

THE ANGEL OF DEATH

by

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A young man named Engelmann, out late one night, entered a phone booth and pretended to search for a number in the book. He savoured the booth's little island of light, and his own prominence in it, like a lone glass-cased museum exhibit on the dim street.

Displaying himself thus made him grin with irony, for he knew his rarity and power would not be perceived by anyone who passed. Here, O Street, was the man the city lived in fear of! His very shape and substance! Behold, and fail to see! He lifted the receiver, deposited two dimes, dialled a local prefix and then, randomly, four more digits.

He got an old man's voice. "Who is it?" A little angry-edgy, as if to an unexpected knocker outside his door. There was a TV on in the background.

"Hello, sir," Engelmann cried, hearty as an emcee. "I'm glad you tuned in, sir, because, once again, it's Angel of Death time!"

A pause. Just enough to show the name had struck, registered. "What? Is this some radio call? I never listen to the radio."

"No, sir! This is a *hot tip*. I'm letting you and only you know that it's Angel of Death time, brought to you by that ol' Guy in the Sky, the Angel of Death himself, *myself!*"

Now the pause echoed unmistakably with the old man's awareness. "Who is this? Who are you calling?"

"But I'm calling you! And I know you're ecstatic, 'cause only I can satisfy, right? Only I can make 'em die!"

"You're crazy! Who do you want? Leave me alone!"

Engelmann positively shimmied with contained laughter for the old man didn't hang up! He waited, as if for the reply of Death itself. He waited to argue for mercy, for exemption, as if Engelmann hovered somewhere above his roof and clutched his very fate in angelic talons.

"Oh, but sir – *you're* not my Mystery Guest tonight. I'm just calling to *tell* you. You must know about me – how I go light-foot, smoother than smoke, or growl along in my powerful car. I'm that devilish, cleverish, feverish Angel of Death, that snooper and swooper and brain-outscooper. This is a *tip*, sir! I picked you out of the air! Take this down."

The old voice came back, half-begging, half-barking: "You shouldn't be bothering people that don't do you any harm! Is this a joke?"

"Just take this down please, sir. Don't you see it's a newsworthy *tip*? You can send it to that Jimmy what's-his-name. Is it Scheisskiss? The guy who writes the column. Ready now? Take this down:

'Those sniggering bitches
Out scratching their itches –
All steamy and sticky,
All teases and twitches –
I shatter their skulls into
Spatters and tatters –
I slug and I slug them
To jumbled red matter!

Engelmann hung up crisply and left the booth. He strolled back the way he had come. His body was plump and tall, and he moved with a kind of stately drift – a secret pomp. He was a visiting potentate, again at large in the Cosmos. Tonight, in fact, he was stepping down from his Citadel and into the city's Time and Space, for the eighth time.

During his intervals up in his eyrie (where he lay in timeless power, watching TV) he was also down here among men, even of course. Their unflagging vigilance and dread enshrined him everywhere, night after night. He was a Presence here even between those times when he chose, according to the long sweet tidal shiftings of his will, to descend in the flesh.

And now, for the eighth time, he had descended, and moved among men. Even unto his angelic car he moved, and entered it, and woke the vigour of its engines.

At this point a remarkable coincidence – the first, in fact, of a series – occurred. At the very hour of the Angel's descent into the space and time of mankind, another transcendent individual made a similar entry. That is to say, he plunged from space into the warm, rich atmosphere of Earth.

It wasn't only the timing that made this remarkable. For as the newly arrived entity braked his plunge and extruded an umbrella of rigid cilia so that his sphericity, hanging beneath, began to drift smoothly like a giant thistledown – as

he performed these adjustments, he immediately initiated a sensor-probe of relative psychic concentrations throughout the biosphere. And in doing this he quickly identified as his nearest promising target a huge concatenation of vitalities that was none other than the city through which Engelmann then moved.

Engelmann was driving at that moment, gliding down the lamplit corridors of parked cars. Humorously, he had chosen a street that was just on the margin of what the press generally designated as his 'territory.' As he drifted past, his eyes ransacked the cars, front seats and back. Eerie emptiness! Nine months before, a street like this would have offered a dozen pairs of greedy mammals, hutching up, for here was the only escape for the ache of young blood in the crowded apartments everywhere. And it had been he, Engelmann, who, like a scouring wind, had cleansed these streets.

But there was something here. He sensed it. He almost felt the secret rocking, the muffled titter aimed precisely at himself, a snigger of triumph at duping the Angel of Death. He turned and came back down the block. There was a van ahead that, just perceptibly, had moved, or had it? As he passed, his senses crowded up to it, embraced it, passionate for any faint clue of hot, hidden grapplings. And, by his fierce angelic eyes, it moved! The van rocked slightly!

He parked around the nearest corner. His hand, stark and gorgeously remorseless like an eagle's talon, grasped his weapon and plunged it deep in his jacket's side-pocket. Ah, the luscious tang of imminence in the night air! They in their grunting swinish scorn of him, thinking themselves safe. To know he could creep near them, pluck off their nasty shell of secrecy, smash to putty their sneering softnesses till they bled and dribbled, swooning and collapsing in exquisite agonies of remorse and futile repentance!

He stepped out, feeling the swell and tug of mighty wings at his shoulders, and wing-buoyed he moved, his heels treading in creamy silence the would-be-betraying pavements.

He stood at the van's cab door. There were curtains behind the front seat, and even as he stared at them, they shivered. He shuddered, their undulation smoothly continued in his flesh; and looking down with casual sovereignty, he saw that the lock button stood tall and silver within the rolled-up window, obedient to his will.

Then he moved, knowing his own speed and clarity compared to the dazed flesh-tranced time he was thrusting into: he, a celestial falcon; they, groggy and a-blush with blood, like vermin too gorged even to flinch. He seized the handle, thumbed home the button, pulled wide the door, and vaulted up to jam his knees into the driver's seat. He swept aside the curtain, and two matted heads popped up from the broken pane of streetlight that fell and shattered on two bodies. The Angel of Death squeezed out a bullet from his Magnum and felt the delicious lurch of its velocity jump from him and plunge through the skin and domed bone of the smaller head. With splendid fluid flexions of sinew and talon, with leisurely largess, he hammered both those skulls repeatedly, distributing the roaring gouts of lead to follow his dying targets through their spasms of recoil.

Engelmann drove home wonderingly, whimsically. He went into an all-night market for a six-pack of root beer, doubled back to buy a newspaper at a liquor store, went to a drive-through taco stand, and after elaborate polite discussion with the woman behind the clown-faced intercom, ordered a vanilla shake. These movements were his way of relishing his almost dizzying freedom – freedom to prowl these streets, or to quit them, to pull up and, in one smooth climb, to exit them, whenever he chose.

Meanwhile, that intercosmic tuft of thistledown was drifting over the very neighbourhood that Engelmann had just visited with his wrath. This being had, among his colleagues, a complex personal designation that involved simultaneous articulations in a multiple of electromagnetic frequencies. The phonetic aspect of this designation was, roughly, 'Siraf'.

