

Posterity by George Alec Effinger

COURANE FINALLY MANAGED TO FALL ASLEEP SHORTLY before dawn. Less than two hours later, though, he was awakened by the blood lady, who came into the ward and turned on all the overhead lights. Courane raised his head a little and watched as the blood lady came toward his bed. He knew he would never get any more sleep that night. The awful day had begun.

"Morning," said the blood lady. She set a metal basket of test tubes on Courane's blanket.

"Good morning," said Courane. "You're new."

The young woman nodded. "Today's my first day," she said. She tied a rubber hose around Courane's arm and tapped the veins on the inside of his elbow. Then she fitted a test tube to a syringe and discarded the needle's plastic cap. She looked into Courane's eyes and smiled. "I've never done this before," she said. "You're my first victim."

"Oh boy," said Courane. He felt a quick, ugly chill in his belly. The blood lady tapped a vein again and seemed satisfied. She jabbed the needle home, and Courane winced. No blood flowed into the test tube. "Oops," she said, "sorry."

"It's all right," muttered Courane. He was in the hospital; he expected to suffer pain. If he'd had insurance or money in the bank, he could have been in a private hospital instead of a charity ward where almost the entire staff was trying out its dubious skills on captive patients.

The blood lady wiggled the point of the needle in Courane's arm until she hit the blood vessel. "Here we go," she said, as the test tube began to fill up. Courane watched as she loosened the rubber hose. When the test tube was full, the blood lady pulled it free and jammed another in place. She hadn't yet learned to change tubes without stabbing the needle deeper. "Just one more," she said. She removed the second test tube and pressed on a third, again sending a jolt of pain through Courane's arm. He lay in the bed, his eyes now tightly closed.

"All done," she said at last. "That wasn't so bad, was it?" She'd moved on to the next bed before Courane had a chance to reply.

Courane let his head rest on the plastic pillow. He stared up at the water-stained soundproofing tiles on the ceiling. He wished he could change position, but he could barely move. To his left, a tube snaked down from an IV bag on a pole into a tangle of white adhesive bandage around his wrist, which was taped tightly to a board. He held his left arm motionless, because he was afraid of dislodging the IV needle in the back of his hand. Another plastic tube connected his right nostril to a squat, noisy machine beside the bed. The tube wiggled and irritated his nose, and the soreness was almost as bad as the blazing pain from the surgical wound in his belly.

Courane prayed for oblivion, but sleep was very difficult to achieve on the charity ward. To Courane, the trouble with sleep was that he couldn't really appreciate the freedom from pain while he had it. He realized his loss only when he woke up again. Of course, in theory he was entitled to a shot of Demerol every four hours. In actual practice, however, that was as hard to come by as sleep.

"Hello," said a soft voice. "How are you feeling this morning?" Courane looked up at the

beautiful woman and blinked. She had long, lank white hair, and she was wearing a bizarre, black one-piece outfit, with white gauntlets and a diamond-shaped emblem on her left breast. "Wait a minute," Courane murmured. "I thought I dreamed you last night."

The woman threw her long, pale hair over her shoulder and smiled.

"No, it wasn't a dream. I came in to visit you late last night."

"And no one else saw you or heard you."

"That's right," she said.

"And no one else can see you or hear you now?"

"That's right."

Courane frowned. "Then they must think I'm crazy, talking to myself."

The woman laughed. "Would you like some privacy?"

"Please," said Courane.

The woman stood up and drew the curtains around the bed. "How's that?" she asked.

"It's the best we can do. What if someone comes in?"

The woman shook her head. "The nurse's aide will come by in about sixteen minutes. We have plenty of time."

"You're sure I'm not dreaming now?" said Courane.

"You're not dreaming. How much do you remember of what I told you last night?"

"Not much," admitted Courane. "I was sure I was asleep or drugged, and I wasn't paying very close attention."

"All right, we'll start at the beginning. My name is Eldrçs. I'm from the future."

"Yes, I remember you saying that. I remember you showing me all kinds of strange things."

"Do you believe me?" said Eldrçs.

Courane shrugged. "This is the way it is, ma'am: if you're really, truly here, then you're probably telling me the truth. All those futuristic newspapers and books you showed me couldn't be just an elaborate practical joke. But if I ever find out that you're not really here, I'm going to stop believing you that instant."

"Fair enough," said Eldrçs. "Do you want to know why I've come so far into the past to talk with you?"

"It would be discourteous for me to say no, wouldn't it?"

"Even if you said no, I'd tell you anyway. The truth is, Mr. Courane, you don't have long to live."

Courane felt the blood drain from his face. "I don't want to know about that," he said

quietly.

Eldrçs shook her head. "Well," she said, "it's why we have to get right to work. Your surgery was a success, all right, but there are more tumors in there, and not long from now one of them will rupture. You're going to die on your own bathroom floor, stark naked, in terrible pain."

"Thanks," said Courane. "Thanks a lot." He took a couple of deep breaths, but it didn't help the sudden feeling of dreamlike disorientation that had seized him. He felt a monstrous anxiety attack looming.

"I'm terribly sorry," said Eldrçs, "but you can't let it depress you. I mean, everybody dies, you know. Everybody has to face it."

"Yeah," said Courane angrily, "but everybody doesn't have to hear all the awful details in advance. How long do I have? A year?"

