.

It was then that he noticed the light. Across the great room there was a rectangular opening in the wall, and a gentle luminosity was drifting in through it. A window to the outside world? Was it possible that the creature had fled through here to the outside?

He panned the room quickly with his handlight. He saw no other exits.

He stepped across the room cautiously and stood before the aperture.

He listened. Over the pervasive electronic humming he could hear strange noises. He knew immediately what they were. Street noises. Vehicles moving rapidly up and down streets, clanging at each other. Even occasional squeaky cries.

It was not possible!

The light evidently came from a balcony that overlooked a busy street. He would have to see this!

But if he stepped out there, would the creature be hiding by the side of the balcony doorway, waiting to ambush him?

He hung his light on his belt, grasped his pistolet firmly in his right hand, and stepped carefully to the balcony entrance. The street sounds were much louder. Very slowly, he peered first to the right, then to the left. The little balcony was empty.

And now, even without stepping out onto the balcony, he could see that a marvelous vista lay open before him: greensward and gardens, fountains and colonnades swept down the valley. The great mall was bordered on both sides by majestic white buildings. They were so tall he could not see their top stories. He ducked back on reflex as a great metal shape hurtled past the balcony. His jaw dropped in total awe.

He had found Araqnia.

Beyond this balcony the city had shaken off millennia of desolation and had sprung back to life. It was like some fairy tale left over from his childhood.

He had a sudden impulse to step out to the balcony railing and peer into the streets below. But he did not. There was something wrong here. It was all too, too strange.

The creature had tried to lose him, first in two dimensions, then in three. The next logical step would be a false trail in four dimensions. This balcony led backwards in time. And he suspected it was a one-way passage. If he stepped out there, he would step into this city as it existed thousands of years ago, with no way to get back to the present.

On the other hand, perhaps the creature had forced Coret out there, and was even now laughing at him from the vantage point of distant eons. Was it possible?

From where he stood, he examined the surface of the balcony floor. Like most of the other structures he had encountered, it was stone. It seemed devoid of disturbance, ancient or recent. He played the i.r. scanner over the surface briefly, but without result. No, Coret had not come this way. He could relax on that score.

He stepped back into the room, trying to stay in the same path he had used on entering the room. From the center of the chamber he shone his light slowly, meter by meter, around the walls. The only exit he could see was the doorway whereby he had entered.

He got out the i.r. again and began systematically to cover the floor. He got firm readings only when it touched his own footprints.

And yet Coret's footprints had been in the long corridor. And the corridor led here, and only here.

He returned to the doorway. Here he picked up her last set of footprints with the i.r. In fact there were several prints. She had been standing there, doing something that involved moving her feet a little. And then she had vanished into thin air.

He looked back into the great room. And now in the grayness of the high ceiling, he picked out an irregularity. As he played his light over it, it resolved into a black disk, about a meter in diameter. It was, he suddenly realized, a hole. A hole in the dome of the ceiling. And it had to be Coret's exit from this room.

But how had she reached it? There were no filaments hanging from the ceiling; it was totally bare.

He examined the walls with his light. Here there were no strands, no filaments for her to climb up to reach the ceiling.

And yet, somehow, she had stood here in the doorway and had reached that hole in the ceiling.

And undoubtedly the horror on her neck was at this moment hovering over the edge of the hole, listening, and perhaps even peering cautiously over the ledge when Thorin's back was turned.

He opened his pack once more and pulled out the sonar.

The sonar beam would not make direct contact with Coret's body, of course. But he did not think that was necessary. The beam would go through the hole, hit a surface, perhaps the ceiling of the room above, then be reflected to another surface, then to another, and another, and it would do this perhaps several dozen times. Eventually, however, a reflection would return to the instrument. He would make ten or fifteen readings, and one of them ought to be weaker than the others. And if it were correct, it would be because something-- perhaps Coret's body-- was shielding out the reflections to a measurable degree.

He found something before he had completed one-third of the circle.

Something.

Coret?

There was no way to know unless he could get up there. And if it were Coret, how had *she* got up there? He thought he knew; but he needed to make an experiment.

He returned to the passageway, and with his pistol, severed a length of filament. The strand was about 5mm. in diameter, a dirty translucent gray, except for its core, which was a tiny black thread. It reminded Thorin of something. An insulated electrical conductor? Perhaps. But there might be an even closer analogy. A mammalian neuron: the central axon with its protective myelin sheath. Very likely it was actuated in the same way as a motor nerve. The creature touched it with a tentacle and a tiny electrical impulse, perhaps measured in milliamperes, passed into the strand. The electrical characteristics of the filament changed. Electrons traveled along its surface, reducing carbonyl groups to hydroxyls, perhaps even releasing loosely-bound oxygen to the atmosphere. And when that happened, the filament, for a couple of meters from the point of contact, was no longer sticky.