Siraf, then, just as Engelmann was ordering his vanilla shake, selected the rooftop of a tall and partly disused building as a covert in which to pass his inert phase. The Archives required that all field-workers, upon entering an alien sphere, lie passive for a time, before engaging in research on the indigenous life-forms. By this tactic the worker could gain some assurance that he had entered a sufficiently stable configuration, before expending valuable research energies on mimicry and transactional involvement. Each worker could carry only limited quanta of metamorphic power, and even in the best circumstances, only brief investigations were possible. Hence the care taken to telepalp the surroundings thoroughly for any sign of disruptive local phenomena that might abort the workers' researches.

Siraf adopted a spherical shape and rolled himself against the tarry brick parapet of the rooftop. He immediately initiated telescans of the nearest-lying indigenes. Although most of these seemed to be dormant, and all were in any case too distant for fine-focused observations, the young scholar was able to add much to the morphological program provided him by the Archives for this race. That program had been in truth the merest sketch, and Siraf improved the hours of inertia by fleshing it out with studious encodements of the data he was able to gather.

But of course, this kind of preparation could only go so far in alleviating the inevitable obscurity and confusion of alien interactions. He could expect to assimilate most of the physical structure, locomotor routines, much vocabulary, and so be able, on emerging from dormancy, to mimic and to initiate transactions with the autochthones. But it would only be *during* that brief and energy-exorbitant period of mimicry and close-range interaction that he could fine-tune his observations.

For example, Siraf had soon enzymatically recorded much of the local speech. But when it came time actually to effect relationships with the natives, he would still have no clue to the motile and behavioural patterns that this vocabulary served. He would know how to express many concepts, but would have no guide to what concepts it was appropriate to express under what circumstances. A field-worker could come onstage in perfect costume, so to speak, but with no hint of his role, or even, in many cases, of what kind of thing a role might *be*.

It should give some sense of Siraf's excellence as a scholar to report that within a few busy hours of assimilations

and inferences, he had arrived at a closely reasoned choice of form. Of the two sexes, it appeared that the larger, the 'male' enjoyed a significantly greater degree of mobility and social initiative than did the 'female'. (For example, the dreams of several nearby dormant females were full of this very theme.) To this finding he added the fact that the sexual drive of this race seemed remarkably dominant among its impulses – a circumstance that boded well for his chances of getting much-valued insights into its reproductive rituals. Altogether, a young male with high mating potential seemed indicated for a maximum probability of successful interaction. The specifications he arrived at were, in the native units: height, 6'4"; weight, 215 lbs; age, 24 years; muscular and vascular systems highly articulated; features, Nordic; hair, blond.

Siraf was aware that many of his colleagues would condemn this choice by reason of its exceeding the norms of size, strength, and general aesthetic appeal by local standards. They would point out that an abnormal individual was not likely to elicit normative reactions. His atypicality would distort his findings.

But Siraf's heuristic methods were the reverse of conservative. He reasoned that there was no such thing as 'situational purity'. To experiment at all was to disrupt, distort. And since there was no way around it, why not *use* slight disruption? Let the field-worker agitate a bit the hive he visits. Not traumatically, but to a degree that might intensify and multiply the scholar's involvements in his all-too-brief time for probing.

Throughout those hours when Siraf lay conceiving himself, it happened that Engelmann was doing very much the same thing. He was in his room on the top floor of an old apartment building. He lay on his mattress before the TV, propped to a half-sitting posture by pillows. He was alternately watching the tube and writing in a spiral notebook that he held against his raised knees.

'Freedom!' (he wrote) 'It's a joke/miracle, a staggering simplicity! You just dare to take Justice, and the daring alone fills you with power. The mere daring-to-fly *is* the power of flight. I *can* fly. I *have* power over life, and freedom from death. Even if the Insect-Squads eventually do take me –'

A Jacuzzi ad came on and he stopped writing to watch it, having seen it twice already. It would repeat throughout the program, a late movie on a local channel. Two big-breasted girls in bikinis – one on the edge of the pool paddling her legs, one sitting in the water – laughed with a young man. He was neck-deep, and his trendy moustachioed head bobbed on the bubbles just at the submerged girl's breast level. There was a voice-over pitch, and addresses of the company's outlets rolled across the scene. When the ad was over, Engelmann had to reread what he had written before he could go on:

'I won't be taken to the Poison Room. Oh no! I'll go to the shining halls of Medicine. I'll be given soul-upholstering drugs. For my freedom itself protects me. It's too "unreal" for the Little Folk. The very horror of what I do classifies it past the reach of punishment.'

He stopped to watch the movie for a while. It was sci-fi, and there were spaceflight shots with starry backgrounds that exalted him. The ad returned. He watched it closely, and afterward he wrote with a heat and fitfulness he had not shown:

'I do what I will. I paint the world as I will. Your skulls are my paintpots, bitches! I empty them with my rude and potent brush. I splash out frescoes of my revenge. Your cheating sneering little world is my palette. I'll make my masterpieces and lay them out to dry. And I'll have them displayed in the press as if it *were* no more than paint I splash around. And so it is! And so it is! I make it so, and so it is!'

Engelmann laid aside his notebook. He found that he ached to go down again, to swoop for another kill. That lovely blind red impetus had returned to him, his heart was engorged with it as with some bodily fluid.

It caused him a painful division of feeling. He had always loved to savour each deed both ways in time, first through a long anticipation, and after, to relish its echo through the expectant desolation of the city's renewed terror. Especially in this latter period he felt his tread to reverberate, gigantically, through the city. Then, spectral, huge, he lived in the hearts of seven million.

But desire was great upon him, and he lusted for a fierce, unparalleled abundance that would fill the air with the red debris of his redundant rage. After brief hesitation, he made the pact with himself to take further vengeance the following night.

Engelmann did not fall asleep until the afternoon of the next day, and he was still in the depths of his sleep when, at dusk, Siraf terminated his dormancy.

He rolled out from the brick parapet to a clear space on the tar and gravel. There, again in compliance with Archivist tradition, Siraf uttered the Field-worker's Vow prior to transmorphing. The articulation involved a phonetic aspect that sounded like lush, melancholy flute solos. Its cognitive content was, roughly:

'Having sworn to be a foundling through the stars
I lie on yet another threshold.
I will remember, though I travel far.
As treasure I'll store up all I behold.'

He extended his mass into a slender ellipsoid six and a half feet long, and transmorphed.

He had perceived that the fibre-envelopes universally adopted by the indigenes were pretty widely available and thus did not warrant the energy expenditure that would be needed to fabricate them from his own substance. He found, as he lay making detailed adjustments of his new material apparatus, that the pebbles of the rooftop painfully disrupted the curvature of his dorsal dermal surface. He sat up and brushed the little stones off the pale ridgings of

back and shoulder muscle. His length of limb stretched his sinewing to gothic gauntness. He stood up and did a brisk dance of acquaintanceship with arms, legs, lungs. Then he walked to the parapet, leaned on it, and looked consideringly over the city.