Eldrçs shook her head.

"Six months?"

She shook her head again.

"Don't tell me," said Courane. "I really don't want to know." The woman from the future held up a hand. "Calm down, Mr. Courane. I'm here to help you."

"Help me do what? You've already made sure that however much time I've got left is going to be miserable. I'm going to wake up every morning from now on wondering if this is the day. What kind of a life is that?"

Eldrçs sighed. "Some people do that their whole lives, no matter how old they live to be. I'm telling you this for a reason. I'm giving you the chance to fill the great gap you left when you died in my time line."

"You've come back to change the past, is that it?" said Courane.

"I've got it on good authority that such a thing is impossible."

Eldrçs found that amusing. "Whom are you going to believe," she said, "me or one of your science fiction writer friends?"

"Time travel is impossible," said Courane. "Changing the past is even more impossible."

"I can take your pain away," she said softly.

That caught Courane's attention. "How? By getting the nurse for me? I'm due for a shot of Demerol."

"My way is much better than Demerol," said Eldrçs,

"What do you mean? Morphine? That stuff makes me throw up."

"Forget drugs. I have futuristic techniques that from your point of view are indistinguishable from magic. I can help you."

Courane nodded. "But you want me to do something first," he said.

"Naturally. But you'll be glad to do what I ask. It's just what you'd be doing if you were healed and at home. I want you to write a book."

"Here?" asked Courane. "In the hospital? Hooked up to machines? I need peace and quiet even at home; I can't have any distractions. I can barely *read* here, let alone do any writing."

"You'll do just fine, once you get used to the routine," said Eldrçs. "You've got your notebook and a pencil on your bedstand. What else do you need?"

Courane looked at her glumly. "I need an idea," he said.

Eldrçs waved a hand, dismissing his objection. "You have plenty of unwritten ideas in your notebook, you know. I want you to complete the manuscript of the sequel to *Space Spy*."

"*Time Spy*?" Courane looked startled. "How do you even know about it?"

"In my time, I'm sort of a literary historian. I'm doing my thesis on you and your books. I've read everything you ever wrote, including your unpublished work, your notebooks, and your letters. I know more about you than does anyone else in my era. It's very exciting for me to meet you in person. I feel as if I've known you for years."

"I'm flattered, but I don't think I can help you. I have worked out a vague plot outline for *Time Spy*, but it's nowhere near ready to work on. That's why I haven't written it already. I need to do a lot more thinking. I don't know who the characters are, or where it takes place. I don't even have subplots, just the main idea."

"I told you not to worry," said the woman from the future. "I've seen a finished manuscript of *Time Spy*. I can give you a detailed synopsis."

Courane just stared for a moment. "You've seen the finished book? How?"

Eldrçs sighed. "It would take too long to explain. It involves what seems to be a temporal paradox. Let's just say that I will, in fact, persuade you to write the book, and so I will have access to it in the

future."

"Then why do you have to put me through all this now, when I'm feeling so terrible?"

"Because unless you actually do write it here and now, the manuscript in the future will cease to exist."

Courane felt he was missing something. "Then why not bring me the manuscript, and save me all the mental anguish of trying to create it the hard way."

"I would if I could," she said. "But it can't be done. The continuum won't permit it."

"The continuum won't permit it," murmured Courane. "The continuum is going to see to it that I die a horrible death pretty damn soon. The hell with the continuum!"

Eldrçs put a hand on Courane's arm and looked at him sympathetically. "This must be

hard on you," she said. "I have to go now. Think about what I said. I'll be back about 7:30."

Not long after Eldrçs left, a nurse's aide came by to take Courane's temperature and blood pressure. He let her wrap the sphygmomanometer around his free right arm. She pushed the thermometer between his lips. At least none of this hurt. She noted his blood pressure and his temperature on his chart and started to move off toward the next bed.

"Miss?" said Courane.

The nurse's aide gave him an impatient look. "Yes?"

"Would you tell the nurse that I'd like my shot now, please?" There was no room in the hospital's operating budget for luxuries like call buttons at every bedside.

She nodded. "I'll tell her when I see her," she said. Courane had to take every opportunity to get the message to the ward's head nurse. It usually took three or four requests before she actually arrived with the medication.

The ward was not a pleasant place to recuperate. There were twelve beds, six on each side of the aisle. Prisoners from Central Lockup filled four of them, handcuffed to their beds' side rails. Even the patients who weren't chained down were suspicious. Before his operation, Courane had had a small radio beside his bed. He liked to listen to the ball games in the afternoon. The radio had been stolen soon after he'd been taken down to surgery. On another occasion, when Courane had been wheeled downstairs for Xrays, he came back to find his hairbrush and his shoes missing. Now the only personal possessions he kept were some paperbacks, a spiral notebook, and a pencil. He had learned that books were perfectly safe. No one here would have any use for a book.

Although it was only six o'clock, all the televisions had been turned on for the day. Eight of the patients had their own portable sets beside their beds, brought from home or on loan from relatives. It didn't seem to matter to the patients what was on. They watched anything, rarely changing the channel. News programs, game shows, soap operas, kids' shows-Courane heard them all; he couldn't escape the cacophony. The televisions wouldn't be turned off until after midnight.