This could be easily verified. He plugged conductors into his fuel cell. One conductor end he left bare on the stone floor, to serve as a rather poor ground. The other he touched to one of the strand garlands hanging at the doorway. It adhered tightly. He turned the current delivery knob to one milliamp. The conductor on the strand fell away instantly, bounded off two more strands, and dropped to the floor. That was interesting to know. Neutralizing one strand seemed to neutralize all strands in the same area. Of course, it was not too surprising, since they were all interconnected.

Now he was ready. He repacked the conductors, picked up the piece of strand he had cut, and re-entered the room. He took careful aim and threw the fragment toward the ceiling, near the hole. It stuck there.

And that must have been how the creature had reached the ceiling. It had spun a fresh filament from its

own body, and Coret had thrown the strand through the hole, where it had caught, and then Coret had climbed up the filament, hand over hand, through the hole (her palms must be raw flesh), and they had pulled the cord up after them.

The thing was consuming Coret. Her body was being transformed into this horrid network. How much of this could she take? Evidently quite a bit. For she was waiting for him up there, waiting to kill him.

"Earthling!"

"Aie-- !" The call was so unexpected that Thorin screamed. He picked the pistol from its holster and looked up.

A face peered down at him. He did not recognize it at first as belonging to Coret. It was a twisted, animal thing. The hair was bedraggled, held together in front by perspiration. The eyes were not in good focus. One seemed to wander while the other gazed vacantly at his feet.

"Earthling!"

He held the light with his left hand while he raised the pistol slowly, quietly confirming with a flick of his eye that it was still on "stun."

The face disappeared.

He was not surprised. The creature would not risk paralysis of the host body.

The next call was muffled. "Earthling, I mean you no harm. Nor do I understand your persistent attempts to recover your mate. How can you resent my using her? In your own world you ride horses, camels, even elephants. You kill and eat cattle, sheep, pigs, and chickens. And you know you must die. You have very short lives, less than one hundred years. Why be concerned if it is somewhat shorter? In the few days your mate has left, I will give her many lifetimes. I do not have to do this, yet I shall, as a favor to her, and because she has given me a glimpse into another way of life, primitive though it be. For these reasons I have permitted her to see into my mind. And there was much to see, for I have lived three hundred of your Earth years. I am Keeper Number Ten. The ancestor of the Ten Keepers was named Eroch. He was a great scientist. It was he who built this window into time. Before he died he was able to set apart ten egg-sacs, one for each of the ten three-hundred-year periods that would follow on this side of the window. I am the last. Our prime directive is to preserve this room until the Death-One comes. Nothing must change until the Death-One comes. Go, Earthling! If you die here, the Death-One might be warned away."

It was eerie, unnerving, to hear this coming from the lips of Coret. He understood none of it; yet instinctively he felt he had to keep the creature talking as long as possible. He cried, "Am I the Death-One?"

"No."

"How will you know him?"

"Ah! He sprays treacherous death from his mouth! And when he comes, he must die, here in this room. He must not go forth on the balcony."

"Why?"

"There is more, much more. But I cannot remember. Or perhaps I was not told. My ancestors were ready to send forth great ships, to found colonies. And then the Death-One came, and they died."

"Where? Where were they going?"

"Ah, where? What was it? Was I ever programmed to understand? I do not know. But you must not be here when the Death-One comes. Nothing must affright him. When he stands before the balcony, he dies."

Now that was odd. Thorin had walked toward the balcony, and he had not died. There must be a comparator beam that had analyzed him and decided he had not been worth killing. Was there something up there? He played the handlight carefully over the lintel of the balcony entrance. Yes, there was a glassy grid. Some sort of closed-circuit TV. The comparator was evidently waiting for the "Death-One." And if you believed Keeper Number Ten, the comparator had been waiting quite a while... three thousand years! It didn't make sense.

The creature was making Coret speak again. "This time he must not get through, to bring death. Ah, foolish young Earthling, you don't answer. You don't understand. So be it. I now leave you. Don't follow.

There has been enough death. It would truly sadden me to have to kill you."

Thorin waited a moment. Overhead there was total silence. But the thing might still be there. He made a rapid pan with the sonar. The rim of the hole registered blank. That was not necessarily decisive. The creature might have withdrawn into a nearby doorway.

And then, as he stood there, he realized that the creature had come to this room, this sanctuary, this tiny remnant of a lost civilization, and had found no weapon to counter the pistolet. The evidence was irrefutable: he had been visible to the thing for several minutes and he was still alive. Were weapons unknown to this thing and its culture? Probably not. But probably none were needed at home, and perhaps up to now the creature had seen no reason to keep one in its home. But weapon or no, as long as the thing controlled Coret, he was in great danger. He must follow with great caution.