Profitable as his dormant scanning had been, he now faced a demanding struggle for comprehension. The race was a complex one; close-range involvement with it was going to be a matter of frantic ad-libbing, a swift juggling of known variables with the always bewildering influx of new data. A local parallel for his plight would be a man running dizzily ahead to keep a crazy stack of dishes balanced in his hands. Siraf smiled, practicing the facial contortion that would be deemed appropriate to this image.

His first goal must be clothing. He had foreseen that if his stature was unusual, so would commensurate enfibrements be, but he was counting on the abundance of the population to ensure that an appropriate envelope could be found fairly readily. He scouted now for the nearest considerable centre of vital activity.

Siraf happened to be in a largely residential neighbourhood, but it was a Saturday night, and three streets away was a very thriving stretch of bars, discos, dirty-book stores, and rib joints. It was invisible to him, even from his thirty-story elevation, but he telepalped the psychic concentration, noting that high emotive levels seemed to prevail. The area should offer a rich field of options, at least. He picked out an alleyway route that would bring him to the middle of the block. Then he found the shadowiest side of the building and walked down the wall, risking this anomalous gravity-orientation because dark had fallen and it saved time.

The last alley Siraf followed debouched on the activity zone. He crouched behind some big packing crates just inside the alley mouth. Across the street he could see an adult bookstore and an Italian take-out stand. Within five seconds of his pausing in this covert, an individual pulled up to the curb in front of the bookstore, and he was not only amply clothed, but just about Siraf's size as well!

Surely this was one of those rare assignments where the field-worker and his target cosmos were in a strange harmony, and luck blessed the scholar's labours. This convenient individual was of a darkly pigmented species that Siraf had rejected as a mimicry choice when he perceived that it enjoyed more limited options of social interaction than the paler ones. The man wore a broad-brimmed leather hat, a pirate shirt of maroon silk, leather pants, and calf-high Peter Pan boots. He also wore a gold watch and a gold pendant and several fat gold rings. The Eldorado he sat in, all burnished chrome, glowed on the pavements. He waited behind the wheel, and after a few moments two brightly and scantily-dressed young women sauntered up to speak to him through his half-open window.

The psychic effluvia that flooded these neon-starred blocks were those of highly stimulated organisms. In all directions he detected the perceptual blur and latent vulcanism of alcohol-saturated brains. Even a highly disruptive act, if swift and decisive, should be slow to engender any organised response in such surroundings. Siraf deemed some initial traumatising of the natives permissible, if it was strictly localised in its impact, and if it facilitated entry into full interaction with them elsewhere. He began to increase the density of his hands and arms.

It took several moments to achieve a massiveness sufficient to deal with the glass and steel of the Cadillac. The girls strolled off again. The statuesque black man in the colourful enfibrements sat adjusting his tape deck. Siraf gauged him to be perhaps an inch taller and twenty pounds heavier than himself. He realised that when the man's enfibrements had been removed, he would experience the atmospheric temperature as a great discomfort. The large boxes behind which the scholar crouched were full of shredded wood, and he decided they should answer nicely for insulation. His arms were ready. He straightened up and strode toward the Eldorado.

There was a fair number of people on the sidewalks, but all at some distance. The nearest were the two girls. Both gave amazed shouts, and one of them made a merry, obscene gesture of admiration. The well-dressed man became aware of Siraf a fraction later than his two employees. He was, however, like most successful pimps a quick-thinking man. He took in the nude stranger's sheetings of stomach muscle, the machinelike power of his thighs, his dreamy and absorbed gait – and he locked both doors and twisted the key in the ignition.

Siraf, telepalping the mechanism, inhibited the spark. He plunged his hands through the window glass, took a crushing grip on the steel of the door, and ripped it entirely out of its snug frame. He placed it as neatly as possible on the roof of the car. Then he reached inside for the man, who was just then crawling through the further door, and seized him by shoulder and thigh. He spoke several reassurances that he had prepared in advance:

"Come along now," he said soothingly. "Nothing to worry about. This won't take a minute, and you'll be plenty warm afterward."

The man gave him a long, horrified glance. Siraf found pressure points in shoulder and leg that cancelled resistance and allowed him to lift the man out. "Outsy-daisy," he said, uncertain of the expression. He hoisted the man straight-arm over his head and carried him to the sidewalk. There he sat him down, leaned him against the wall, and started to remove his clothes. A fascinated crowd was forming, at a respectful distance. Siraf took and donned the hat, the shirt, the trousers, and, last, the boots. He left the jewellery on the man.

When he was dressed – and it was done in moments – he picked up the still-quiescent donor and carried him to the alley mouth. There Siraf bedded him snugly amidst the shredded wood in the largest packing crate. He tucked the insulator around him till only the head lay visible, like a set jewel, or shipped fruit, in the midst of the excelsior. Since he had already grossly violated behavioural norms, he took his leave of the crowd, after an amicable salute, by running straight up the wall of the nearest building and disappearing over the top, eighteen stories above.

He knew that the indigenes' communication system was relatively swift and efficient, and so he travelled several miles, overleaping streets, when he had to, at the darkest points and most carefully chosen instants. He did not think a concerted pursuit likely in a place not only populous but rife, so far as he could gather, with transactions of the most intense and violent kind. He fled on nevertheless, conscientiously safeguarding his researches, and it so happened

that as he fled across one particular roof, his passage sent down an eerie drumbeat into the sleep of that other alien, Engelmann, the Angel of Death.

Just then he lay in the dense webbing of a lustful nightmare where ghastly sprawling spiders envenomed and sucked away his flesh. The hammering of those feet kicked through and scattered the nightmare like gusts tearing up a sluggish ground mist and sent sad, turbulent dream-reverberations through him. He felt that desperately vital news, cosmic tidings, were being sped by messenger to a distant city, where there would be a vast rejoicing. And meanwhile he, Engelmann, lay in a living grave upon some giant plain, and saw the runner pass him with that news, and struggled to rise and follow, and could not, could never reach that far, vast rejoicing.

As for Siraf, about a mile beyond this new coincidence he slowed and found a high building for reconnoitring. He decided that his entry point would be a park some blocks distant, and when he had approached it and studied it from a new rooftop perch just across the street, he felt fully confirmed in his decision. Singles bars, cabarets, movies fringed the leafy square, whose pathways and benches were as lively as the surrounding sidewalks.

Long unmoving, he spied that scene. With his fine-spun net of telepulses, he trawled and seined the swarming lagoon of psychic life below. His investigative powers were cruelly limited by distance, but such was the emotive unanimity of the crowd that he could read much from its sheer ambience. It was overwhelmingly obvious from what he saw – pairing rituals, symbolic self-exhibitions, musical mimicry of copulatory contortions – that the place was a hotbed of mating-related activities. It seemed the luck that had clothed him was not faltering.

