

Greg Bear

The topics of Greg Bear's science fiction have ranged from nanotechnology run amok in Blood Music, to the translation of souls into awesome energy fields in the SF-horror hybrid Psycholone, and future evolution in Darwin Radio. He is the author of the Songs of Earth and Power heroic diptych, comprised of The Infinity Concerto and Serpent Mage, and two collections of short fiction, The Wind from a Burning Woman and Tangents, which include stories "Hardfought" and "Blood Music," each of which won both the Hugo and Nebula Awards. Renowned for hard science-fiction epics, Bear has written the trilogy that includes Legacy, Eon, and Eternity, which features a multiplicity of alternate worlds and timelines accessed through the interior of a hollow asteroid. Novels of equal impressive scope include the alien contact story The Forge of God and its sequel, Anvil of Stars; the nanotechnology opus Queen of Angels, and its follow-up, Slant; and the Nebula Award-winning Moving Mars, which chronicles the fifty-year history of Earth's Mars colony and its revolt against the mother planet. Bear has also written Dinosaur Summer, a sequel to Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's The Lost World, and Foundation and Chaos, which builds on the concepts of Isaac Asimov's Foundation trilogy.

THROUGH ROAD NO WHITHER

THE LONG BLACKMERCEDES rumbled out of the fog on the road south from Dijon, moisture running in cold trickles across its windshield. Horst von Ranke moved the military pouch to one side and carefully read the maps spread on his lap, eyeglasses perched low on his nose, while Waffen Schutzstaffel Oberleutnant Albert Fischer drove. "Thirty-five kilometers," von Ranke said under his breath. "No more."

"We are lost," Fischer said. "We've already come thirty-six."

"Not quite that many. We should be there any minute now."

Fischer nodded and then shook his head. His high cheekbones and long, sharp nose only accentuated the black uniform with silver death's heads on the high, tight collar. Von Ranke wore a broad-striped gray suit; he was an undersecretary at the Propaganda Ministry, now acting as a courier. They might have been brothers, yet one had grown up in Czechoslovakia, the other in the Ruhr; one was the son of a coal miner, the other of a brewer. They had met and become close friends in Paris two years before.

"Wait," von Ranke said, peering through the drops on the side window. "Stop."

Fischer braked the car and looked in the direction of von Ranke's long finger. Near the roadside, beyond a copse of young trees, was a low thatch-roofed house with dirty gray walls, almost hidden by the fog.

"Looks empty," von Ranke said.

"It is occupied; look at the smoke," Fischer said. "Perhaps somebody can tell us where we are."

They pulled the car over and got out, von Ranke leading the way across a mud path littered with wet straw. The hut looked even dirtier close up. Smoke rose in a darker brown-gray twist from a hole in the peak of the thatch. Fischer nodded at his friend and they cautiously approached. Over the crude wooden door letters wobbled unevenly in some alphabet neither knew, and between them they spoke nine languages. "Could that be Rom?" von Ranke asked, frowning. "It does look familiar-Slavic Rom."

"Gypsies? Romany don't live in huts like this, and besides, I thought they were rounded up long ago."

"That's what it looks like," von Ranke said. "Still, maybe we can share some language, if only French."

He knocked on the door. After a long pause he knocked again, and the door opened before his knuckles made the gap. A woman too old to be alive stuck her long, wood-colored nose through the crack and peered at them with one good eye. The other was wrapped in a sunken caul of flesh. The hand that gripped the door edge was filthy, its nails long and black. Her toothless mouth cracked into a wrinkled, round-lipped grin. "Good evening," she said in perfect, even elegant German. "What can I do for you?"

"We need to know if we are on the road to Dôle," von Ranke said, controlling his repulsion.

"Then you're asking the wrong guide," the old woman said. Her hand withdrew and the door started to close. Fischer kicked out and pushed her back. The door swung open and began to lean on worn-out leather hinges.

"You do not treat us with the proper respect," he said. "What do you mean, 'the wrong guide'? What kind of guide are you?"

"So strong," the old woman crooned, wrapping her hands in front of her withered chest and backing away into the gloom. She wore colorless, ageless gray rags. Worn knit sleeves extended to her wrists.

"Answer me!" Fischer said, advancing despite the strong odor of urine and decay in the hut.

"The maps I know are not for this land," she sang, stopping before a cold and empty hearth.

"She's crazy," von Ranke said. "Let the local authorities take care of her later. Let's be off." But a wild look was in Fischer's eye. So much filth, so much disarray, and impudence as well; these made him angry.

"What maps do you know, crazy woman?" he demanded.

"Maps in time," the old woman said. She let her hands fall to her side and lowered her head, as if, in admitting her specialty, she was suddenly humble.

"Then tell us where we are," Fischer sneered.

"Come, we have important business," von Ranke said, but he knew it was too late. There would be an end, but it would be on his friend's terms, and it might not be pleasant.

"You are on a through road no whither," the old woman said.

"What?" Fischer towered over her. She stared up as if at some prodigal son returned home, her gums shining spittle.