He fished a tiny barb-ladder out of his pack and fired it into the ceiling hole. He could hear the muffle metallic clank as the sharp teeth struck somewhere out of sight overhead. He dragged the cord until the barbed tines caught, apparently in a crack in the flooring. He fixed the light to his visor, grasped the pistolet in his teeth, and began the ascent. He reached the ceiling and paused a moment before climbing over the edge of the hole.

If he were going to be attacked, it would be here and now. He listened. If Coret were nearby, he should be able to hear her breathing. The creature would not be able to prevent that. But he heard nothing.

He stuck his head up and looked quickly over the edge, front and back. There was no movement in the chamber above him. No sound. Nothing. He clambered out on the floor. The room was empty, save for a few cabinets and shelves at the sides. And there were no filaments. Hence there ought to be dust. And where there was dust he should be able to follow Coret's footprints with his naked eye.

And there they were. The creature had made Coret walk out through the archway at the right.

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13. Fatal Contact

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He repacked the ladder-barb into his kit, pulled his cape about him, and walked over to the passage. The light reached into another tunnel. Here, there were strands again. It was a puzzle. Why were some areas choked with filaments and some completely devoid of them? Perhaps the stranded areas were the entrance ways, which this Araqnid and his predecessors had lined with webbing both to trap and to bar the wild life of the Ferrian forest. Deep in the interior of the labyrinth it was probably not needed. The Araqnids' historical mounts, the Llanoans, were either all dead or had reverted to the wild, and this last of the race was forced to move on his own spindly legs, except when he found an occasional mount. Well, the thing had one now.

Thorin trembled. Even if he were successful in killing the creature, would Coret recover and live? After seeing her face, he was no longer sure that he would be doing her a favor to rescue her. Perhaps, from her viewpoint-- if indeed she still had some sort of mind of her own-- she wanted only to die. But it was wasted mental effort even to think about it. He would get her back or be killed. And just now he suspected that the chances of the latter were fairly good.

For his adversary was a three-headed monster. Part of him was Coret and Coret's mind and knowledge of human limitations. Part of him was the creature of the vast culture and technology of Araqnia. And finally, the ultimate and dominant part, the part that controlled everything else, was an insane spider-like beast.

He peered down the empty corridor. His light shone bright and true. There was no movement. The

deadly garlands hung limp, silent, waiting for him.

It was a long passageway, and it sloped upward, so that the end, if there was an end, was cut off from view. The creature might have disappeared in that direction. On the other hand, there might be sidepaths. He pulled a set of zoom binoculars from his pack and examined the corridor again. Yes, about halfway down, there appeared to be branch tunnels leading off on each side. And beyond that, another pair.

The thing might have disappeared in any one of five directions.

He clamped his light to his visor once more, got out the i.r. scanner, and, pistolet in hand, proceeded slowly down the way.

The floor was dust-free, and he had to rely almost exclusively on the i.r. Without any attempt at concealment or camouflage, Coret's footprints led into the right branch. And the thought occurred to him that the creature lurked just around the corner, waiting. He stopped in his tracks and listened. Did he hear breathing? He was almost certain he did.

This would be the end. All the creature had to do was tear his cape and hurl him against the wall strands. He would be stuck. And forever. Or worse, he would be the next mount after the creature had finished with Coret.

He knelt down, opened his pack once more, and brought out the flexiscope. This was a flexible tube tipped with a photocrystal, extensible to the length of a couple of meters, and which would turn corners on command. A tiny light beam paralleled the crystal. Thorin snaked out the tube, guided it around the corner, and examined the right-hand corridor. Nothing. Very odd. So, what had he heard? He retrieved the instrument and repacked it.

Then he stepped abruptly into the intersection and shone the handlight down the length of the right-hand branch of the corridor.

A hell-cry burst into his ears from behind him. Something hard and sharp slashed at his right hand. The pistolet sailed down the corridor, where it slammed into a cluster of webbing.

He got up from his knees even as the creature ran past him. He took one step, then in frozen horror saw the creature riding Coret's neck, touching the strands in lightning-like gestures with its thin tentacle-like arms, as Coret ran on her toes. He knew he would lose the race to the weapon. He turned and ran back into the main corridor.

Peals of crazy laughter followed him.

He knew instantly what had happened. There must have been an overhead passage. The creature had gone into the side corridor, taken a flight of stairs overhead, and had come down into the left-hand passage, there to await him from his rear.

Fleet steps would follow him now. The creature knew its own territory, and could make Coret move about it very rapidly indeed. He knew that already. It was pointless to try to outrun this thing.