In the Archives, mating transactions were highly prized as data, for among sexed organisms, they often provided a key to many other emotive patterns and social rituals in a given race's repertory. At the same time, they were recognised as the trickiest exchanges for a field-worker to mimic, since cuing behaviour and display symbolism were likely to be very subtly elaborated in such crucial interactions. But Siraf resolved that his daring would match his luck. He would take mating for his immediate aim. He adjusted his hat and took the stairs down to the street.

He followed the sidewalk for a short time before crossing over to the park. With every step he modulated more precisely his posture and gait to those prevailing and achieved a fuller acquaintance with the local vocalisation system by rummaging in the vocabularies of those he passed. He accomplished, in a few hundred yards, great refinements in the facial and bodily techniques of confronting and moving among others. He also satisfied himself that most of the active pairing was going on in the park, and, accordingly, he soon crossed over.

It happened that a tall, exhilarated grad student named Jeannie Kudajzinsky had entered the park not long before Siraf did. Prior to doing so, she had enjoyed three stiff Bloody Marys at The Elevator Disco-Bar while watching the dancers with increasingly droll approval. She had spent the last five days, ten hours a day, in the library stacks preparing for her doctoral exams in anthropology. And now she lounged in the park, watching the passers-by with a jaunty smile, indulging in what she thought of as 'contemporary anthropology', an amused survey of current styles in self-decoration and self-preservation. Her overall feeling was that the night was splendid and anything might happen.

It was from Jeannie that Siraf received his first unmistakable lead in the tangle of fleeting ideations he was combing through as he strolled the paths. He noted among her cerebral events his own image undressed and subjected to various erotic attentions. He circled round to pass her again in a few moments.

She wore body-emphasising courting finery. Her mammary and gluteal bulges appeared precisely to fulfil the normative ideal, but her stature was sufficiently norm-excessive to make it likely that she was deprived of interaction and thus probably the more motivated toward it. She would stand about six feet tall. Fighting that inevitable pang, that forlorn sense of ignorance every investigator felt as he prepared to grapple closely with alien phenomena, Siraf stepped up to her bench and opened with an expression that he felt fairly sure was appropriate:

"Hello, my dear. You're looking lovely tonight."

Jeannie laughed. Her first disbelief at the approach of this beautiful Nordic pimp became a giddy sense of *savoir-faire*, and she promptly countered him:

"You say that like you know how I look other times. You've been following me around, right?"

"Oh, no. I only just now picked you out. Does your appearance change radically with the passage of time?"

"That's putting it mildly. Think how I'll look in forty years!"

Siraf was about to clarify that he meant over short periods, but Jeannie laughed with such gusto at her own retort that he was cued to discount the whole exchange. The image of himself sitting by her on the bench was recurring vividly in her cerebrations, attended by strong though ambiguous affect. Siraf sat down with a reassuring smile. He was aware of a verbal routine, apparently designed for such a situation as this, and so he ventured it: "I was just passing, and I thought I'd stop by for a while and see how you are."

The woman's new laughter informed him that the formula did not apply.

"Well, that's wonderful," she gasped. "We don't get to see you much out this way." Jeannie was going to elaborate the joke when she was taken with a guilty awareness that, in her excitement and anxiety, she had done nothing but laugh at the man. "Listen," she said, "are you a foreigner? Your accent is perfect, I mean you have no accent at all, but your ... your idioms are a little funny – Christ! That doesn't sound like I'm putting you down, does it?"

"I'm not the slightest bit put down. In fact, I am a foreigner. I'm Norwegian." Jeannie's turn of speech had given him his cue, and as he spoke he read the nationality in her expectations.

"You certainly look it," she said. "I mean that as a compliment."

"Oh, yes," said Siraf, adopting a grave manner and feeling with new keenness his ignorance. He decided it was safest to answer tautologically and counter-compliment: "A compliment is a very pleasant thing to receive. Thank you. You are a very desirable woman. I mean that as a compliment in return."

Jeannie could find no sign in his face that he was joking, and as she smiled incredulously at him, he went on, developing the seemingly gratifying theme of her physical form:

“For instance, something the observer immediately notices about you is the abundant development of your breasts and your posteriors. Your face has a delightful symmetry. It is ... foxlike.” He caught a clear suggestion from her here, as he hesitated. “Moreover, I see that you are unusually large, and I thought this a wonderful coincidence, because I too am abnormally large-bodied.”

From resurgent hilarity, Jeannie had subsided to bemused attention. All shadings of irony or affront were missing from the man’s impossible words. There was an honest, a tender objectivity in them such as she had never heard in a man’s voice. An Innocent? A Noble Savage? If this was illusion, as the whole man seemed illusory in his perfection, she decided to rise to it, as on a dare, and take it at face value. Had she only been pretending to believe that anything might happen tonight?

“You are very sweet to tell me the things you do,” she answered. “You have this marvellous sincerity. I hate that word, but it’s what you have. Furthermore, you’re beautiful, physically I mean, as far as I’m concerned. What do you say to that?”

She smiled in his eyes, half humour, half suspense. She did not know what to expect, as if she were Baucis in the myth and had just given a nudge of collusion to one of the disguised gods in her house. Siraf, finding no cue, returned her own formula:

“You are very sweet to tell me.”

“Most men wouldn’t react that way,” she said.

Siraf had a swift fear that the woman was objectively rating the credibility of his performance – knew him to be a performer, in other words, though he found no such image in her. “They would not?” he asked, trying to express innocent, grave alarm. It made Jeannie laugh again in spite of herself.

“Don’t be so shocked! It’s beautiful that you answered that way. See? Again beautiful. See how you’re racking up points?”

The game metaphor, which he had noted as a common turn of mind, locally, oriented him, and he recognised that performance here was humorously commented on without signifying doubt of the performer’s genuineness. He laughed, and Jeannie felt a burst of *déjà vu*. Long ago, in high school, before she had become (as she liked to phrase it) ‘a certified giantess’, she had often sat in a car with a certain basketball player. There had been in him a similar ease of acceptance, and with him she had felt an exhilarating, unthreatened freedom of thought and body. He would always start by inviting her for a burger and a Coke ...

“Well,” said Siraf, “how about driving out for a burger and a Coke?”

This almost eerie echoing of her reverie at first made her stare and then made her jump up, as if to throw off bodily the last encumbrances of cynicism and disbelief. She snuffed the night air appreciatively, and said:

“Wonderful! I’d love a drive! I’d love a hamburger!”

They walked down the paths to the sidewalk. The curb was parked solid, and Siraf was confident that an adequate vehicle could be procured. As they passed, he telepalped each car for fuel and performance levels and settled on a new black Cadillac halfway down the block. He probed its ignition and, as they approached it, started it up. Jeannie’s surprise told him that the performance was anomalous. Hastily he searched out a reassuring tag for such occasions.

“Oh, you know how it is. It sometimes does that.”