Suddenly Courane felt a sneeze coming on. He had a long incision in his chest and belly, pulled closed with metal staples rather than stitches. It ran from the tip of his sternum all the way to his pubes. A sneeze, a cough, even a hiccup caused him agony. He pressed on his bandages with both hands and surrendered to the sneeze. The pain brought tears to his eyes. He held himself and moaned, wishing that the nurse would hurry with the Demerol.

All Courane had to look forward to was another day of boredom, loneliness, and desperation. He looked at his wristwatch: it was only 6:20. Time moved with the sluggishness one would expect in prison, or Hell. He was thinking just that thought when a priest bent over his bed.

"How are you today, my son?" said the priest.

All the visiting clergy were so goddamn kindly, thought Courane. "Fine," he said. The priests didn't take it well when you complained to them.

"I'm glad," said the priest. "Is there anything I can do for you?"

Well, actually, there is. On your way out, I'd be grateful if you'd ask the nurse if I can have my shot."

"You know, when you get out of the hospital, you won't be able to get those shots. You shouldn't start relying too heavily on drugs. You'll do better to look for the inner strength God has given you."

"Yes, Father. Would you ask the nurse though?"

The kindly priest nodded. "Of course."

Courane looked at the priest's compassionate face, his own expression blank. Let me slash you up the middle, he thought, and we'll see what your inner strength is like. "Thank you, Father," he said.

"You know", you should get up and walk. It's the best thing for you. If you line in bed too long, it will just make it harder for you later on."

"Yes, Father."

"I'll include you in my prayers, my son."

"Thank you, Father." The priest went on to the next patient. Courane checked his watch; it wasn't even 6:30 yet.

At seven o'clock a new patient was brought into the ward and put in the empty bed next to Courane's. "This is really disgusting," said one of the orderlies, as he helped lift the unconscious man into the bed.

"You haven't worked here very long, if you think this is bad," said a second orderly.

"I've never smelled anything this bad in my life. Geez, I'm glad I m not going to have to bathe this sucker."

One of the men across the aisle complained. "That stinks" he said. "We don't want him here."

"Gangrene," said the .second orderly. "The cops found this guy sleeping in a doorway. his leg will have to come off."

"I don't give a damn what his problem is," said the man across the aisle. "Get him out of here. Put him out in the hall or something."

The first orderly gave the patient a malicious grin. "If he wakes up, you can make friends. Sometimes you got to overlook something like a rotting leg. You can't hold that against him. I'm sure he wouldn't talk that way about your bullet wound."

"The bullet wound is my business," said the angry man. "I don't go pushing it on other people. That bum is inflicting his smell on everybody on this ward."

The two orderlies shrugged and headed toward the door. "Orderly," called Courane. The stench of the man's gangrenous leg was almost suffocating, and Courane could barely breath without gagging.

"You want to complain, too, mister?" said the first orderly.

"My IV bag's running out," said Courane.

The orderly came over and examined the bag on the pole. "I'll tell the nurse," he said. He

followed the other orderly out.

Courane grimaced; he should have asked the orderly to remind the nurse about the Demerol shot, too. In the meantime he turned his head and buried his nose in the pillow. It didn't provide much relief from the nauseating smell. He thought about how often the odor of gangrene had been described in other people's books as "sickeningly sweet." Those writers couldn't have had the opportunity to experience it like this. Courane knew now that no neat phrase could do it justice.

A little while later, Eldrçs returned and drew the curtains again.

"How are we doing?" she asked.

"You sound like one of the residents," said Courane. "Can you do something about that awful smell?"

"Let's talk about that," she said. She perched on the very edge of his bed. "I can take your pain away, and neutralize anything else that's annoying you."

"Superdrugs from the future?"

She combed her white hair back and shook her head. "Just some creative past-altering. I can doctor details of this quasi-reality."

"Quasi-reality?" asked Courane. "What's quasi about it?"

Eldrçs shrugged. "I can shift you from one reality to another, nearly identical, one. One in which, for example, there's no putrid gangrene smell in the air. Or one in which you're recuperating exactly the same, only you don't hurt. Do you follow me?"

"You have this magical power, but you're going to use it only if I go along with what you want me to do. That means you're perfectly content to let me go on suffering if I don't cooperate. You don't have any qualms about withholding comfort from me."

"No qualms at all," said Eldrçs. "My field is minor twentieth-century genre writers, not ethics. You can go on suffering as much as you want, although I can't see why you'd make that choice. What I want isn't so terrible."

"You don't know how hard it is for me to write, even when I'm healthy and sitting at my desk, fully motivated."

"I'd think that what I'm offering you would be enough to motivate you."

Courane frowned. "I mean inspired. You're asking me to force a book into existence, something that I'm not at all ready to write. It, won't turn out well; I can guarantee you that. It won't be writing; It'll be constructing, like putting together a model of a novel from your outline."

"That's all I want. The people in the future won't know the difference. And who's going to know? Besides me, I doubt if anyone else in my era has ever even realized your books exist."

Courane groaned. "First you tell me that I'm going to die a horrible death real soon now, and then you tell me that nothing I've done or written will be remembered. Why don't you leave me alone? Why don't you go bother somebody else? Gene Wolfe's a good writer. Go

talk to him."

Eldrçs spread her hands. "I don't have to. Gene Wolfe is very popular in my time. He wrote some genuine classics."

"And *Space Spy*-"

"Let's say, to be charitable, that your best work has been somewhat neglected since your death."