He slipped into the next side corridor and dropped his pack quickly from his shoulders. He had no real weapon left. Certainly nothing to compete with the pistolet. Still, there was one last thing to try. He opened the face of his fuel pack. If the creature were able to send a modest stream of electrons into the strands and thereby depolarize them into inertness, it just might be possible to neutralize the creature's imposed current with an exactly equal current of opposite polarity. That might make the strands adherent again-- even to the Araqnid. He need only reverse the conductors and adjust the amperage. With savage haste he jabbed the clamps at the filaments. There was no current yet; his hand rested on the switch handle. He waited.

Howls reverberated down the corridor. An explosion sounded far beyond him, down the main tunnel. The creature was testing the pistolet. The footsteps were pounding closer.

That was good. He wanted Coret to be running. He wanted the creature to be touching those little strands in rapid succession.

At this moment he ought to be thinking of death and destruction. But all he could think of was Coret. But not this poor ridden wretch waving his pistolet. He remembered Coret on their wedding day: floating in a radiant whiteness, and with tiny red flowers in her hair. Let him die seeing her in perfection.

He pulled the switch.

An inhuman scream.

A grunt.

A body falling.

He stepped out into the main passage.

Coret lay motionless on the floor. Behind her, the creature dangled from the ceiling strands. His four tentacles, torn out at the roots, hung in the filaments a couple of meters behind his body. His thorax was ripped open where it had been fastened to Coret's neck. It gushed a purple liquid in rhythmic spurts onto the floor below. Only the eye-stalks seemed undamaged. It seemed to peer in immense surprise at Thorin, as though to be caught in its own web was totally impossible. A thread of filament oozed slowly from the thing's spinneret and collected in a crazy obscene coil on the cold stone surface.

Thorin knelt over Coret and felt for the artery in her throat. The pulse was strong. He picked up the pistol, turned the heat gauge up as far as it would go, and incinerated what was left of the Araqnid.

He then tried to lift Coret up. She was stuck to the floor strands, but that was readily fixed. He reversed the conductors again. Now the strands were in their reduced, non-oxygenated phase. Nothing would stick to them.

He folded the cape up, slipped it into his pack, holstered the pistol, clamped his light in his visor, reversed the orientor, picked his wife up in his arms, and started out. By the time he had lowered her down into the balcony room, she had recovered consciousness and was able to drink some water from the fuel-cell flask.

She coughed, looked up at him, then took the little canteen with both hands. "My... God!"

"Yeah. But don't try to talk."

"What *was* it?"

"An Araqnid, I guess. Just rest awhile."

She handed the canteen back. "I saw the city."

He nodded toward the window. "The balcony?"

"No, not the balcony. He was in my brain, and I was in his. They programmed him while he was in his egg-sac. Complete with implanted memories. He was born one hundred percent educated. He knew how it was before the Death-One came. I know just about everything he knew. I can read those books in the balcony room."

"You're talking too much."

"All right. Can we get back?"

"I think so. It may take hours, but the orientor should get us there."

"He doubled back and circled around a lot."

"The orientor can cancel out the doubles and circles."

"I wonder if they've missed us yet."

"I guess so. I'm several hours overdue to make the evening call."

"They'll be there waiting for us."

"Maybe."

"We'd better start."

"You can't even stand up."

"Yes I can. Help me up."

"And let me fix your hands. Your fingers are bleeding." He got out the first aid kit. "You'll have to do some climbing in those shafts."

"Do you have an extra cape and gloves?"

"Sure."

"But maybe we don't need them. Couldn't we just leave the power pack up there, plugged in to neutralize the web? Save a little weight that way, too."

"No. Too risky. We'll wear capes and carry the pack. I'll go back and get it. In the first place, the orientor is integral with the pack. Secondly, we may need the fuel-cell water before we get out. Finally, suppose the electrical effect quits?"

"I just asked. Cape and gloves, then. What's the matter?"

"I was just wondering. The web. Maybe it's a good aerial."

"You could get a signal out?"

"Worth a try. He jabbed the aerial probe from his communicator into the nearest strand and adjusted the dials. "Calling Archeology 411. Thorin here."

The receiver crackled almost immediately. "Speidel here. Thorin, are you two all right?"

"Pretty much, Professor. Where are you?"

"I'm at the base. Jones is on his way now to your camp to check up on you. Why didn't you call in?"

"Professor, we've been having a sort of adventure. We couldn't shake free until just now. It's going to take us several hours to get out of here."

"Where are you?"

"Well, I guess you'd call it a network of tunnels and shafts. It used to be connected to Araqnia. Your lost city."

"*Araqnia?* Don't make jokes with me, young man."

"It is... it *was* Araqnia, Professor. Right now, I don't really care whether you believe me or not."

