

p {text-indent:2em;margin-top:0;margin-bottom:2px}

# FLAW ON SERENDIP

J. BRIAN CLARKE

*Although by the standards of lesser beings the builders were immortal, yet they were not gods. They were therefore not omnipotent. It was even conceivable that they could make a mistake.*

*When they came to the realization that a leak was a theoretical possibility, it was too late. After eons of commitment, a minor hyper-dimensional flaw was an irritant which could not be allowed to stop that which was nearly complete. If intelligence was to be the life blood of the future galactic organism, that blood had to circulate.*

*The network was built to last. Although the builders eventually evolved beyond the constraints of the physical universe, that mightiest of their works endured—waiting for those who in some distant future would be its users. Stars were born and stars died. Other stars destroyed themselves in cataclysmic explosions which enriched the continuum with their transformed matter. Thus the galaxy evolved toward its own maturity. Life appeared on many young worlds, and in the few rare instances where it crossed the line from instinct to self-awareness, it faced the inevitable question: "Who am I?" Even rarer were those who asked, "Are there others?" Rarest of all were the instances in which grasp caught up with reach and life journeyed to worlds other than its own. Only then was the network finally triggered to its true purpose.*

*It was then, at the exact nanosecond of activation, that what the builders feared might happen—happened.*

*The resultant zone of discontinuance was tiny and slightly displaced from one of the gates. It was also located in difficult terrain. So it would probably have remained hidden from those who had learned to use the network, if it was not for an elderly eccentric and his need to wander—*

Banff, the single human community on the world known as Serendipity, had been named by a homesick surveyor who recognized the similarity of the local topography to that of his favorite resort town amid the Rocky Mountains of distant Earth. Although Jason Kurber had arrived here only hours before, the bucolic combination of log-constructed buildings and soaring mountains had already relaxed the somewhat jaded expediter to the extent he was not even slightly irritated

when Jameson DeGrasse approached him in Banff's main lodge.

Kurber greeted the other with a broad grin of recognition. "Jim you old reprobate, when I heard you were here I had to pinch myself to believe it. How can you stand a year of running this placid picture-book?"

DeGrasse, a stocky graying man with an affectation for clashing colors, was uncharacteristically somber as he shook Kurber's hand and sat down. He gestured at the food tray. "Don't let me stop you, Jase. It may be a long day."

Kurber's fork hovered half way to his mouth, then lowered. "Please. I am here on vacation."

"I know," DeGrasse said regretfully. He spread his hands wide. "Unfortunately, I have no choice. I would not be bothering you if there were anyone else."

Kurber sighed. "So what is the problem?"

"It's about our only permanent resident."

"Cal Bremmer?"

"I understand he's a good friend of yours."

The expediter nodded. "True. I have known Cal since he was appointed custodian here about twelve years ago."

"When did you last see him?"

"Two years ago, when the wife and I stayed in his bungalow for a few weeks. As a matter of fact, I was hoping to see Cal when I arrived yesterday. That was when I was told he was away on one of his hiking trips."

"He's back."

Something in the administrator's manner made Kurber uneasy. "Is Cal OK?"

DeGrasse shook his head. "Fraid not. Jase, I want you to come with me to the clinic."

Kurber pushed his chair back from the table. "I think," he said grimly, "I have just lost my appetite."

He accompanied DeGrasse out of the lodge into the bright sunshine. Serendipity was a glowing world of clean skies, a mild climate, and vegetation of reds, golds, and browns which made homesick humans think of that season which in Earth's north temperate zone marks the glorious death of summer. Visible above and beyond Banff's small cluster of buildings, at the head of a valley between snow-dusted peaks, a flickering sphere of light glimmered palely over a huge horizontal bowl and its towering three-thousand meter support column. A shuttle thundered aloft from the strip which separated Banff from the Phuili settlement of Freghevquul, spiraled for altitude, and then banked directly into the light. The roar of its jets ceased as if turned off by a switch, and even as the fading echoes still rumbled among the peaks, Kurber knew the shuttle was already descending through the thin air of another world far around the curve of the spiral arm. In this age, the time required to travel between stars—even across the width of the galaxy—had been reduced to less than a heartbeat.

The clinic was located at the far end of what was euphemistically sign-posted as "Main Street." Because of the strict limits imposed on those who—after intensive screening—were allowed to experience the natural delights of this rare and lovely world, the small staff of one doctor and two paramedics was rarely overworked. Nevertheless the harried expression on the middle-aged face of the doctor as she met DeGrasse and Kurber, was that of a woman who dearly wished she were elsewhere.

"Although I have read about this kind of thing in the literature," she told the visitors as she ushered them into a windowless room illuminated only by a dull-glowing fluoropanel, "this is the first time I have had a patient who suffers from it. Frankly gentlemen, the best I can do for Cal Bremmer is to have him loaded aboard an Earth-bound shuttle A.S.A.P."

The man in the bed was well built despite his seventy-three years. His face was strong, with the weathered look of a lifetime spent in the open air. Yet the pain and confusion expressed in the staring eyes and twitching cheeks, were something Kurber doubted he would ever forget. "What in god's name—"

Bremmer squeezed his eyes shut and turned his face away. "Don't do that," he mumbled into the pillow. "It hurts."

"Watch," The doctor flicked the switch beside the door. As the main room light turned on and then off again, the old man lifted a hand to cover his exposed ear. "Let me sleep. Please."

They went back into the corridor. Still shocked, Kurber asked, "Does 'it' have a name?"