“Oh, yes,” Jeannie nodded emphatically. “I know what you mean. Sometimes they just get eager to get going.”

He now made out the proper sequence from her anticipatory ideations and, springing the locks with telepulses, opened the passenger door and let her in.

At just about this time, Engelmann was slowly awakening. He had left the TV on, and its rising to the more hectic pitch of prime time was what gradually wedged him out of his sleep. He stumbled to the bathroom, came back to his mattress only slightly less groggy, and plunged his hand into a cardboard box on the floor near the bed. From amidst candy bars, cheese-’n’-crackers packs, bags of chips, and boxes of cookies, he drew out several packages of cupcakes, some rolls of miniature doughnuts, and a quart of chocolate milk, which he liked warm.

He breakfasted. Some of his mind followed the beloved food down to his insides; some of his mind carefully watched the backgrounds of the tired cop-series for streets and locales he knew; but most of it peered queasily back into the dream-tangle he had just crawled out of.

All those Things That Should Not Be – all that spiderous bristly grappling. Granted, such things squirmed eternally behind the veil of nightmare. But why should he plunge so often into them? Why should his thought so tirelessly conceive the worst it could? Wasn’t it after all only the price of his greatness, his terrible freedom? Engelmann licked his fingers and, with a musing air, took up his notebook.

‘Lo!’ (he wrote) ‘I’ve burst from the shadow-show called Human Action. That pantomime! It’s all cringing, all shying-away-from, all writing-to-please! So I’ve torn free – I’ve swung at those shadow-manikins and smashed them to tatters, to rags and lust.’ He paused, corrected ‘lust’ to ‘dust’, and sped on.

‘But just for this reason, the shadow-dimness no longer protects me. I see the real infinity of possibility, infinite possibility, both dark and light. That’s why so many nightmares come with freedom!’

He stopped to savour this high pitch of understanding for a moment, and the feel of archangelic overview quickened his heart to full wakefulness.

‘Oh, yes, I pay!’ (he wrote). ‘Power isn’t free! It’s not just given away! Dues? I guess I know about paying dues!’

He shook his head here with a wry smile of self-admiration.

'Oh, there will be rest at the end! I admit I've had that consolation to stiffen me against the nightmares. Everyone earns a rest, and for me there'll be the long hours of protection and nourishment. Institutional life! All shining and brilliant with the lovely psychic varnishes of drugs!

'But for now, there is still the struggle! I'm not so ready to give up the power of flight – not so fast, whatever it costs! So for now let the dues be reckoned, and I'll just pay up on demand.'

All the latent feeling of the nightmare was dispersed now, and the Angel of Death was fully himself, voluptuously stretching out the wings of his oversoaring irony. And, like the splendid sun-burnished cock in the fresh morn, he suddenly craved to tread some squawking, fluster-feathered she-bird and hammer the heat of his blood into her pleasure-devastated flesh.

So the Angel of Death took up the image of his beloved and laid her in a shadowy place behind his eyelids. He laid her so that the shadows concealed her head. Her body cringed and shivered under his taloned regal feasting. She rolled her dark-smearred head with her cherished agony. And her clutching, penetrated flesh – aided by Engelmann's deft right hand – tugged and tugged on the root of his pleasure and at last, powerfully, quite plucked it out of those divine loins.

The Angel of Death rose and washed and changed his clothes. He began to clean his gun, and as he did so, fell to musing again on the ease and quietude of a mental institution. This line of thought shortly led him to so piercing-sweet a mirth that he dropped his work and snatched up his notebook again. He wrote:

'It's like being a giant that no one sees rightly. The doctors will come up to me, and they'll talk to my knees, thinking they see me. I roar down to them: "Here I am up here, you snivelling jerks!" They nod compassionately to my knees and answer: "Yes, these inflated ideas – they are your punishment as much as your pleasure. Tragically for others, you've been led to cherish these ideas of exaggerated potency and now you are compelled to enact them."

'I boom back jovially: "Doctors! My exaggerations are made true by your sons' and daughters' blood. I *am* gigantic with it. Up here, Doctors! Up here I am!"

"Yes," they say, "that is the horror of your condition – your utter separateness. You're trapped in a void where others are no realer, no more comfort to you, than furniture."

'How answer to be heard? This dogged, blind, idiot compassion is of course only the child of fear. Everyone on Earth uses others like furniture, cautiously at first, then abusively, once familiarity sets in. I have made grosser and more daring uses of them and admit it's for my whim, and through this I've reached another order of being, another order of happiness. I could roar out louder than an H-bomb, and they'd still be straining their ears at me to catch the nuances. It's just this simple: I'm the crazy guy who happened to *be* Napoleon. I *am* the Angel of Death.'

Engelmann read what he had written, reread it, and at length, took up the gun again. When it was cleaned and reloaded he got up and turned off the TV. He pulled on a jacket and stuffed his Magnum into one pocket of it. Into the other he shoved three candy bars from his cardboard box and turned off his light.

Fearlessly he walked down the dark flights and fearlessly out into the gusty night. He stabbed and twisted with his key, and his deep-chested car came to life. The Angel of Death was again on the city, and he meant to hover wheresoever he would – to stand and stoop with Olympian randomness wherever the covert stirred beneath his eye.

Siraf, for much of their drive, was absorbing navigational procedures and signals, while following Jeannie's ideations closely for clues to his route. Simultaneously, of course, he was encoding everything, for in this he never ceased. Jeannie talked about herself, luxuriating in a sense that she could say anything that came to her, and yet only half-attending to what she did say. For her sense of sexual-fantasy-come-true had not faltered. The very turnings of the car had a dreamlike congruence with her desires. All the shopping districts and showpiece streets of the city that she loved to see at night streamed past them now, while through it all Siraf sat stately, beautiful and grave, receiving the details of her life with his odd, earnest answers. The sensation of unreal rightness peaked when he steered them into one of the few old-fashioned drive-ins still operating in the city. In her high school days they had been the norm, before the coming of the drive-through.

Siraf handled the opening meal transactions fairly smoothly, using his foreigner's prerogative to ask for details of procedure when he failed to palp clear indications. He watched her handling of the food when it arrived, and aped it.

"How did you start the car from outside?" Jeannie asked. He read her back the hypothesis she mentally rehearsed in self-answer.

"Remote control," he said and, on a further hint, significantly tapped his empty pocket. He bit into his cheeseburger, far too hard. It ejected a gout of sauce through its greasy diaperings and splattered the chest of his shirt.

When Jeannie laughed, he joined her, causing her to apply her napkin with guilty solicitude and turn on the lights to bring the car-hop. She was an older woman. Pointing to his shirt, Siraf told her:

"The cheeseburger squirted it."

"Look, sir. We make them all the same," she said. "They don't squirt other people."

He nodded. "I see. Perhaps I bit it too forcefully."

The woman stared, and seeing his candid gaze, her brow darkened.

"Then again," he offered, "it is possible that I was holding it incorrectly." Jeannie leaned forward quickly.