"If you wish a reading, sit," she said, indicating a low table and three battered wood chairs. Fischer glanced at her, then sat at the table.

"Very well," he said, suddenly and falsely obsequious. Another game, von Ranke realized. Cat and mouse.

Fischer pulled out a chair for his friend and sat across from the old woman. "Put your hands on the table, palms down, both of them, both of you," she said. They did so. She lay her ear to the table as if listening, eyes going to the beams of light coming through the thatch. "Arrogance," she said. Fischer did not react.

"A road going into fire and death," she said. "Your cities in flame, your women and children shriveling to black dolls in the heat of their burning homes. The death camps are found and you stand accused of hideous crimes. Many are tried and hanged. Your nation is disgraced, your cause abhorred." Now a peculiar light came into her eye. "And many years later, a comedian swaggers around on stage, in a movie, turning your Führer into a silly clown, singing a silly song. Only psychopaths will believe in you, the lowest of the low. Your nation will be divided among your enemies. All will be lost."

Fischer's smile did not waver. He pulled a coin from his pocket and threw it down before the woman, then pushed the chair back and stood. "Your maps are as crooked as your chin, hag," he said. "Let's go."

"I've been suggesting that," von Ranke said. Fischer made no move to leave. Von Ranke tugged on his arm but the Oberleutnant shrugged free of his friend's grip.

"Gypsies are few, now, hag," he said. "Soon to be fewer by one." Von Ranke managed to urge him just outside the door. The woman followed and shaded her eye against the misty light.

"I am no gypsy," she said. "You do not even recognize the words?" She pointed at the letters above the door.

Fischer squinted, and the light of recognition dawned in his eyes. "Yes," he said. "Yes, I do, now. A dead language

"What are they?" von Ranke asked, uneasy.

"Hebrew, I think," Fischer said. "She is a Jewess."

"No!" the woman cackled. "I am no Jew."

Von Ranke thought the woman looked younger now, or at least stronger, and his unease deepened.

"I do not care what you are," Fischer said quietly. "I only wish we were in my father's time." He took a step toward her. She did not retreat. Her face became almost youthfully bland, and her bad eye seemed to fill in. "Then, there would be no regulations, no rules-I could take this pistol"-he tapped his holster-"and apply it to your filthy Kike head, and perhaps kill the last Jew in Europe." He unstrapped the holster. The woman straightened in the dark hut, as if drawing strength from Fischer's abusive tongue. Von Ranke feared for his friend. Rash-ness would get them in trouble.

"This is not our fathers' time," he reminded Fischer.

Fischer paused, the pistol half in his hand, his finger curling around the trigger. "Old woman"-though she did not look as old, perhaps not even old at all, and certainly not bent and crippled-"you have had a very narrow shave this afternoon

"You have no idea who I am," the woman half-sang, half-moaned.

"*Scheisse*," Fischer spat. "Now we will go, and report you and your hovel."

"I am the scourge," she breathed, and her breath smelled like burning stone even three strides away. She backed into the hut but her voice did not diminish. "I am the visible hand, the pillar of cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night."

Fischer's face hardened, and then he laughed. "You are right," he said to von Ranke, "she isn't worth our trouble." He turned and stomped out the door. Von Ranke followed, with one last glance over his shoulder into the gloom, the decayed *one has lived in this hut for years*, he thought. Her shadow was gray and indefinite before the ancient stone hearth, behind the leaning, dust-covered table.

In the car von Ranke sighed. "You *do* tend toward arrogance, you know that?"

Fischer grinned and shook his head. "You drive, old friend. *I'll* look at the maps." Von Ranke ramped up the Mercedes turbine until its whine was high and steady and its exhaust cut a swirling hole in the fog behind. "No wonder we're lost," Fischer said. He shook out the Pan-Deutschland map peevishly. "This is five years old-1979."

"We'll find our way," von Ranke said. "I wouldn't miss old Krum-nagel's face when we deliver the plans. He fought long against the antipodal skip bombers. . . . And you delay us by fooling with an old woman."

"It is my way," Fischer said. "I hate disarray. Do you think he will try to veto the Pacific Northwest blitz?"

"He won't dare. He will know his place after he sees the declarations," von Ranke said. The Mercedes whined its way toward Dôle.

From the door of the hut the old woman watched, head bobbing. "I am not a Jew," she said, "but I loved them, too. Yes. I loved all my children." She raised her hand as the long black car roared into the fog.

"I will bring you to justice, whatever line you live upon, and all your children, and their children's children," she said. She dropped a twist of smoke from her elbow to the dirt floor and wagged her finger. The smoke danced and drew black lines in the dirt. "As you wished, into the time of your fathers." The fog grew thinner. She brought her arm down, and forty years melted away with the mist.

High above a deeper growl descended on the road. A wide-winged shadow passed over the hut, wings flashing starburst invasion stripes and cannon fire.

"Hungry bird," the shapeless figure said. "Time to feed."