The doctor nodded. "Synesthesia. It's a syndrome in which the brain misinterprets incoming signals. Sound, Cal sees. Light, he hears. Notice how he covered his ear when I flicked the light switch? How he turned his eyes away when you spoke loudly?" She shook her head. "The poor man still has not realized he has to close his eyes to quieten what he thinks is noise, or cover his ears against what his brain tells him are intolerable flashes of light."

"How did he get that way?"

"Good question, Mr Kurber, and I wish I knew the answer. I suppose you already know that Cal spent most of his free time exploring the local scenery on foot. Yesterday he took a jeep to a spot about fifty kilometers southwest of here. He radioed his location and said he was going to hike that area for a couple of days. That is the last anyone heard from him until shortly before midnight, when he was found staggering around at the west end of Main Street."

"You just told us he is as good as blind! So how did he manage to drive—?"

"He didn't. The jeep was where Cal had left it—with his communicator left behind on the seat. I should add, by the way, that even for a healthy man with full vision, the location is a strenuous fourteen hours daylight walk from here."

"So obviously someone brought him back in another vehicle."

The doctor shook her head. "Everyone, including visitors and staff, has been accounted for. So has all ground transport; floaters as well as wheeled. And of our two heliflyers, one is in for routine maintenance and the other is a thousand kilometers from here. In any case, why would that nice and obviously sick old man be left to fend for himself in the middle of the night?"

"What about the Phuili?"

DeGrasse snorted. "The dog-faces don't know anything. They wouldn't be interested anyway."

Kurber winced. "Do you agree?" he asked the doctor.

She shrugged. "I checked with the Phuili, of course. I got the impression they are as puzzled as we are."

"I bet," DeGrasse said skeptically.

Kurber walked away a few steps. Then he turned. "Dammit, I do not like this at all."

The doctor smiled wearily. "Who does?"

"Have you tried to communicate with Cal?"

She shrugged. "Frequently. But even if he understood me, which I doubt, he has apparently decided to say nothing about what happened."

"If he knew the Morse code—"

"What?"

"It's a system of dots-and-dashes which was invented during the early days of wire-telegraphy."

"Do you know it, Jase?" DeGrasse asked curiously.

"Only the signal for distress."

"So what is the point?"

"I don't know. But let's try it anyway." Despite the doctor's protests, Kurber went back in the sickroom and flicked a careful S.O.S. with the light switch. Then he approached Cal Bremmer's bedside.

After uncovering his ears, the old man whispered, "Is that you, Doc? Mr. DeGrasse? Klipsis?" His body shook with silent, mirthless laughter. "I don't know what you were trying to say, but if it's to get me to talk it won't do any good. What the forbidden fruit did to me, is not going to happen to anyone else."

"Forbidden fruit?" DeGrasse whispered. "What is he talking about?"

"I wish I had never found that cursed place." Bremmer shook his head from side to side on the pillow. "Never," he repeated as tears ran down his seamed cheeks. "Never."

They went back outside the room. "He means it, you know," the doctor said. "He will not talk."

"There are drugs—"

She shook her head. "Not in his condition. As far as I am concerned, it would be a complete violation of medical ethics to allow that kind of nonsense."

Frustrated, Kurber turned to DeGrasse. "What cursed place? And how in all that's holy did he transport himself fifty clicks without eyes or transport?"

The other shrugged. "As of this moment, you know as much as I do. What else is there to say?"

Kurber lost his temper. "Only that we seem to be discussing what in any language is a bloody miracle! You don't need an expediter to solve this one. You need a witch doctor!"

DeGrasse grinned sympathetically. "Sorry, Jase. As I told you, I would not have dragged you into this if there was anyone else within shouting distance. But because you *are* an expediter, as well as Cal's friend—"

"—and being in the right place at the wrong time," Kurber grumbled as he tried to imagine the world reduced to a mad cacophony of unrecognizable signals. It had to be especially terrible for someone as sensitive to his environment as Cal Bremmer—who was, in fact, as rare a man as Serendipity itself was a special place. Although the planet was only one of nearly twenty thousand destinations which were accessible via the mysterious alien artifacts or "AAs" which linked the galaxy in a web of no-time travel, a monument in the valley below Serendipity's AA marked the spot where a two-place wingship (Phuili-piloted with a human passenger) had crunched to an ungainly landing after completing the first world-to-world traverse of the modern era. So by agreement between the Earth and Phuili governments, Serendipity was declared a natural reserve available only for strictly limited recreational use. The agreement allowed for two permanent residents, one Phuili and one human, who were custodians for their respective physical facilities, and who were also the unofficial "house parents" for those who, for any of innumerable reasons, desperately needed rest and recuperation. Cal Bremmer had been one of more than seventy thousand applicants for the job he now held, and the retired school teacher, home-spun philosopher, and amateur naturalist had won the appointment for reasons which that modest man would be the last to understand.

Cal Bremmer did not deserve what had happened to him.

Kurber tried another tack. "Doctor, this—ah—synes—"

"Synesthesia."

"Yes. Is it curable?"

"I believe so. With time and proper treatment."

Kurber took a deep breath and expelled it. "Thank you for that, anyway." To DeGrasse: "Jim, you are the administrator here. So I suggest you make my status official by putting in a request for my services. Also while you are at it, I will need to talk to my wife Gia Mayland. She's on temporary assignment at Expeditors Central."

DeGrasse grinned. "I feel better already."

"By the way, Cal mentioned someone named Klipis. Who is he?"

"Not he. She. Klipis is the other Serendip permanent. You know, Cal's opposite number."