"Could we just get some water please?"

She helped him wipe the silk clean, pressing her free hand against his chest to tauten the fabric. The tactile influx she experienced awakened a complex image in her that Siraf noted.

Precisely here – in Siraf’s notice and misunderstanding of Jeannie’s mental image – was demonstrated an insidious and incorrigible blind spot affecting the judgments of all the Archives’ field-workers in their readings of highly evolved conscious forms. Jeannie’s image – to which her mind had reverted throughout their meal – was one of copulation in the backseat of a car on a breezy night. The car was parked on a street canopied by big broad-leafed trees and lit by old-fashioned streetlights.

Siraf took this ideation as a simple, projected goal, though Jeannie did not clearly visualise her partner in it. The assumption was reasonable, on the grounds of the image’s consonance with their actual situation: it was night, there was a light breeze, they had a car.

In fact, Jeannie was savouring a fantasy. The spilled sauce, the heat of skin felt through a thin shirt, had renewed certain memories of her basketball player. They had never parked in such a place as she pictured, however – the street was added from childhood walks in another city, where she had lived for a time with an aunt. This sensual nostalgic compound, mixed memory and desire, was in no sense a projection. Jeannie feared the Angel of Death as much as anyone.

On the theoretical level, the Archives fully recognised the inevitability of such errors. But in the field, the urgent thing was always to identify the subject’s dominant psychic configuration. The less articulated strata of consciousness that this emerged from must often be neglected, for simple lack of time to analyse them; the interaction must be kept going above all else, and of course there were the field-worker’s ongoing anatomical investigations and his monitoring of the larger environment to be sustained simultaneously as well.

In the present instance, Siraf was lucky. His proposal that they ‘drive to a tree-lined street, and park there,’ did not elicit the alarm it might well have done. His unfailing closeness to her thought so emphasised his magic aura that she could not simply recoil in fear from a suggestion that would have to be called insane, in this place and time, coming from anyone else. Coming from Siraf, this offer of her erotic dream made real had the character of one of those crucial choosings offered the heroes of so many of the myths she studied. To the daring, this mythic choice offered revelation. To the daunted, drab endurance. Jeannie, aglow with three Bloody Marys and dawning lust, decided that here was a critical challenge to her faith and recklessness. She must dare to choose enchantment over safety.

And, after she had assented to his proposal – with a grand “Why not?” and a sweep of the arm that scattered a few drops of her Coke on the lap of his trousers – a further, somewhat shabbier, reflection occurred to her that made the risk seem less. After a moment she brought it out, to confirm it to herself.

“I know it’s morbid, but you get to where you calculate, you know? I mean about this Angel of Death character. The week just after one of those killings is statistically the safest time, right? Ghoulish way to think, I guess, but there it is.”

Siraf was preoccupied with internally reviewing the sexual apparatus he would shortly have to employ, for he palpated high oxygen concentrations nearby and guessed they were approaching heavily-treed neighbourhoods. He gathered, distractedly, that the ‘Angel of Death’ awakened strong avoidance reactions and that he was a kind of public figure. His name was not associated in her with any clear facial or bodily image, but rather with written accounts too elliptically evoked to admit piecing out.

Jeannie had quelled her own fear. Thus easily was his phantom vanquished, whose only reality to her was a series of news photos of meaningless kerbsides with police and stretchers. But as fear dwindled to insubstantiality, she was pleased to poke at it with little jabs of theory, noticing the while that Siraf was experimentally stiffening his procreative member. (He was astonished at the rigidity that the flaccid protuberance was capable of attaining.)

“It’s really amazing to think that what that character does is essentially a substitute for, you know, sex. It’s a classic pattern, I mean apparently it pops up all the time – I mean *all* the time. You’ve heard of it, the weapon’s the symbolic organ, right? He’s displaying his potency to the woman by killing her. There’s the equation of sex and pain, death is the orgasm he causes. I guess sometimes you feel vengeful, but what’s the point of killing someone like that? It would be just as cruel and pointless as what he does to others.”

Just then Siraf was busy appreciating for the first time what a powerfully engrossing phase of experience sexual engagement was for this race. As he tested the relevant aspects of his neural apparatus – that is to say, almost all of it – he saw that he faced a turbulent adventure. Perhaps a fit image for this stout spirit, as he faced the strange cerebroneural uproar that would shortly engulf him, would be that of a beginning swimmer facing huge waves that he must, for the first time, ride.

Nevertheless, he was, in a half-attending way, fascinated by this strange ritual variant of the mating pattern that Jeannie was so glibly describing. It appeared to be a cultural institution that what was abhorred, but of sufficient permanence to generate a theoretical tradition. That he was dealing, on this planet, with a highly symbolic sentence, he had seen immediately. But a symbolic system that could substitute death for the process of insemination would be a startling oddity to add to the Archives’ store. Then Jeannie’s train of thought became strongly and unequivocally mating-directed. He sought, amidst towering leafy sycamores and old-style streetlights, a place to park.

Thus it was that Jeannie Kudajzinsky became a point of intersection, of convergence, for the two starry nomads abroad that night. Unburdened by all sense antecedent and consequence, she enjoyed fluid and explosive embrace and intermittences of warm enclaspment during which she watched the gold-brown sycamore leaves where the sparse lights splashed them with visibility. Of the two who converged on her, Engelmann, even in the instant of his actually seeing her, possessed her only as an abstraction, while Siraf was so busily encoding her (and his own) electrochemical activity that he almost ceased to perceive her simple bodily presence at all. Between these two potencies, she lived her dream of love alone.

Siraf, for his part, was humbly amazed at the extreme aesthetic capacities that were being revealed to him. Their

copious, spasmodic exchanges of fluids he found to be among the most dynamic transactions he had ever observed to fall within the repertory of a race's routine behaviours. So desperately focused was his attention that the brief impingement of a strong psychic source outside that focus came as a slight shock to him. The signal he caught, as the pair of them rested, was a very intense ideation of a faceless pair coupling in a car. Siraf found the coincidence striking. The ideator was moving at a vehicular rate and passed from range almost as soon as Siraf had identified his thought. Then Jeannie's slow, rocking demands recommenced.

Siraf re-entered the labyrinth of his borrowed form. Jeannie, splendid and abandoned, rode his lap until, all at once, she drove herself greedily to climax. He followed suit.

She lay against him. She spoke thickly into his chest. "It's astonishing. Having exactly what I want so easily. But then you're like a dream. A wet dream."

"A wet dream. Is that an idiom?"

She sat up and laughed. "I don't think so, dear. I don't know what else you call them. Nocturnal emissions, I guess, would –"

The light in the car came on. It was Siraf's doing, and what had moved him to do it had gone unnoticed by Jeannie, so that at first all her startlement was at the sudden illumination. Then, following Siraf's eyes, she saw the gun and squinting face behind it just outside the window. She saw this through the image of herself and Siraf mirrored on the glass – saw how she straddled him and gaped, saw how her gape began to become a scream – all these last readings of the world she took before the gun fired. When it did, alarm had activated only the slightest muscular resistances in her, and the slug's impact snatched her off the scholar's thighs and flung her slack as a doll against the farther door.