"Neglected," said Courane glumly.

"Totally and unmercifully out of print since a month after you passed away. There was a small piece in *LOCUS* about your death, and then your name was never again mentioned by anybody until I came along."

"Why did you choose me then, if I'm such a nobody?"

Eldrçs smiled sadly. "There were only a handful of twentieth-century science fiction writers left to write about. Almost everybody else had been documented before my time."

"I was the bottom of the barrel then," said Courane.

"Does it help any if I say that I think you've been unfairly ignored? That your stories are more entertaining than those of many other writers whose reputations lasted much longer?"

"To be honest, it doesn't help. I think I'm psychologically crippled now, thanks to you."

Eldrçs stood up and smoothed the covers. "You wouldn't want me to lie to you, would you?"

"It's too late now, anyway."

"Let's talk about happier things. Let's talk about what I can do for you here, and what finishing *Time Spy* will mean. For one thing, it will lead to a resurrection of interest in your work."

"I don't suppose you could manage a resurrection of me, personally."

"We do supertechnology," said Eldrçs, "not miracles."

"All right, I'll go along with you. What do I do?"

"Great!" said Eldrçs, She beamed at him. "I have a skeleton of the first chapter of *Time Spy*. Look it over, read the character sketches, and when you feel ready, just start writing in your notebook. You'll notice that as soon as you start to work, the pain from your incision will disappear, as well as the other small discomforts. That will last only as long as you're actually working. As soon as you stop, the pain will come back."

"That's blackmail," said Courane angrily.

"That's incentive," corrected Eldrçs. "I've got to go now. They're bringing you breakfast in a couple of minutes."

"Oh boy.....,"

"Aren't you hungry?"

"You haven't seen the food here," said Courane.

"I'll check back with you in a little while to see how you're doing. Maybe we could get a chapter a day. That will finish the book in three weeks, and the future will have a new minor masterpiece of science fiction to study. A lost classic of the Golden Age."

"I've never been able to write a chapter a day in my life. Even when I was rolling."

"We'll see," said Eldrçs confidently. "When you realize how much you hurt when you're not working, I think you'll find all sorts of new inspiration." She pulled back the curtain just as an orderly was coming toward Courane's bed with his breakfast tray. Eldrçs left; the orderly paid no attention to her as she walked by him on her way out.

"Mr. Courane," said the orderly. He put the tray on Courane's lap, nearly spilling its contents onto the bed.

"Thanks," said Courane. "About my shot-"

"The nurse knows. She'll get to you as soon as she can."

Right, thought Courane. He looked at the breakfast tray unhappily. The food in the charity hospital was the worst Courane had ever had, and he'd sampled institutional cooking at college, in the service, in jail, and in several other temples of healing. Breakfast, though, was the most reliable meal of the day. It was entirely recognizable, and therefore promised also to be edible.

Today, Courane had a plate of tepid grits, a hard-boiled egg, two slices of bacon, a pat of margarine and a cold piece of toast, and a carton of milk. He was hungry because he hadn't eaten much of his dinner the previous night. It had been fried liver of an impenetrable toughness. With so many prisoners on the ward, knives were out of the question, and he could make no headway on the liver with the plastic spoon and fork he'd been given. He'd finally folded it into a slice of bread and made a sandwich, but he'd had as much trouble sectioning the meat with his teeth as he'd had with the plastic implements. When he'd finally succeeded, he quickly learned that it wasn't worth the trouble. He saw that most of the other patients on the ward had also passed on the fried liver.

This morning he ate the bacon first, then the egg. As he was opening the carton of milk, one of the orderlies passed his bed. "Is that an extra tray?" asked Courane.

"Yeah," said the orderly.

"Can I have it?"

"You want seconds?"

"Sure," said Courane. Better to fill up with genuine food now, in case both lunch and dinner proved to be culinary disasters.

The orderly gave Courane the second tray, an unusual kindness. Of course, to remind him who was in charge on the ward, the orderly never returned to take the empty trays away. It took some painful maneuvering for Courane to slide the trays out of his way, toward the foot of the bed.

"You want me to move those for you?" asked Eldrçs.

"Would you?" said Courane.

She touched the emblem on her black outfit and the trays disappeared. "Have you got any of the first chapter finished?" she asked.

Courane was astonished. "How did you make that stuff go away?"

Eldrçs smiled. "Wonders of the future," she said. "The same way I can make your pain go away. Have you done any work yet?"

"No," admitted Courane. "I was going to start right after breakfast. Well, actually, they're going to come by in a few minutes and change my linen, and that causes me a lot of pain. They have to move me into a chair, and it's like torture. Then I'll get a shot of Demerol soon, and by then I'll really need it."

"It won't do you any good," said Eldrçs. She was examining her long, scarlet fingernails.

"What do you mean?"

She gave him an innocent look. "I think it will make my bargain with you so much more attractive if I neutralize the effects of the medication. You can take all the Demerol you want, but it won't ease the pain. If you want to stop hurting, you're just going to have to write this book. Writing is what you do, isn't it? You enjoy writing, don't you?"

"Sometimes I enjoy it," said Courane. "The rest of the time I'd almost rather go out and change the piston rings on the Toyota. Once I start writing, it's wonderful though. It's just that sometimes I know I can't do it anymore, that's all. It's like I forgot how, or all the creativity just leaked away somewhere. That's how I feel right now. As if whatever used to enable me to write was cut out of me with the tumor."