The shuttle arrived six hours later. The only incoming passenger was a slender woman with wide-eyed, almost elfin features. Before she entered the small terminal building, the woman stopped to lean over and brush her lips across the forehead of the man who was waiting to be carried aboard. Gia Mayland then entered the building and accepted the embrace of her

husband. After they kissed, she leaned back in his arms and studied him anxiously. "Are you all right, dear?"

Kurber forced a smile. "As well as can be expected, I suppose."

She touched a sympathetic hand to his face. "Poor Jase. Cal doesn't look good at all, does he? But before I left New York, I talked to the specialist who will be in charge of the case. He assured me Cal will be back at his post within six months. Nine at the most."

"How can he say that before he sees the patient?"

"Because Cal was not born with synesthesia, it has to have been caused by some kind of intense psychological trauma. In such cases, the prognosis is usually pretty good even without treatment. With treatment, it takes a lot less time."

"Time is something Cal has not got a lot of. He is over seventy, you know."

"Don't worry." She kissed his cheek. "The Extraterrestrial Office has already budgeted for the best care money can buy."

"Yeah," Kurber said moodily. His wife's arm tucked comfortably within his, they began to walk toward the lodge. Gia took a deep breath of the crisp air and gazed with pleasure at the breathtaking scenery. "Remember the last time we were here?"

"I do. I also recollect that vacation was similarly cut short."

"But it was fun while it lasted, wasn't it?" Then Gia became serious. "What have you found out?"

"Not a lot. I have had a look at Cal's jeep and checked the odometer. The reading confirms that it had remained where he parked it. But Cal did not walk those fifty clicks, either. An Olympic athlete could not have done it—in twice the time!"

She bit her lip. "Sort of unreal, isn't it?"

"Unreal? The term I used was 'bloody miracle!'"

"Yeah," Gia echoed mischievously. Despite himself, Kurber laughed.

Five made up the party. The Kurbers, Jameson DeGrasse and two Phuili.

Kliphrottunisrenipaziz (Klipis) was an elderly female whose sad-eyed canine features kept somehow juxtaposing with Gia's memory of her grandmother, the loving lady who had raised her after her parents died. Hreomlupfrozzipnkiaplaziz (Harry) was DeGrasse's counterpart on Serendipity; a Phuili who was known to tolerate humans only because the job required him to.

"Of all the assignments the Phuili authorities could have given that one, why did they send him to Serendip?" Gia wondered aloud as she watched DeGrasse and the two stocky aliens examine the area where Cal Bremmer's jeep had been parked. "I thought the Phuili weeded the rednecks out of their Star Service long ago."

Kurber chuckled. "I suspect Harry is an aging bureaucrat who is looking forward to the Phuili

equivalent of his first pension check. Because nothing much is supposed to happen here anyway, I imagine it's an ideal posting for an individual who prefers to fade out with as little fuss as possible."

Gia sighed. "That's all we need, isn't it? A 'please do not confuse me with the facts' type, Phuili or otherwise." Suddenly her eyes widened with concern. "Jameson is not like that, is he?"

"I doubt it. Sure, I admit he is not too far from retirement, even that he has never made any secret of the fact that the Phuili are not exactly among his favorite people. But Jim's no raving xenophobe, and he has a better service record than even a lot of expeditors I know." Kurber grinned. "Present company excepted, of course." He helped his wife on with her pack, then shrugged into his own. They joined the others. "Any ideas?" Kurber asked.

"Not," Harry replied. "Not only did foolish human not take communicator, he not leave information where he go fwom zis place."

DeGrasse flushed angrily. "Cal's a damn sight smarter than any—" The derogatory "dog-face" remained unvoiced as he became uncomfortably aware that Gia was watching him.

Klipis ignored the human's outburst. "He go up zere," she said, looking in the direction of a lovely valley which rose toward a perfect pyramid-shaped peak at its head.

"What makes you think so?"

"Cal always seek beauty. I see what he see."

Harry made a noise which Gia presumed was an expression of disgust. Nevertheless the Phuili administrator did not object as the group began to follow a faint trail which they found leading into the valley. After a kilometer of relatively easy going, the trail began to rise steeply between enormous trees whose broad red leaves rustled pleasantly about them. Wavering shafts of sunlight illuminated their way, while at least two species of small six-legged animals and several kinds of birds chattered and scolded the intruders.

"Marvelous," Kurber puffed as they stopped for a rest.

"What is?" Gia asked.

"This place," he replied happily. "It reminds me of trails I have hiked in the Canadian Rockies. You know, near the other Banff."

"Jase dear, I hate to break into your euphoria. But I do not like what is going on between Harry and Jameson."

"Neither do I," he admitted.

"Is there anything we can do?"

"Try to reason with them I suppose. Or at least with Jim." Kurber rubbed his chin. "Gia, why don't you talk to Klipis—ah—female to female? She seems a nice old soul, and I am sure she would be willing to pass the appropriate message to her less than friendly compatriot."

Gia said absently, "You know, there is something more than just 'nice' about Klipis—"

He nodded. "I know. Like Cal Bremmer."

They moved on again. For the humans it was pleasant work, although for the diminutive Phuili it did not seem to require any effort at all. Their stumpy legs covered the ground at a rate which repeatedly advanced them almost out of sight, at which point they would wait until the three humans caught up. In this irregular fashion the five climbed further up the valley, while the trees gradually became smaller and more widely spaced. Large birds, astonishingly similar to the gray jays of Earth's western North America (except for their four legs), circled overhead with frequent raucous squawks.