For both the superhuman wanderers who were thus brought together face-to-face for the first time, this was a moment almost impossibly charged with meaning. On Siraf's side, so surprised had he been that he was still scrambling along a nanosecond behind the attacker's cerebral flow. He had hit the light in a reflexive attempt to maximise data of the transaction he suddenly realised was at hand. During the first shot, and Jeannie's falling, and the subsequent instant that the eyes stared over the gun at him through the holes in the glass, his mind sprinted to get abreast of developments: (a) Jeannie was dead. (b) This was beyond doubt precisely the mating variant, and the practitioner of it, she had spoken of. (c) He himself was just sufficiently entangled with her legs to inhibit by a critical instant his extricating himself. (d) The man was now squeezing the trigger again, and the slug would surely reach Siraf's skull. (e) Therefore, he must of necessity again exceed behavioural norms, to preserve the viability of his mimicked apparatus.

The confrontation found Engelmann likewise somewhat stunned. There had been that sudden blooming of light within the car, just as he was stealing her, infernal yellowish light falling on those splendid lengths of limbs, those heroic loins all notched and knotted with the goatish strength of lust; there had been her Atlantean breasts nosing like lilies from the rumpled calyx of her pushed-up clothes, and his Luciferian face. Engelmann felt that he had stumbled upon the very archetype of the crime that it was his divinity to scourge. He had uncovered daemons, or demi-gods, at the coupling. Here was the two-backed beast itself, the Enemy, divine, in its way, as the Angel of Death was. Here was the test, and he would meet it. Exalted, he raised his massy Magnum at her staring not-yet-fearful eyes, and bravely, steadily, mightily, he smote her with fire and ruin. And lo, she was hurled down by the power of his tool and cast below in blood and darkness. And then Engelmann swung that godly tool on the goatish colossus. Here, for an instant, the Angel of Death bore with his naked eyes the stare of the enemy. In that hawk-browed gaze the Angel saw no fear, only a bright unreadable concentration. Then the Angel of Death gave battle, fearing not, the song of supreme combat in his ears. He pumped out roaring destruction into the eyes of the enemy.

This was the beginning of the Angel's ordeal. Here commenced That Which Should Not Be. The range was close, and the shot sprayed what seemed to be the whole back of the man's head against the black tuck-and-roll and the windshield behind him. But even as Engelmann turned to flee his triumphant work, that spray of pulverised bone and brain leapt off the upholstery, jumped off the glass, leaving it unmarked except for the bullet's exit hole, and sped back, recohering in air like a convergent bee-swarm, to reconstitute the gold-haired spheroid of the titan's head.

Seeing that face reknit, and the dark shattered eyes resume their stare – seeing this ruptured the very soul of the Angel of Death. A vital tissue of belief, a deep and unsuspected faith, was torn in him. His mind bled horror that flooded thought and swept it down dreadful channels that had long been dug in him, and lain waiting. The Angel of Death ran, flinging away his gun, and making water in his chaotic muscular exertions to escape.

He hauled himself behind the wheel of his car, left idling a half block down the street. He loosed the brake and grabbed the stick shift and ... waited.

He could not flee, plunge off into the madness now alive in him, as long as a hope remained that he had dreamed. If that black car in his rearview did not stir, if the moments lengthened and nothing happened, he had hallucinated and was free. If not, Engelmann knew with eerie certainty what would happen: that *thing*, only temporarily a man in form, would burst through the very steel of the car, surge out, and, with a roar of Ragnarök, sprint after him. He waited, the gunfire utterly forgotten. That, and the police it might have summoned, existed in another world, to which he could never return if he did not prove now to himself that only corpses lay in that black car.

Siraf was ready for immediate pursuit, but sat still throughout Engelmann's sprint back to his car. He longed to give chase. On this lucky excursion, jackpot on jackpot of data was falling to his lot, and he meant to seize on this second homicidal subject in any way he could, if only by getting a verbal report from the individual on the full meaning of his rite's bizarre symbolism.

But the female, Jeannie, had clearly abhorred in the abstract the fate that had now actually stricken her. Siraf very much wanted to fix her while it was still possible. He touched her long calves, still across his thighs, hating the

wastage. The Archives' most fundamental traditions abjured him not to do it – not at the cost of the new data and not when the first subject's loss was completely fortuitous. Siraf's ambition, and his dedication to the Archives, showed him necessity, but he could not bring himself to move until absolutely the last moment, when the other's car should start to move and he must run it down before it lost him.

And, then, it did *not* move! The aggressor waited down the street, visualising a bizarre form of pursuit by Siraf, ideating with such intensity that the image came through clearly even at that range. Siraf was being invited into the ritual. What an amazingly flexible acceptance of the (to him) impossible on the part of this attacker! For he was now playing the game of retreat and coy pause, and waiting to be chased by his victim!

There would be time then, after all. He began increasing his bodily density. Simultaneously, he sought out by thermal palp every least fragment of Jeannie's head throughout the car's interior. The finer fluids had cooled quickly on the glass and metal, but all retained critical traces of warmth. The reassembly was telekinetic, his body motionless in its process of mass-gain. He referred to his enzymatic record for his exhaustive readouts of her craniocerebral morphology. It was a work of delicate correlations, electrically swift. The chips and tissue-shreds each had to be minutely cleansed and neatly relogged in the dense three-dimensional puzzle. It took twenty-seven seconds. He sanitised, sutured, and sealed the countless seams with thermal telebeams, infinitely fine. When he saw her eyes open and struggle for focus, he was content, and as, just then, his density had reached its peak, he propped her on the seat, pulled up his trousers, and hurled himself against the car door.

For Engelmann, the healing seconds of silence and inactivity had almost closed his horror's wound. He breathed deeply and pulled the car into gear, scarcely yet daring to believe he had been delivered from a mythic retribution, delivered from the Impossible. Then in the mirror he saw the Cadillac's side bloom outward and the giant emerge from the tattering steel and spraying glass amidst a roar of Ragnarök. With a howl of acceleration his deep-chested car fled away.

Now inexorably That Which Should Not Be came to pass. Precisely as he dreaded, the giant began to sprint after him, and though Engelmann shortly hit fifty, his Enemy gained. He drove at and beyond the limit of control, sliding and careering through turns that ought by all odds to have destroyed him. The giant gained. The Angel of Death was Phaethon now, dragged broken-limbed among the stars, a mortal suddenly seized by real gods.

"Real Gods!" He screamed it aloud. "No!" Had he not then believed his own godhead? Yes. No. Yes – but *not like this*. It was partly a *game*! Only the deaths had been real – ordinary deaths. His divinity had only been ... poetic!