"Hmm. Can you make it back to your camp?"

"I think so."

"Meet Jones there. Give him a full report."

"Whatever you say."

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14. Spacegrams

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TX TO R SPEIDEL

CARE WOLFRAM MINING CORP

FERRIA

TRUSTEES REDUCING EXPEDITION BUDGET THIS SEASON AND NEXT.

REGRET NO VACANCIES

INTERSTELLAR GEOGRAPHIC

* * *

The professor sat down in the canvas chair. He looked up at Zachary Stone. "You know what it says?"

"Yes. Sorry, Professor."

"Actually, they've got two digs next year. They think I'm too old. Seventy isn't so old."

"Professor, listen to me. A dig is no picnic. You could break a hip real easy."

"A man with fifty years in the field doesn't have silly accidents."

"And right now you have a cold. Your eyes are watering, your nasals are blocked. You're running a degree of fever. You ought to be in bed."

"I can't. I've just contacted the Thorins. They claim they've found something. And perhaps I believe them. Anyway, I have to get up to Sylva." He arose. "But first, a word to Geographic. Could I use your TX again?"

"Of course. Just give the message to the clerk."

The professor wrote it out quickly:

* * *

TX TO INTERSTELLAR GEOGRAPHIC WASHINGTON, DC HAVE A LEAD ON ARAQNA.
DOES THIS CHANGE ANYTHING? SPEIDEL

* * *

As he returned down the path, Stone was waiting for him. "Can I do anything for you, Professor?"

"A couple of things."

"Say on."

"You once offered to lend us a blastovator. Perhaps facetiously?"

"I may have smiled. But it's yours. Just let us know when you want it, and for how long, so we can schedule our stripping operations."

"Can you get it up to Sylva for a couple of hours tomorrow? The Thorins talked about tunnels in the plateau. I'd like to cut through to one of them."

"No problem. We'll run it up on the ore freighter."

"This is a big help to me, Zachary. Perhaps it's just as well you got into mining."

"I was never much good at archeology."

"Not a popular career. Partly my fault. I don't inspire the kids. I see things. I see people moving in the past. But I don't know how to tell them, how to let them see."

"It's not everybody's bag, Professor."

"No. Suppose not. Do you know how many ark majors I have in this group?"

"How many?"

"Not one. I don't count Jones. He's a post-grad assistant. They're all in it for the summer outing and the snap credit."

"You can't blame them, Professor. My summer course with you in '57 was a real treasure. I met my wife there. Do they still have guitars and beer at midnight?"

"Yes, I think they do." The professor tapped his hat on firmly and blew his nose. "Damn cold. Can't throw 'em off the way I used to. The antivirals don't seem to work for me." He let out his breath slowly.

"You ought to try Arizona or New Mexico, Professor. Get out in the desert. Soak up the sun."

"You mean retire."

"Not necessarily. You could try some of the digs there. Cliff dwellers and such."

The professor shrugged. "I won't give up just yet. This lead on Araqna will reopen the whole thing. Interstellar Geographic is going to change its mind."

"I hope you're right."

"When their offer comes in, could you TX it up to Sylva?"

"Sure, Professor."

"Well, then, I'd better get on up there."

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15. The Cut to the Tunnel

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With the aid of his orientor Thorin and the survey crew took bearings on the balcony-room corridor inside the hill. The great blastovator then moved up, zeroed in, and began chewing away at the hillside. They got through the overburden in a matter of seconds. The topsoil simply disappeared from in front of the machine and reappeared as a dust storm out of the mouth of the waste conduit two hundred meters down the hillside. The engineer turned on the water spray at the conduit mouth and the dust quickly

turned to a dirty gray sludge. And now they hit bedrock. It was lava. The operator turned up the heat, and the water spray below them turned to steam as it hit the white-hot particles of rock spewing out of the waste tube below them.

As the shaft jabbed deeper into the hillside the 'vator moved slowly forward with it. Within a quarter of an hour the operator had shut the cab visor, turned on his air conditioning, and the great machine disappeared into the shaft, ragging the waste tube with it. Fifteen minutes later it backed out again.

The professor ran over. "Did you reach the corridor?"

"Yes. Some kind of tunnel. It dead-ended right inside there. Full of sticky stuff. You through with me now, Professor?"

"If you can wait another ten minutes, I would like Mr. Thorin to check. Make sure this is the right place."

"Lemme hose it down before you go in. It's still hot in there." He closed the visor and the "vator rumbled forward once more. It disappeared into the shaft amid a cloud of steam, and reappeared a few minutes later.

"Well?" cried the professor.

"You can make it. But you'd better hold your breath while you're in the shaft, and you'd better run until you get into the far corridor."