"Can we stop a moment?" Gia called.

They all turned and looked at her. "Human female tired?" Harry asked. "Wish longer stop?"

Gia restrained her irritation at the obvious comment on human weakness. "I am curious about this route we are following." She looked along the trail. "If there is one thing I remember about Serendipity, it is that the largest land animals are about the size of a small dog. Right?"

"Right," DeGrasse echoed. "So what is the point?"

"What made this trail?"

DeGrasse shrugged. "Cal did, I suppose. After all, he has been on Serendip a lot of years." He gestured at the beauty around them. "Perhaps this was his special place to get away from it all. Can you blame the man?"

Kurber rubbed his chin. "On his trips, did he usually radio his location?"

"Not always. And now that I think about it, never from here. Not during the nine months since I have been on Serendip, anyway." DeGrasse shook his head. "The closest I ever got into an argument with the old boy was when I reminded him he was supposed to let us know his whereabouts at all times. His rather testy response was to the effect that he had never had to before, so why start now?"

"Zen he foolish human," Harry said, seizing the chance to repeat his favorite bias. "Zis one say he not want people know he come here often, perhaps most times he away in mountains. He wadio fwom ozer places only for purpose to make people zink he go all over."

Gia realized that despite his obvious dislike of humans, Harry had made a valid point. "So why did Cal radio his location this time?" she asked.

"Perhaps zere weason he zink he might need help," Klipis suggested, her large violet eyes thoughtful. The old Phuili female added, "But after you find him near human place, he change mind about ozers coming here. Did he not talk about 'forbidden'? Zis one zink Cal twy tell you it too dangerwous."

"Forbidden fruit," Kurber whispered. He looked toward the head of the valley. "You know, I am beginning to feel just a little nervous. What *is* up there?"

They camped at that spot. The first hint that things were not as they should be, was when DeGrasse and then Hreomlupfrozzipnkiaplaziz tried to communicate with their respective deputies at Banff and Freghevquul. Up to a range of about a kilometer their communicators



worked perfectly. (They tested, and found they could talk to each other.) Beyond that, there was silence on all frequencies. Kurber took it on himself to return two kilometers down the trail, where again he tried to raise Banff. Although the communicator's ready-light remained healthily green, it was as if the human settlement did not exist.

He returned to the camp. "So now we know why Cal left his communicator in the jeep. He already knew it would be useless!"

They spent a restless night. When the five met for breakfast the next morning, the humans ate in silence and even the Phuili seemed subdued. Finally, as they struck camp and prepared to continue, DeGrasse suggested, "One of us should scout ahead a few hundred meters while he remains in continuous radio contact." He looked toward where the ghostly outline of the pyramid peak was beginning to emerge out of the mist. "If there is something funny up there—"

Surprisingly it was Harry who was the first to agree. "Zis one not would have come if Klipaphrottunisrenipaziz not point out happening to Cal human perhaps also important to Phuili. Wadio and ozer phenomenon confirm so. Now best all be careful."

As the one who had made the suggestion, DeGrasse insisted on being the first up the trail. As he vanished around a bend, Gia drew her husband aside. She whispered, "What happened to us during the night?"

He looked at her. "I beg your pardon?"

"Jase, don't be so damned obtuse. Everyone has been acting like a zombie this morning, which means I do not need Harry's comment about 'other phenomenon' to know something strange is going on! Did we *all* have bad dreams?"

"You too, huh?"

She led the way to where the two Phuili were conversing with the incredible complexity of sounds which was their universal tongue. "Harry. Klipis. Do you mind if I ask what you are talking about?"

Large, fathomless eyes met those of the human female. "We talk about what happen in our heads while sleep," Klipis replied solemnly.

Gia said to her husband, "You see? Something is—"

She was interrupted by Degrass's voice: '*Jase, can you hear me?*'

"Loud and clear, Jim. Everything OK?"

*"So far it seems to be, although the vegetation is getting pretty weird. I can see a good vantage point a couple of hundred meters ahead. Will wait there."*

They began to move up the trail. "We humans call it dreaming," Gia told Klipis. "Bad dreams are nightmares. Did you have nightmares?"

"Images which not organized," the old female replied. "Past, pwesent and future mixed. Places zis one not know of. Entities of types zis one not know in galaxy. Love, hate, feelings which cannot contwol. Not good."

Gia had close working relationships with many Phuili, and knew of their instinctive reliance on

order; within their thoughts as well as the physical world around them. It was a pattern established over thousands of generations of slow evolution on a benign world, and even their dreams—if in human terms they could be called thus—were controlled evaluations of waking thoughts and activities. What Klipis had described was a nocturnal anarchy so totally beyond Phuili experience, it was a wonder the oldster could talk about it calmly. Gia then looked at the back of the Phuili administrator walking stolidly ahead. So what about—?

"Hreomlupfrozzipnkiaplaziz also," Klipis said, anticipating Gia's question. "Tell him perhaps best only zis one continue, while he weturn to duties at Freghevquul. He say zis one zink zhings which not be. He will not go to Freghevquul."

Gia dropped back to walk with her husband. "Although Klipis did not exactly admit to it in so many words, I am pretty sure Harry just told her to mind her own business." She frowned. "Strange. Phuili are normally excruciatingly polite to each other."

"A lot of things are strange on this trip."

"Jase, what did you dream about?"

Kurber shook his head. "Damned if I know. Everything and nothing. Things and people. Places. Met a bully who used to pick on me when I was a kid. I willed him out of existence, and he died—like fluff in a flame." Kurber swore softly. "It's a hell of a thing to realize you hate someone enough to want to do that."