But there was no holding on to this late truth, for it was truth no more. He had flown upward on real wings, had for a fact soared up to where the Impossible lodged. For here it was a dozen strides back of him, its face an image of mythic calm while its legs and arms drove it forward as furiously as the connecting rods on a locomotive's wheels. The Angel of Death had been just angel enough, had had just power enough, to damn himself, to bring down on himself a truly divine avenger. At home there was a machine gun, and to that poor scrap of potency, the limit of his defence, Engelmann now bent all his thoughts. He threw a left turn too fast, side-swiped a parked car, and roared on, dribbling glass and clattering with popped chrome.

Siraf stopped. He had by now returned to normal mass, but even so he found that the effort required to maintain this speed would shortly do serious damage to his adopted anatomy. He had read a clear destination in his attacker's thoughts, including a map thither that the latter had fleetingly rehearsed to himself. The distance remaining to be covered was not great.

So the young scholar settled to an easy jog, husbanding his forces. He had received premonitory glimpses of his quarry's desire – of the scenario that the man wanted to play out when Siraf joined him in his room. He foresaw that new mimicries would be required, and that this investigation would almost surely exhaust his research energies – hardly a misfortune, considering the choice insights he had been granted. Especially this second find. Could a rarer, more paradoxical and self-destructive rite exist, than this his recent attacker flew to consummate?

And at length, when Siraf stood in the vestibule of Engelmann's apartment building and read him clearly where he lay seven stories above, the scholar found in full what he had guessed at, an astonishing necro-erotic ritual with himself as co-celebrant. He was indeed expected to transform his body – and how could the man have educed so unerringly his power to do so? More, how could he so smoothly accept it, beyond the capacities of his kind though it was, and incorporate it in his passionate fantasies? Not for the first time in his career, Siraf acknowledged with awe in his heart the endless creativity of consciousness as he had met with it throughout its polymorphic, transgalactic sprawl. He deactivated the lights of the stairwell and caused his form to melt into several smaller ones. Slowly these climbed the carpeted stairs, with a whispery prickly noise, mounting multiply to probe this second earthly mystery.

Could a more dreadful, even tragic, misunderstanding be conceived? It was lunatic expectation, not desire, that powered those intense imaginings of Engelmann's! But how could Siraf, speed-reading his impossibly involved text, be blamed? The Angel's visions sprang from his real (and all too unreal) encounter, but the grafting where hallucination sprouted from fact was missed by the scholar. And since the half-sexual terror that now flooded the man's nerves was not grossly different from the half-sexual rage of his initial assault, here too Siraf saw continuum and concentrated on reading his scripted role in the rite. Repugnance he surely felt, but professionalism squelched it. He had already gathered that no kind of emotional violence should surprise him, coming from this turbulent species.

* * *

Somewhat later, near the stillest hour of the night, Jeannie Kudajzinsky stepped through a great hole of shredded steel and stood on asphalt and broken glass, an alien in this ended and continued world. It might have been one of those

ritual womb-symbols that she emerged from, she thought, for she found herself reborn – into the Impossible.

She walked along the sidewalk, very slowly. All was emptiness, holocaust hadn't raised a single siren. Had she died in fact, and were all these buildings crypts? An hour and more she had sat in the ruined car, remembering, and no one had passed.

She decided that the most terrible aspect of it all, the thing that could conceivably drive her mad, was that there should be nothing more, that she should now have to walk back into her life and simply resume it. She looked at the big sycamore leaves applauding the wind. Like vile arthritic hands they covetously rubbed the brass-nippled streetlamps. Panic began to radiate from a point-source in her stomach's pit. Just then she was spoken to – distinctly, voicelessly:

"Jeannie. Be comforted. This is Siraf. I am an extraterrestrial and your experiences were simple realities, every one."

She looked straight up – from instinct, as the telepulses bore no directional trace. Ten feet above her, under a vaulting of branches, hung that tuft of transcosmic thistle-down, Siraf's travelling shape. Jeannie gazed. After a long and chaotic moment, she *was* comforted. Softly she said:

"You were ..."

"In a human shape. We mated. The sexual homicide – his name was Engelmann – killed you. I repaired you. Then I indulged Engelmann in his fantasies. He is dead, my dear. Barring the energy I need for my return, I am utterly depleted, and there was no fixing him. But from Engelmann I learned – too late for him – the proneness of your race to psychic trauma, and so I've taken care to explain things. Do you understand?"

"Yes," she said. "But why ...?"

"Scholarship. Please accept my thanks for your time and co-operation. I apologise for the inconvenience involved."

"I'm a scholar too!" she blurted. Sadness, and the lone discoverer's exaltation, stretched her heart between them, while through all else and amazing to herself, she felt a piercing envy.

"Yes," Siraf responded. "And you have taught me much. Goodbye."

He was gone. "Goodbye," she said, an instant too late. And then once more, in a shout, the better to project her voice across the light-years: "Goodbye!"

After a moment, she spread her arms and did a sprawling, not to say gargantuan, pirouette under the sycamore trees. She whooped with laughter, and at the quiet, coward streets where gunshots and fury had not raised a single stir of protest or aid, she shook her fist and shouted: "Revelation! Great! But what the hell can I *do* with it?"

Engelmann sat on his mattress with his back against the corner he'd shoved his bed into, after bolting his door. He had the machine gun across his thighs and the TV was on. He couldn't watch the TV, however – only the door, whose terrible flimsiness was like an ongoing horror show that the tube could not compete with. That Which Should Not Be, *was*. Effortlessly, irresistibly, It took Its being and did Its will on man. Not any man. On *him* alone. Engelmann wept and ground his teeth together.

What was there not? What unspeakabilities, glimpsed in dreams, were not proven now? For he knew the true form of that which chased him. It was a trinity, three-in-one. Eight-legged things from the sniggering dark, come scuttling down from the poisonous cobwebby stars. But he had not flown up there! Not truly! Why should they come down? That dreadful three-in-one – one for his face, one for his heart, one for his loins. He'd had no wings, not really! Only a costume made of others' blood, only a god-costume. Was that his crime, blasphemy? What wall, what puny dike of Possibility, was left to stand between himself and chaos now? All the rest of the world was safe in its fortress, only he – *was that a movement outside the door?*

Back inside the Fortress! Back inside! O World, let Engelmann back within the walls! Engelmann wants back in, dear world! Things are coming, things that will pierce his pitiful skin and corrode his precious heart with poisons!

Was that a bulging of the panel of the door?

Oh, here is Engelmann, alone and naked! Take him in, he begs you; he is helpless, his water flows; oh, pick him up and cradle him out of harm! Momma! Not death! Not pain and death!

But something was piercing the door, soundlessly, as if it were clay or cheese. And a blister was swelling from the ceiling, and another from the wall. Three tarantulas, big as German shepherds, hatched through wood and plaster; their shaggy legs whispered as they came tenderfooting toward him. One for his face. One for his heart. One for his loins. The gun, as they do in nightmares, failed to fire.