"That's nonsense," said Eldrçs.

"I know it sounds like nonsense, but it's how I feel. It's always been this way. When I finish a book or a story, I can't understand how I accomplished it. I can't imagine how I could ever do it again."

"You're making too much of an intellectual hurdle for yourself. Don't try to analyze it, just do it. Just relax and let your subconscious mind work on Chapter One. Get some of it down on paper. I won't be able to help you feel better until I see something. Until then, I'm afraid you're going to have to suffer."

"It's pure cruelty having the ability to relieve my pain and withholding it like that."

Eldrçs nodded. "Yes, that's what it is, all right. Cruelty can be fun, you know."

Courane felt a rush of anger. "You don't have to enjoy my misery," he cried.

"Why shouldn't I, if I get a little pleasure out of it?" she asked lightly.

"Then I'll be damned if I do anything for you!"

"As you wish," said Eldrçs. "But you'll see my way of thinking soon enough. It would be terrific if you could have ten pages done by lunchtime. Then I'd let you rest all afternoon. Take a long, deep sleep and wake up with no pain. Doesn't that sound more profitable than

being obstinate with me?"

"I hate being manipulated," said Courane passionately.

"Too bad. I'm very good at it." Before he could say anything further, she was gone.

Just as he had predicted, a nurse's aide came by a few minutes later. She helped him to get slowly from the bed to a chair, where he sat carefully on the edge of the seat, panting in terrible pain, holding his wounded chest tightly with both hands. She stripped the bed quickly and put on clean sheets, then guided him back beneath the covers. His face was covered with sweat, and he felt faint. "Please," he murmured hoarsely, "tell the nurse. My shot."

"All right, Mr. Courane," said the nurse's aide, "but you can't keep bothering her like this. She has other patients she has to take care of."

"I know, damn it, but I haven't even seen her today. I haven't had a shot since two o'clock in the morning. It's almost two hours late. And my IV bag-

"She knows about that, too. She'll get to it as soon as she can."

The nurse's aide gave him a disgusted look, as if all of this were somehow his fault, and moved on to the next bed.

Courane lay in the bed, holding himself tightly and rocking slowly back and forth in time to the throbbing of his pain. He didn't know how much time passed, but after a while he heard a voice address him impatiently. "Mr. Courane?" it said. The tone was cold and disapproving.

"Nurse," he said. He kept his eyes closed.

"Your IV bag is empty. The blood vessel is blown. We're going to have to reset it."

"I know. I told someone about it a long time ago-

"Let me have your wrist, Mr. Courane." The nurse worked quickly and efficiently, ripping off the adhesive bandage and pulling the needle free. She discarded the whole IV setup, pushing a new plastic tube into a cold bag of electrolyte solution, and connecting the tube's other end to a fresh needle. "Your other arm, please." Courane raised his right arm, and the nurse began searching for a likely vein. It took some time, and a few searching stabs, before she seated the needle in a blood vessel. She taped the needle down to the back of his hand, and taped his hand and wrist to the plastic board. It was going to make it difficult to work, because he was going to have to write left-handed now.

"I have your pain shot, Mr. Courane. Which side?"

"Left," he said, and rolled over to present his naked hip. She swabbed his skin and gave him the injection. "Thank you," he murmured.

"You're welcome," said the nurse distractedly. When Courane opened his eyes, she was gone.

It usually took a few minutes before the Demerol hit. When it did, it was like the sun coming out from behind a mass of rain clouds, and Courane basked in the warmth and pleasant lassitude of the drug. He waited longingly for the first hint that the opiate was coming on. He felt nothing but the unending pain. He looked at his watch and realized that

too much time was passing, that he ought to be feeling the effects of the injection by now. With a growing realization of horror, he knew that what Eldrçs had promised—had threatened—was true: the Demerol would be no good to him any longer. He could only wait in the piercing agony for relief that would never come. Not unless Eldrçs also spoke the truth about the other thing. And slowly, bitterly, he reached out for the notebook and the pencil.

The outline Eldrçs had given him for the first chapter said: *Introduce protagonist, sketch setting, establish problem*. That wasn't much to go on, thought Courane. After all, Eldrçs said she already the complete novel in the future; surely she could provide him with little more help in the present. When he'd scribbled the general idea for *Time Spy* in his notebook—a year ago? two years? he'd done only the barest framework of story, with none of the important details, no subplots, no minor characters, not even a clever scene or an interesting chunk of dialogue. Eldrçs was asking a lot expecting him to fill in all of that while he felt absolutely terrible when he had no motivation at all to work on the book.

A sudden flash of pain reminded him that, after all, he did have motivation. In clumsy handwriting, he put a heading at the top of the first page of the notebook: *Chapter One*. Even when he was healthy, this was the most discouraging part of the book. There was so much more work to do before the pages began to take on the shape of a novel, before the characters resembled real human beings and the conflicts had meaning for the people in the story, and for the reader, too. All that existed now was a thick pile of blank pages that had to be filled up with words. Unhappily, Courane's mind felt as blank as the paper, empty of all inspiration.