Gia whispered, "I dreamed I willed my parents not to board the plane before it exploded on the runway. And I made my grandmother well again. It all seemed so real. To have that kind of power—"

*"Come in, Jase. Godammit, come in!"*

"Jim, what is it?"

*"I have been trying to raise you for the past couple of minutes! Are you people deaf down there?"*

Kurber grinned. "If you shout like that, we will be."

*"Well you're close enough so that I can see you. I am on top of the rise, ahead of you and to your left."*

Gia waved. DeGrasse waved back and scrambled down to meet them. Conspicuously ignoring the two Phuili, he said breathlessly, "Back down the trail, we could talk when we were a klick apart. Now we're down to a couple of hundred meters!"

"So it is starting to happen." Kurber took a deep breath of air which was somehow not quite as bracing as it had been. "Whatever *it* is." He looked around him, beginning to understand DeGrasse's comment about the vegetation. Within a distance along the trail of no more than seventy or eighty meters, the trees had become transformed from graceful to stunted; their leaves from glowing reds and golds into varying shades of sickly yellow. Further on, the vegetation thinned out to sparse ugly clumps which were separated by bare earth and patches of straggly ground growth. The pyramid-mountain at the head of the valley shimmered as if through a heat haze, although the temperature was not much above freezing.

Hreomlupfrozzipnkiaplaziz announced, "Perhaps next it zis one who go ahead."

DeGrasse grabbed Kurber's arm. "They're not to be trusted. You go. Or Gia."

Kurber shrugged his arm free with an irritable, "I don't know what is bothering you, but cut it out!" He walked up the trail to the crest where DeGrasse had been waiting. The others followed. On the far side, the ground dropped slightly before it rose again into the distance. Here the trail and the thinning band of vegetation ceased entirely, leaving undisturbed rock and dirt. Beyond, what from a few meters back had merely seemed to shimmer, was now difficult to discern. Even the pyramid had become vaguely defined, as if it was being viewed through an out-of-focus lens. Kurber squeezed his eyes shut, shook his head and then looked again. "Is it my eyesight, or—?"

DeGrasse said, "I did not say anything because I wanted you to experience it for yourself. Difficult to describe, wouldn't you say?"

"It's like no mist I have ever seen," Gia whispered.

Harry shook his snouted head. "Human female waste time saying what iss not. We need know what iss."

"We need know what iss," DeGrasse mimicked and then subsided with a surprised "Ouch!" as Gia kicked his shin. A surprised expression crossed his face. "Did I say that? Sorry."

Kurber was not sure if DeGrasse was apologizing to Gia or to the Phuili, but for the sake of harmony decided to let it slide by. In terms of obnoxiousness, it was so far fairly even between the Phuili and human administrators. He asked wearily, "Opinions, anyone?"

"Fwom here must go careful," Klipis declared. "Our minds weacting to somezing not known, especially minds of Hreomlupfrozzipnkiaplaziz and human Jim."

Gia felt an overwhelming sense of gratitude to the old Phuili, to the extent tears came to her eyes. "Just like dear grandmama. Say it right out, she always told me. Get it into the open. You will be better for—" She blinked. "What am I babbling about?"

Kurber found a convenient boulder and sat on it. He had been fighting an increasing urge to scream his frustrations at an apparently uncaring universe. Now the urge was suddenly gone and he had full control of himself. In fact, he was thinking more clearly than at any time since they started up the valley. Or is that an illusion also, he wondered? Do I only *think* I am thinking clearly?

"If I did not know better—" Kurber hesitated, frowning. Then he looked up at his wife. "If I did not know better," he repeated, "I would say that someone spiked our breakfast coffee with some pretty potent moonshine."

Gia dropped to the boulder alongside him. She stared blankly at scenery which had somehow lost its beauty. "Jase, what is going on?"

Klipis came over to the two humans. The large gentle eyes drew them in with warmth and companionship. That the Phuili was a squat, thick-bodied, canine-headed being with physical strength which could break a human spine without effort, seemed completely irrelevant. Like her human counterpart Cal Bremmer, Klipis was a genuine good-heart and healer, with the additional advantage of her Phuili empathetic sense. She asked, "Now you identify pwoblem, you not notice effect diffewent fwom what caused by substance you call alcohol?"

"Different?" Gia echoed. She was not sure how Klipis had understood a human colloquialism

which in terms of her strait-laced Phuili background should be completely alien, but somehow it did not matter. She grasped Kurber's hand. "Other than the fact I know there is not an alcoholic drink within fifty kilometers of here, how is it different?"

"Because we don't need to sleep it off to get rid of it," DeGrasse said. There was an expression of faint bewilderment on his face as he looked at Klipis, then at Harry who was standing close by. He turned back to Gia. "I understand you people talked about the dreams you had last night."

"That's right," Kurber said. He asked curiously, "What was yours?"

The other flushed. "I was commandant of a concentration camp." He licked his lips. "It was like those the Nazis had in World War II."

"And?"

"The inmates were all Phuili."

Kurber grimaced with distaste. "Oh."

"The point is, although I do not particularly like the Phuili, I have never let it affect my dealings with them. But as we came up this valley—" DeGrasse shuddered.

Gia nodded. "Dislike became hate, huh?"

"Until you gave me that kick. Now I dislike *me* even more than them. And it scares the hell out of me!"

Kurber said, "Jim, I don't want to criticize this sudden bout of self-realization, except to remind you that in the real world it takes more than a small kick to cure your kind of prejudice."