"Fine. Thank you very much. You and the mining company have done the University a great service. Please express my gratitude to Mr. Stone."

"Sure, Professor." The machine coiled up the waste conduit, turned around, and lumbered off down the alley toward the waiting freighter.

"Well, I think we are ready," said the professor.

"Not quite," said Thorin.

"Why not?"

"Because of the webbing inside of the corridor. I'll have to go in first to see if I can neutralize it with my power pack. And even though I may be successful at our entrance here, I'd like to take a cape and check the webbing throughout the entire length of the tunnel."

"Hmm. Yes. A good idea. Please proceed."

The instrumentalist pulled on his cape and entered the shaft. A few minutes later he was back. "All clear." He led the little party through the shaft.

The professor and Pompeii Jones were strangely silent as their handlights flickered over the stone walls of the corridor.

"Here is where I killed the Araqnid," said Thorin laconically. He pointed upward with his light to a great gap in the garlands of webbing. "I had the pistolet on 'high.' It vaporized him and melted the stone ceiling here. He was probably the last of his race." The professor groaned. "A wanton needless act, Mr. Thorin. He would have been invaluable to us."

Thorin hesitated a moment, then turned around and faced the great man. "Professor Speidel, that is a very stupid remark. That thing nearly killed Coret and me. Now, watch the turn here."

The professor stared at him in amazement. Jones was horrified.

The savant cleared his throat. He said stiffly, "Well, I suppose you and Mrs. Thorin have had a rather trying experience. I can understand that you will need a little time to recover fully. So I am inclined to overlook-- "

"The balcony room is straight ahead, and below," said Thorin shortly. "But before you get close to the balcony, there is a thing I have to do. So let me go on ahead."

"No more destruction, I hope," said the professor hurriedly.

"In a moment you can judge for yourself."

They entered the circular chamber.

"Beneath us is the dome room and the balcony," said Thorin. "I will drop this rope ladder down through the hole in the dome. Let me go first, and I will take a look around."

"Go ahead, but don't destroy anything," said the professor. "And, Jones, can you please call outside and tell the base where we are and what's going on."

"You can plug in to the nearest strand," said Thorin. "It's a good conductor and a good aerial."

Jones made immediate contact. He turned to the professor. "Sir, they've been trying to reach us. You have a TX relayed from Wolfram Mining."

"Ah, yes. From Interstellar Geographic?"

"Yes, sir."

"They changed their minds! They finally saw the light!"

Jones looked uncomfortable. "Could you step over here a moment, sir?" He led the professor down the corridor from Coret. "The message said, "Good luck on Araqnia. Still can't use you."

"Ah."

"Sorry, sir."

"It's a disappointment, of course. Too bad, too bad. They were the last, you know, Jones."

"Yes, sir."

"I'm an old man. I'm... finished."

The assistant was silent.

Finally the professor asked, "Did you report our present location to the camp?"

"Not yet, sir."

"Tell them we're waiting to go down into some sort of room. With some sort of window."

"Yes, sir."

After a moment Thorin called up. "All clear. Come on down."

The three clambered down the ladder.

The professor looked about in wonder. "Just imagine! A scientific laboratory! Intact. With apparatus and library. And there of course is the balcony. I can hear the street noises. And there's a shadow passing. By the great god Thoth! A window on Araqnia!"

"The window was made by an Araqnid archeologist named Eroch," said Coret. "He built it in order to look out on ancient Araqnia as it existed three thousand years before his time. The Araqnid watchers of our year one thousand B.C., who had attained space travel, looked through that balcony, and saw their ancestors of four thousand B.C. in carts drawn by animals.

"But then, in one thousand B.C., they learned that a nearby volcano was about to erupt. They decided to emigrate. But before they could get away, the Death-One came. And he came to them through this window. He came to Araqnia from our year 2177."

"I must have a look!" cried the professor.

Thorin barred his way. "Just a minute, Professor."

"Stand aside, young man!"

"Not just yet. See that lens over the balcony?" Thorin let the beam of his handlight play on the TV barrel.

"Well, yes. So?"

"The Araqnids put it there deliberately. It is supposed to kill this thing they call the Death-One, so he won't go out on the balcony."

"But you stood here and it didn't kill you."

"True. And it was a stupid thing to do. But as it turned out, the lens rejected me."

"Well, do I look like this... whatever it is?"

"Not to me. But you might to them."

"Nonsense. I am going out on the balcony."

"You ought *not* to go out on the balcony. But in any case, before you even get near it, let me shoot out the lens."

"No! Wait--!"

Thorin aimed and fired. There was a tinkle of glass.

"Oh... oh..." moaned the professor.

"I think you *were* their Death-One, sir," said Coret. "I believe the comparator beam has been waiting for you for three thousand years. It was put there for the sole purpose of detecting you and then killing you, so that you would not go out on the balcony."