Well, then, he'd write without waiting for inspiration. One of the first things he'd learned early in his career was that if he wanted to pay his rent and eat now and then, he surely couldn't afford to sit around until the Muses showed up to mop his brow. The next thing he'd learned was that if he just started describing a place or a person, very often he'd have the beginnings of a genuine story going within a few paragraphs, and all he had to do from that point was listen to the characters talk about what they needed and wanted.

What was a good name, now, for the main character? Eldrçs hadn't even given him that much. Mark something. Mark Abbott. Mark Cummings. Mark Molnar. Courane's mother had been Hungarian, and he always told himself that he should use more ethnic names. All right, Mark Molnar of the Time Patrol. What Time Patrol? There had to be a Time Patrol. What did they do? Simple enough: they patrolled time. Why? Because—

—because people need protecting, that's why. And the Time Patrol kept the time lines safe for democracy. The very existence of the Time Patrol presupposed the existence of somebody or something else who was gleefully screwing up the time lines.

Somebody, maybe, like Eldrçs, thought Courane.

He considered that for a moment. Nah, he concluded. Eldrçs wasn't really the Dragon Lady type. Sure, she'd said that she enjoyed cruelty; but, really, Courane knew lots of people like that, although they wouldn't admit it so readily. He didn't believe she was capable of any real temporal vandalism.

That gave Courane an idea for the bad guy: Rack Packard, The Attila of Time. And all his little Huns.

It had everything: it had romance; it had danger; it had assonance and alliteration. It was disgusting.

Of course, it was only a preliminary approach to the first draft of a sketch of an outline for the first chapter; but already he sensed that *Time Spy* was not going to be a deathless classic of science fiction, despite what Eldrçs said about a Courane revival in the distant future. *Time Spy* would turn out to be a book of familiar character types driving so fast around the story's turns that the reader might never realize how disjointed and illogical the plot actually was. The secret was not to give the audience much of a straightaway, no time to catch its breath, no time to do any critical thinking.

With a sinking heart, Courane realized what *Time Spy* would be like: it would be just like *Space Spy*, a book that many people enjoyed, a book that no one remembered.

It did him no good to know that, for better or worse, he had worked up to his potential on *Space Spy*. His parents, his grade school teachers, and his ex-wife would have no cause to disparage him. They had always told him that if he worked hard and did all that he could, no one could ask for more. All anyone could expect from him was his best, and Courane had always given his best. He would go on giving his best in *Time Spy*, but he already knew what that would get him. *Time Spy* would be forgotten before it was created, a lost curiosity from an antique age for an academic scavenger like Eldrçs to pick over.

"Why bother?" murmured Courane. He coughed, and it was a moment before he realized that the cough hadn't caused him more searing agony. His eyes opened wider. Eldrçs had told him the truth.

The pain had seeped away and left him feeling fine, perfectly well-not drugged and semiconscious, but as good as if he'd never had the surgery in the first place.

"See?" said Eldrçs, as she drew the curtains closed around the bed again.

"If I could patent this," said Courane, "I'd never have to write again."

"Don't worry about it. Your writing days are almost over anyway."

Courane glared at her. "You've got the worst bedside manner of anybody I've ever met."

She shrugged. "In bed I'm fine. Beside the bed, maybe I'm a little too blunt."

'Blunt,"said Courane.

"So you tried working, and you found out I'm as good as my word. Extra-strength pain relief from the World of Tomorrow."

"That's just fine," said Courane, "but wouldn't it make it easier on both of us if you just gave me a peek at my finished manuscript? I mean, it is my work, isn't it? I don't understand—"

Eldrçs raised a hand to interrupt him. "I don't want you bringing that up anymore. I told you the story; I gave you my reasons. You take 'em or leave 'em; it's up to you. If you give me any more trouble, I can go get a previously unknown novel out of Sherman Ross Hladky."

"Who?" asked Courane, genuinely puzzled.

"Sherman Ross Hladky. The science fiction writer next on the list below you, as far as lasting contributions to popular literature go. He wrote *The Brain Feeders* and *Terror of the Mind Solvent*."

"Never heard of him."

"What can I say?" said Eldrçs, spreading her hands. "You and Hladky have a lot in common."

"Hladky sounds Hungarian," said Courane thoughtfully.

"It wasn't his real name. He was born Roger Sherman Ross. He dropped the Roger and added the Hladky because he thought it would make his name more memorable."

"I guess he was wrong," said Courane.

"Well, what do you think?"

"Come back later, and I'll try to have some work finished for you."

"Good boy."

"Even when I'm perfectly healthy, you know," said Courane, "I don't write very fast. I aim at two or three thousand words a day. That's at home, comfortable, surrounded by all my office equipment and source material. Here on this ward with my belly ripped open, trying to work in pencil with one hand taped to a board, I don't expect I can keep up my regular pace."

"Speed isn't important," said Eldrçs. "Quality is more important. I need something I can show my chief. If you give me a first-rate manuscript, it will drastically alter the way the future thinks of you. When it begins to think of you at all."

He took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "You have such a charming way of encouraging me," he said.

After Eldrçs left, he opened the notebook and looked at the scrap of outline. He felt oppressed. Despite his freedom from pain, he resented Eldrçs, She was bullying him, and he hated being bullied. She was right, though; there wasn't anything he could do about it. Not as long as she controlled him so thoroughly. The injections every four hours were supposed to dull the pain and keep him moderately comfortable. Courane could think of no way to explain his situation to the doctor or nurse-not without creating serious doubts about his own sanity.