DeGrasse shrugged. "Then perhaps this is not the real world."

"Perhaps not," Hreomlupfrozzipnkiaplaziz said, who had been listening to the conversation with increasing agitation. Although it was hard to read Phuili expressions, Gia was sure she read apprehension and even fear in the snouted face of the Phuili administrator. Whatever had happened inside that inflexible mind during the previous night was, she suspected, an additional unknown factor in an equation which already had too many unknowns. The difference between human and Phuili mentality was beginning to show in DeGrasse's and Harry's reaction to what had happened in their heads; the apparent acceptance in one, the fear in the other. Yet nothing was certain; probably even less so if they proceeded further up the valley. Strange influences were at work, and if what had happened to Cal Bremmer was any indication, what they had already experienced was only the beginning.

Klipis said, "Look." The old Phuili was staring at a tiny whirlwind of dust and dead leaves which was dancing across the bare ground a few meters away. Only seconds before, the disturbance had not been there. "Say stop."

"Say what?" Kurber asked puzzledly.

Somehow Gia understood. She waited a few seconds while the whirlwind continued its erratic dance. Then: "Stop."

The whirlwind collapsed.

DeGrasse shook his head. "Coincidence," he said unconvincingly. "Gia, you did not do that."

"Damn right she didn't." Kurber's mouth was dry as hopefully he stared at his wife. "Did you?"

She smiled. "Don't worry dear, I have not turned into a monster. I only *said* stop. It was Klipis who did the stopping—and starting."

"I don't underst—"

Klipis pointed at Kurber. "You twy."

Kurber swallowed. Suddenly he was two people. One was a skeptic who would stretch coincidence to enormous lengths before he would admit the existence of anything even slightly resembling the paranormal. The other was a romantic who wanted to believe in the infinite flexibility of what the mind conceives as "reality"; a magical world in which all things are possible. Kurber then remembered his ugly dream-wish of the night before, and he shuddered. Some things should *never* be possible—

"Twy," Klipis insisted.

Despite himself, the expediter concentrated his attention on a dead leaf on the ground immediately before him. The leaf stirred slightly.

"No," he said. "No way."

Nevertheless the leaf continued to tremble. Then, as if caught by a vagrant breeze which had seized it as its only plaything, the leaf fluttered into the air. It was followed by a tiny cloud of dust which, as Kurber continued to concentrate, began to spin. Smaller leaves joined the diminutive vortex which spun faster and extended higher. More material lifted into the dancing whirlwind of debris as it spread up and outward. It had a life of its own now, like an exuberant genie released from its bottle. Above the noise of the spinning air, Kurber dimly heard his wife tell him to stop, and he made a half-hearted attempt to will the life out of what he had created. But something within him exalted in the new-found power and would not let go. He shouted angrily as a pair of hands covered his eyes. He lifted his own hands to pull them away, but was restrained by a strong grip from behind. The whirlwind sagged, began to die. Finally Kurber was released, just in time to see the last fluttering leaves drift to the ground.

DeGrasse stood back from Kurber, who dropped to his knees. Gia stayed close to her husband, kneeling with him. "My god," Kurber whispered as the power-lust drained out of him in dark, shuddering waves. At the edge of his vision, a leaf began to stir—

"No, you bloody fool!" the expediter yelled as he flung himself forward and brought DeGrasse down. The other struggled maniacally for a moment, then subsided with a strangled, "I'm sorry Jase, I didn't think! I didn't think!"

After a few seconds of confusion, the two men assisted each other as they scrambled groggily to their feet. With an understatement which would be almost comical in any other context, Klipis declared solemnly, "We have pwoblem."

"I'm sorry," DeGrasse repeated. His eyes were glassy.

By unspoken agreement, the three humans and two Phuili turned away from the crest and returned down the trail to the place of their last stop. Something squeaked angrily at them from the underbrush, and Gia felt comforted.

His heart still thumping from the joint stimulation of exertion and wonder, Kurber shrugged off his pack and sat on a fallen log. He said tentatively, "Mind over matter."

Klipis was staring fixedly at some yellowing leaves on the ground. Horrified, Gia was about to scream a warning, when the old Phuili nodded with satisfaction. "We safe here."

"Safe?" Almost giddy with relief, the woman began to laugh. "From what?"

"Us," Harry said. The Phuili administrator gestured. "You. Klipaphrottunisrenipaziz. I. All." There was a fanatical gleam in the large eyes. "Planet not like us here. So planet give us way to destwoy ourselves."

Kurber asked, "Klipis, what did you expect when you asked me to try that?"

"Zis one not expect what happen," the old female admitted.

"So what did happen?" Gia shot back. She turned to her husband. "All right Jase, you are the one who used the term 'mind over matter.' Tell us about it."

For long seconds Kurber did not respond. *What do I say?* For any parlor trick the explanation would have been simple; mind-over-matter used facetiously to explain sleight-of-hand, or the application of simple psychology to give reality to phantoms. But this was something else; with implications so awesome it was like a crack in the universe.

Expediting had never called for this.