"I don't believe it! They never saw me before! And certainly I would not do them the slightest harm. Well, in any case, is it all clear now?"

"I think it is safe for you to stand in *front* of the balcony," said Thorin. He added firmly, "But I don't think you ought to go *out* on it."

"And why not?"

"Two reasons. Number one, suppose it is a one-way time passage? If that is the case, you're out there in their world of one thousand B.C. and you couldn't get back in here to 2177. Number two, suppose they grab you while you are standing there admiring the view?"

"Young man, why do you force this humiliation on me? Must I plead with you? Don't you realize what has happened? No one will hire me. I've been kicked out of archeology. It doesn't matter what happens out there. It doesn't matter whether I can get back."

"Sorry, professor. I can't let you risk it."

"I'm going out there, Thorin."

"No, you are not, Professor."

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16. The Window

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Several things happened very suddenly.

The professor dashed for the balcony. Thorin made a flying leap and grabbed him by his left foot. He had him! But now Jones jumped into the melee. Jones grabbed Thorin's arms. The professor's leg was free. The great man struggled to his feet, flushed, panting, and very angry. "How dare you!" he shouted at the instrumentalist.

"Professor..." ventured Thorin. But Jones stepped between them.

Coret spoke up. "Let him go." She held the pistolet loosely, not aiming at anyone in particular. But she was speaking to her husband.

Thorin stared at the weapon incredulously. "Coret... but why?"

The professor dusted off his jacket and without a backward glance stepped out on the balcony.

They watched him in awed silence as he leaned over the railing and looked up and down the vista. he interrupted his inspection a couple of times to cough and sneeze. Finally he pulled out his handkerchief and blew his nose with enthusiasm and turned to re-enter the room.

But it was as though he had run into a glass wall. He stepped back, shrugged his shoulders, waved toward them, then turned outward again.

"Coret... I tried to tell him," whispered Thorin.

They watched in horror.

"You mean, it really is one-way," said Jones hoarsely.

"Yes, it really is," said Thorin grimly.

In that moment a great shadow filled the balcony. The professor stepped back in hasty reflex. A group of furry things, each carrying a spidery creature on his shoulders, swarmed down an exit ramp out of the hovering airship, and then they hauled the professor back into the ship with them. The professor turned, got one arm free, and waved farewell. They caught wisps of his voice. When last seen, he was evidently trying to explain something to his captors. Then the airship vanished.

"They got him," gurgled Jones. "They took him away."

"Just what he wanted, wasn't it?" said Thorin. He looked over at Coret. He held out his hand and she gave him the pistolet. It was on "stun." "I think perhaps you would have shot me if I hadn't let him go on

through. Why?"

"It is as I said. He was the Death-One... the monster they dreaded. When he walked through, onto the balcony, he carried with him the disease that destroyed them."

"I thought he only had a cold."

"He did. But to them it was the black death. It killed their mounts-- the Llanoans. And lacking mounts, they died. They couldn't eat, they couldn't drink."

"But even assuming his cold is what did it, why would you want to let him destroy them?"

"Don't you see, dear? Those four hundred heaps of iron oxide out on the launch pad are what is left of four hundred colonizing ships. The creature told me. If nothing had stopped them, they would have landed in the Nile Valley about one thousand B.C. *Homo sapiens* wouldn't have had a chance. We wouldn't be here today talking about it."

He looked at her wide-eyed. She was right, of course. "But why did they go to all this trouble, leaving behind guardians of the window, and all that? Why not just turn off the time-stream?"

"They didn't know how. Eroch, the builder, was among the first to die. And since the professor came to them from three thousand years in their future, they knew they'd have to stop him-- three thousand years in their future. Which for us is right now, this instant. Which meant they'd have to set up the comparator beam *then*, to kill the professor *now*. And they'd need a series of guardians-- the Keepers-- to see that the system was not disturbed for that three thousand years. It was remarkable that they got all this put together in the little time remaining to them. It was their bitter ironic paradox that their very efforts to destroy their Death-One served to preserve him."

"All right," said Thorin. "The professor is gone. I think we must count him missing in action, possibly dead in the line of duty. And I don't see anything we can do about it." He flicked an inquiring glance over at Jones. "Pom-pom, I don't suppose you would want to go out there and look for him?"

"Not me."

"Then I think all we can do is notify the Interstellar Police and the University and any next of kin, and see if they have any recommendations. Meanwhile, I suggest that we call in the other teams and see how much of this stuff we can haul out of here."

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17. A Memorial

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Some ten days later, as they were packing the last of the books in the balcony room, Coret called out from the wooden scaffolding they had placed in front of the balcony. "Something is happening out there!"