He closed the notebook and placed it back on the be stand, then tried to relax. He closed his eyes, and quickly the pain began to increase. "Nurse!" he called loudly. Somebody on the ward was always yelling for the nurse. Now it was his turn.

As deplorable as the hospital was, Courane thought Eldrçs's intellectual tyranny was even more hateful. She was making him loathe his own talent and ability. He was a chronic procrastinator, and he often told people how much he actually detested writing. That wasn't true, of course; at least, it hadn't been until now.

He decided to rebel. He refused to let himself be shoved around any longer. Maybe Eldrçs thought she could make him jump through her circus hoop because she stepped out of his science fiction writer's fantasy. Courane had been startled at first, of course. Now he was disenchanted. Apparently, even in the radiant realm of the future, there were unwelcome and obnoxious people.

Lunch came, but he was in too much pain to even guess what was on the plate. The

orderly took it back untouched. Much later the nurse came with a shot of Demerol. Once again, Courane waited in vain for the injection to take effect, for the opiate to obliterate his discomfort. Once again, it did not happen. He clutched the side rails of the hospital bed and told himself to bear up under the pain, to suffer through it with the kind of quiet courage his fictional protagonists had in such abundance. Courage wilted under torture, he discovered. Cursing and weeping, he put out his free hand and took the pencil and notebook. He took up Chapter One where he had left it.

"And how was your day?" asked Eldrçs sometime later.

"I'm hungry," said Courane.

"I knew you would be. I brought you something." She handed him a bag from Burger King.

Courane raised his eyebrows. In the bag were two bacon double cheeseburgers, a large order of fries, and a vanilla shake. "Thanks," he said. "It's just what I wanted. How did you know?"

She shrugged. "I asked you."

"You mean this afternoon? I don't remember you asking me about that."

Eldrçs shook her head. "No, about a week from now, your time. You met me today, but that doesn't mean I haven't visited you already somewhere else along your time line. In your future. And I have, several times."

"Why would you want to talk to me all out of order? It doesn't make sense to me."

"I can't tell you. You'll find out when you get there. Maybe I just wanted to find out how cooperative you were going to be. Maybe it was something else entirely. It's not important today. Eat your food."

The burgers were good, improved considerably by raw hunger and by the ugliness of everything else around him. "Well," he said, "thanks again."

Eldrçs reached across the bedstand and took the notebook. She opened it and began reading what he'd written that day. She nodded her head slowly. It made Courane feel uncomfortable, as if he were enduring some kind of audition or tryout. He waited for Eldrçs to respond in some way, to make some positive sign of enjoyment or unambiguous rejection. "I'm not reading this for fun," she said, without looking up, as if she'd read his mind. "This is business for me, not pleasure. I don't even really enjoy science fiction, you know."

"I like to have some kind of input," said Courane. "I'd like your reaction."

"My reaction doesn't matter. As long as you keep our bargain, I'll give you what I promised. My opinion of your writing isn't part of it. It's irrelevant."

"It's not irrelevant to me."

"Then take a look at this." She gave him a sheet of dark brown paper covered with pale yellow print.

"What is it?"

"A newspaper clipping. Our paper's been recycled so many times, it's almost black. Read it."

Courane looked up at her in astonishment. "It's a review of *Time Spy*. From the 115/31 *Daily Pansophist*, What's 115/31? A place?"

Eldrçs smiled. "In a way."

Courane stared at her for another moment, then he looked back at the review. " 'Sandor Courane,' " he read aloud, " 'was one of a number of fiction-creating independent laborers who flourished from the middle of the twentieth century until it became clear that consumers no longer needed their commodity. Courane himself was neither particularly skilled nor especially successful, even in his own lifetime. In the years since his death, both his name and his product have disappeared into oblivion. Lately, however, word has come from literary salvage operator Eldrçs that she is obtaining posthumously written bulk fiction from a Courane in a nearby quasi-reality. To prevent interference and maintain the integrity of Eldrçs's project, the IDS label of the quasi-reality is being kept secret.'

"Bulk fiction?" objected Courane. "Is that what I'm turning out? It sounds like I'm operating a science fiction feed and grain store." He went back to reading. " 'The first chapter of this new lot, to be titled *Time Spy* in its entirety, was logged yesterday. Initial reactions were cool.' " Courane looked up. "Is that all they've got to say? Cool? He tried to crumple the paper, but it wouldn't wad up. When he opened his hand, the paper flattened out again without so much as a wrinkle.

"Well," said Eldrçs, "it's only the first chapter. You can't expect them to get all excited over an early fragment."

"But I don't even have the whole first chapter written yet" he said, indicating the notebook. '

"Uh-oh, watch out. You're trying to comprehend paradoxes again.

Courane got angry. "I'm not going to let you push me around anymore," he shouted.

The patient across the aisle rattled the chain on his handcuffs. "Break their face, white boy!" he called. The other patient couldn't hear Eldrçs, but he could hear Courane clearly enough.

Take It easy, said Eldrçs soothingly.

"I don't care where you come from," said Courane hoarsely, still furious. "I don't care if you're from the Collection Agency from the End of Time, or Atlantis, or west of the goddamn moon. I don't care what you're selling, what tricks you can do, or what you can do for me. Maybe if you talked to me like a decent person and treated me like I had the least little bit of intelligence, I'd be perfectly happy to go along with you on this rotten book. But no, you come storming in here pulling your Agent of Destiny number. And you wonder why I'm not wearing out my pencil so all your friends in Tomorrow-land can make undelighted comments about my work. You and your future can go to hell!"