Kurber took a deep breath. "All right, try this on for size. Although Cal Bremmer apparently came to this valley many times, there are two reasons why he did not tell anyone where he was or what he was doing. First, he was scared. Whatever it is up here; psychic zone, force field or whatever, he figured he had stumbled on to something that most people—Phuili as well as human—are not equipped to handle. In a few dozen generations perhaps, but not now. The second reason has to do with Cal himself, his curiosity to learn more. Using the rationale that it would be OK because he was the only one at risk, I suspect he experimented; cautiously at first and then more boldly. It was probably dumb luck that nothing got away from him as it almost did with me, because if it had—without the presence of others to force restraint—god knows what would have been unleashed. A local phenomenon? A disaster on a planetary scale? Anyway, it looks as if Cal was somehow declared out of the game before too much damage was done. Which is, I suppose, where we come in. With the knowledge we now have, do we quit while we are ahead? Pretend nothing happened and hope no one else becomes too curious? Or do we continue what we started; hopefully to learn enough that we can make some kind of decision about what we *should* do?"

Klipis said softly. "What you most say, zis one agree. Yet why not you yet talk about mind over matter?"

For the first time in his life, Kurber lost his temper in the presence of a Phuili. "Dammit, what are *we* risking by being here? Synesthesia? Or something worse? And what about the possibilities hinted in our dreams last night? Correction; not possibilities. Warnings!"

"Of what?" the old female alien insisted.

"Klipis, you and I used mental power merely to move a few leaves around. But what could we do after a little practice? What would we do? Where would we stop? Would we throw boulders

around, perhaps? Move trees from here to there? Shift a mountain? What if we tried it on people—"

"—like Cal Bremmer tried it on himself," DeGrasse muttered. He clenched his fists and held them to the sides of his head. He began to laugh hysterically. "Beam me aboard, Scottie! Beam me aboard!"

Fortunately Klipis did not query the hoary old cliché, which in any case was only partially appropriate. But all understood, and were startled by the implications. "It was Cal's last experiment," Gia whispered, "to literally think himself back home." She shuddered. "But what it did to him—"

So they stayed.

The decision to further investigate the phenomena was not difficult. That the two weakest members of the five should also remain involved, was forced by the logic of basic security. Although Hreomlupfrozzipnkiaplaziz, and then DeGrasse, promised to wait while the other three worked their way toward the heart of what had become labeled the "mystery," their obvious instability made it impossible to know whether either of them could or even intended to keep that promise. Nevertheless, DeGrasse and Harry were surprisingly reasonable when they were asked to stay with the group.

"If you want me to continue along," DeGrasse said with a shrug, "OK, I will."

The Phuili administrator had only two words, "I come."

Cautiously they worked their way up the final section of trail they had already covered twice before. At first Kurber tried to keep his mind blank, until he realized the silliness of attempting to "turn himself off." So instead he turned his thoughts toward pleasant things. The merry sound of Mozart. The pounding of surf along the California shore. His acceptance into Expeditors. Erotic images of his body and soul mate—

Gia whispered into his ear, "Jason Kurber, you flatter me extremely. But really, is it appropriate while there are others around?"

Startled, he stopped and looked at her. "Did I say something?"

She twinkled at him. "Not acoustically." She touched his forehead. *'Not to worry, darling. I think it was only between us two.'* For a timeless moment they would remember for the rest of their lives, their inner selves touched, caressed and merged.

They had regained the crest. Beyond, it was as before. The descending and then rising terrain, the sense of strangeness, the distortion of vision which somehow made the scenery look *bent*.

"Now for the tough part," Kurber murmured, still marveling and still warm from the experience which he realized had wedded him to Gia far more thoroughly than the words of their marriage

ceremony. Yet there remained a core of unease which he knew was also part of the mystery in this valley. Also remaining was knowledge that the decisions were his now, that leadership had fallen on his shoulders and had been accepted by the others. He was not particularly happy about this development, although neither was he sorry. He was not even curious how or why it had happened.

Kurber produced a small pair of binoculars and examined the way ahead. "There is a small cairn down there." He expanded the field of view. "Another on that far slope. At least, I think it is a cairn—" The built-in focus/intensifier did its electronic best, but failed to resolve the tiny, wavering image. He lowered the binoculars. "I have seen mirages which were clearer."

Klipis looked incongruous with a device perched on her snout which vaguely resembled old-fashioned spectacles. "Agwee," she said. "Phenomena do stwange zings to way eyes see." She paused thoughtfully. "Or perhaps to way bwain interpwet what eyes see."

Hreomlupfrozzipnkiaplaziz broke his long silence. "Phuili and humans see what planet want Phuili and humans to see. Soon planet punish us who twespas where Phuili and humans already told not to go."

The Phuili administrator was undoubtedly close to sanity's edge. Nevertheless even the completely insane have their own form of logic, which caused Gia to ask, "What happened to Cal Bremmer was a warning to us?"

"Iss so."

"Then Harry, if what you say is, true, why did you accept our decision to proceed?"

Although there was no physical movement equivalent to a shrug, the woman sensed the Phuili's weary resignation. "Iss better. Zis one see dark side of universe, shadows of dead which not conform physical laws and which contwol fwom places we not see. If logic no longer be, life should no longer be."

*'Jase, what do you make of it?'*

There was no direct response to Gia's projected thought. Instead, Kurber muttered disgustedly, "That's all we need. A doomsayer!" So the telepathy had been as transient as the froth at the top of a wave, and probably as unimportant. Yet something remained which had not been there before. Between husband and wife, a kind of quiet closeness.

For his part, Kurber sensed that his wife had sent him a direction, like a psychic arrow pointing to a conclusion which startled him. "What did you mean by 'shadows of dead'? Are you referring to what we humans call ghosts?"

Harry did not reply. But something within the alien's ineffably sad eyes caused Kurber to turn to DeGrasse. "Jim, years ago you told me about an episode in your life in which you dabbled in the occult. It was a pretty nasty affair, if I remember. Considering the weird things which have been happening to us up here, is it possible Harry has tapped into that part of your subconscious?"