Thorin came running. "There hasn't been any motion out there for three or four days. What is it?"

"Something is falling in the streets. Not rain. Hail...?"

Jones said uneasily, "That's ashes and lapilli. A volcano is erupting somewhere near here."

"You mean, has already erupted," said Thorin. "Remember, we are looking at something that happened three thousand years ago."

"Wow! Look at that..."

"Volcanic bombs," said Jones. "Globs of molten pumice as big as your head."

"And those flashes of light!" cried Coret. "What's happening?"

"It's lightning-- from the volcano," said Jones.

"So that's what finished them," said Thorin. "The volcano."

They looked at each other in shocked silence.

"The professor... ?" whispered Coret.

"He dies a hero," said Jones.

"*Died*," said Thorin. "Out there, it's one thousand B.C."

The room began to vibrate.

"I think we have caught a molten flow," said Jones. "It's filling the streets."

"How high can it get?" asked Thorin.

"I don't know. Vesuvius covered Herculaneum to a depth of over ten meters. But lava flows several miles deep are not uncommon."

"I think we had better get out of here," said Coret.

"But all this took place thirty centuries ago," said Thorin. "Here we are in the twenty-second century. It can't touch us."

"Just the same, I think we'd better get out. The window might not hold."

The room began to rumble.

Jones pointed at the balcony. His voice shook. "White-hot! And it's already filled up the street." He dropped his books on the floor and started up the ladder.

The others looked at Thorin. "We can come back tomorrow," said Coret. "If there's anything to come back to."

"Yes. Everybody grab whatever you can carry. Let's go. Women first." He picked up the volumes that Jones had dropped and brought up the rear of the group.

Outside, they dropped their loads on the tarpaulins spread out on the ground and turned back to listen.

Thorin moved over to Coret. "That's why no trace of Araqnia had ever been found here before now. The lava must have covered the city completely."

Coret put a finger to her lips. "Listen!"

They looked up at the entrance to the shaft. The sound began as a barely audible rumble. And then it grew louder, and became a continuing muffled thunder. A cloud of dust swirled out of the tunnel mouth.

Looking back every other step, the group edged uneasily down the slope.

And then the rumble died away.

"I think the window collapsed," said Thorin. He looked at Jones inquiringly.

The other shrugged his shoulders. "Very likely. Perhaps the combination of several thousands of pounds pressure and the white heat were too much for it."

"But why did the lava stop?"

"It probably filled up the room, ran along the corridor for a hundred meters or so, and then it cooled down enough to form a plug."

"The window is gone?"

"Gone," said Jones.

"So this is all we will ever have ..." Thorin waved his hand at the books and boxes. "Even so, enough for a thesis for all of us."

Jones turned his face away. "Don't expect me to do it."

"But you're the only ark in the group."

"I don't care. And anyway, I'm getting out of ark. A fellow could get hurt in this business. I'm transferring to classical languages."

"All right, Pom-pom. Anybody else? Lots of stuff here. We really ought to do something with it. We owe it to the professor"

They all shook their heads. "I'm in stage design," said one. Another: "I'm phys. ed. I just did this for the easy credit." A third, "This fall, I'm overloaded with Englit."

Thorin lifted his hands in a hapless gesture. "All right, all right. Of the whole bunch here, I'm the one least qualified. But somebody has got to do it. We can't let the professor walk out for nothing. So I'll do it, even if I have to switch my major from instrumentation."

"I can help," said Coret.

"Yeah," said Thorin.

"I mean, I really can. I can read Araqnid. I got it from the creature-- from Number Ten. You and I can completely reconstruct life in Araqnia. The books tell their technology. Their space drive. It's beyond

nuclear: it's an anti-grav system."

"Well, what do you know. Anyone want to join us?" he asked. "Any science majors here? Phys? Chem? Engineering? Instrumentation? Anyone for fame, fortune, and maybe an A+?"

Silence.

"It's all yours," said Jones. "And you've certainly earned it."

"So be it. Well, one last thing. Any art majors here?"

A lone arm thrust up reluctantly.

"We want a memorial for the professor," said Thorin. "See if you can create a design, maybe with a couple of Araqnids in the borders."

"Where's this going to be, and how big?"

"In the rock by the corridor excavation. Let's have a big one, say three meters on a side. We can burn it out with my pistol."

"What words go on it?"

"Don't really know. But it ought to say something important. Like, DOCTOR REITER SPEIDEL, ARAQNIA, 2177."

"The Council of Universities would certainly ennoble him," said Coret.

"Yeah. Make that Baron Doctor."

"Anything else?"

Thorin thought of the professor spreading germs in the sacred Araqnid air. "Yeah, add a kind of motto, maybe in small print: "Archeology is a process of destruction."