Eldrçs leaned forward and put two fingers beneath Courane s jaw on the right side. With her other hand she touched the emblem on her breast. Immediately he was caught m a seizure of absolute

anguish, of pain far greater than anything he'd ever experienced. Then, just as suddenly, she

released him.

"All right?" she asked.

"I won't cooperate," he muttered through clenched jaws. "I'll suffer the pain. I'll go ahead and die rather than do what you want."

"That's simply not true, Courane," said Eldrçs. "You know it's not true. If you think about it for a moment, you'll admit to yourself that you're just not that brave. I don't really want to hurt you. I want you to finish *Time Spy* because it's your work, because it's something that you really want to do. And because, after all, this book will be your own best monument. You're creating your own memorial here. You have the chance to write a postscript to your life, with full knowledge of who'll be reading what you have to say about yourself. This is a gift to you, Courane, a precious gift, even if maybe you can't see it that way yet."

"What difference does it make, if *Time Spy* won't be any better than *Space Spy*, and nobody in your world has any respect for that book? Having you take my pain away is a good reason to work, but why should I worry about introducing myself to your friends? Okay, you mentioned monuments and memorials. Most markers in cemeteries are worn away by the weather, and if you can read them at all, they don't have any meaning to anybody but the immediate family. What I have to say in *Time Spy* won't have any significance in your time line."

"Not until you carve out a new place for yourself," said Eldrçs.

"Or renovate your old place. But set all that aside for a minute. Just for argument's sake, I'll grant your objection. Why else would you want to take my suggestion? What about self-respect? You know what's going to happen to you not long from now; I'd think you'd want to take this last chance. It's a crucial moment that only one person out of a billion gets to experience. Nevertheless, you'd be surprised how many ditch the chance. I don't know why. Maybe eternal glory doesn't have as much allure as it used to, or else your fellows are immune to enticements. If that's the real reason, their resistance has rendered their entire lives pointless. Their careers and their body of work are now—that is, will be—even more obscure and disregarded than ever."

Courane stared up at the discolored ceiling tiles. "Tell me about the science fiction writers who went along with your other salvage operators. That's what they call you, isn't it? The writers weren't all trapped on charity wards like me. What did you do to persuade them?"

Eldrçs gave him a wan smile. "Oh," she said, "this and that."

There's always a plan tailored to each primitive—I'm sorry about that, but the twentieth century is to us as the middle Middle Ages are to you."

"What about Hladky?"

She rubbed her forehead. "I think they got his favorite television program renewed for another season. It was really a terrible situation comedy, but it just goes to show you how versatile and powerful we are."

"Does he accept?"

"I don't remember. You were my project, and I didn't pay very much attention to anything else that was happening in this time line. We're wasting time now. I don't mean to come

across as impatient, but—"

Courane interrupted her. "I've changed my mind," he said, "and it has nothing to do with your high-sounding talk about writing my own epitaph. It comes down to extortion. When I'm putting pages in the notebook, I feel better. It's as simple as that."

Eldrçs nodded. "Your ultimate motivation isn't important, as long as you complete the novel itself." She stood up and smoothed the covers on Courane's bed. "I'm going to leave now. I can stand to be in this century for only half an hour at a time. I'll look in on you later tonight, after twelve o'clock. You ought to be snoring away. If you're not, I'll make sure you fall into unbroken sleep with pleasant dreams."

"Thank you, Eldrçs," said Courane.

"You're welcome. I'll see you tomorrow." She went through the curtain, then came back almost immediately. "By the way," she said, "take a look at this." She handed him an old, dog-eared notebook.

He glanced through it. "Whose is this?" he asked. "It's yours," she said. "It's very old."

"It's so old I don't remember it at all. When did I write the entries in here?"

"According to my research, when you were between ten and twelve years old."

"So?"

"So when you finish *Time Spy*, you might want to start working on some of the ideas you'll find in this notebook. They're lumpish and rough, but of course you made the entries before you had any true sense of literary style. You've come a great distance since then."

Courane shook his head. "Why in hell would I even think about working on these? I have no intention of spending my last days reshaping these god-awful things."

Eldrçs gave him her brightest smile. "I'll tell you why," she said. "Because as long as you're scribbling, you're living. And you're not hurting."

"You mean you can postpone my death?"

"That's right."

"For how long?" asked Courane.

She shrugged. "Indefinitely."

"Why?"

"It's very simple. If I can get a lot of new material from you, and if I can increase your reputation a hundredfold, it will increase my own reputation to the same degree."

"Ah," said Courane. "So much for the humanitarian kindness of our distant descendants."

"Live on, and free of pain," said Eldrçs.

Courane grimaced. "As long as I torment myself trying to make decent stories out of these horrible literary shards."

Eldrçs pointed directly at Courane's forehead. "But isn't that what you've always done for a living?"

"Not under this kind of pressure," he said.

"Write and live," said Eldrçs, "Your stories or your life." Courane didn't say anything for a long while, until Eldrçs looked at him impatiently. "I'm thinking," he said mournfully. "I'm thinking."