DeGrasse said mildly, "What you refer to is not exactly what one likes to be reminded about, you know. But if, as you say, Harry—"

His shrug was eloquent.

It had been the sort of unsavory story which, if not told to a good friend, would probably have



been confessed to a priest. A clique of bored yet brilliant students had tapped into a substrate of the human psyche with disastrous results; one suicide, the others marked for life. The possibility that the disoriented mind of the Phuili administrator had somehow linked into that dark corner of DeGrasse's past was chilling yet plausible. The dark and sometimes menacing shadows of the human subconscious would be devastating to a mind which acted mostly on the conscious level, such as the mind of a Phuili. One unknown was the effect of the experience on Harry's innate distrust of humans. Although Kurber wanted to believe that the Phuili's current mental chaos had rendered all of that irrelevant, he had a nagging feeling it would not be a good idea to ignore other, perhaps more unpleasant, possibilities.

And DeGrasse?

Perhaps there had been an exchange. DeGrasse's calm rebuke at being reminded of something which in normal circumstances would have provoked fury, showed a remarkable transformation from the wild man Kurber had wrestled to the ground less than an hour before. There had also been DeGrasse's reasoned acknowledgement of his prejudice against the Phuili; itself a surprising development considering the years he had been "in the closet." But as with Hreomlupfrozzipnkiaplaziz, it would be foolish to assume that things were as they seemed. In fact, there had been changes in all five of them, and the odds were that those changes were still only the fringe.

Kurber pointed. "We will head for the first cairn. Stay close together and watch each other. If anything even slightly unusual begins to happen, for god's sake say so."

Klipis suggested, "Keep mind on cairn. Zink only of cairn."

It was the longest one hundred meters Kurber had ever walked. Three minutes later, as they stopped at the small heap of stones, he felt certain it was the incongruity of their group shuffle which had prevented any telekinetic mischief-making. Gia's broad grin and the hint of amusement on Klipis's normally inflexible features, stimulated the man to ask with a chuckle, "Are we overdoing it, or what?"

Nevertheless the expediter felt a palpable tension which hemmed them in like a psychic wall. Forcing himself to ignore the temptation to inwardly cringe, Kurber examined the stones. "Why the cairns?" he wondered aloud.

"Perhaps each marks a place where Cal nailed down some facet of the mystery," Gia suggested, hugging herself. "Jase, I am cold." She examined her fingers, which were turning white. "I mean it. I am *cold*."

Kurber grasped her hands, and was shocked at the icy feel of her skin. "My god, Gia—"

"It in mind," Klipis said. "You must zink warm."

Gia's eyes widened. "Of course."

Kurber felt her fingers begin to lose their chill. Her face began to flush and her eyes sparkled. "Klipis is right, Jase. All you have to do is—"

"Like hell! You're getting feverish!" For a moment Kurber almost panicked as he felt the flesh continue beyond warm to hot, and as his wife began to gasp with distress. Then, just as abruptly the flesh cooled again; finally stabilizing at a pleasant warmth.

Gia gently pulled her hands free. "I am all right now. I can handle it."

"Handle what?"

"I did something stupid. Instead of concentrating on the cairn as Klipis suggested, I invoked a mental image of something I saw when I visited Antarctica a few years ago; an iceberg calving off the rim of the continent. It was then I remembered how cold I was—"

"Don't," Kurber said worriedly. "Don't!"

She smiled. "When Klipis told me to think my way out of it, I switched the image to that of an old-fashioned hearth with a blazing fire. And then when the fire started to take on the dimensions of a forest blaze, I turned my mind to pleasant thoughts of you, dear husband." The smile became mischievous. "—who is definitely not the only one who can play *that* game."

"Umph," Kurber muttered, ashamed to feel flattered while he was so overwhelmingly relieved. To refocus his thoughts, he again turned his binoculars toward what he had earlier assumed was a second cairn. Although the image was only slightly clearer than it had been before, there was now enough additional detail to reveal that he was definitely not looking at a heap of stones. "That's no cairn. It's Cal's tent!"

*The watcher was concerned. Although the zone of discontinuance was minuscule, so is the first crack in a dam. First there had been only one entity, now there were five. More would inevitably follow, tapping into and releasing forces they could never understand, exponentially widening the breach toward ultimate catastrophe.*

*The emergency was now.*

*So the watcher expanded its awareness to include others of its kind. Within the span of a moment which had no meaning in a continuum in which all times are one, those who were once the builders dispassionately analyzed the problem.*

*'You know the constraints. We cannot interfere.'*

*'Yet are not our antecedents responsible for the original error?'*

*'That is true. Nevertheless the constraints must remain.'*

*'What is the potential?'*

*'Theoretically, a complete breakdown of the nine dimensions which form the matrix of the physical universe. But long before that can happen, the young ones in which we have invested so much hope will be destroyed—as that one individual would have been destroyed if it had not semi-successfully projected itself out of the discontinuance. Although the universe will survive, it will survive only as it has always been. A mighty machine without mind.'*

*'Is there anything which can be done?'*

*'Not directly. It would require us to reemerge into the universe, which of course violates the constraints.'*

*'Are you implying that some form of indirect action is possible?'*

*'You are perceptive. There are, as you know, a few precedents which allow a slight degree of flexibility in matters concerning the young ones—'*

"So he got that far anyway," DeGrasse muttered as he peered at the vague shape of the tent and then tried to pierce the shimmering veil beyond. The pyramid mountain had a wavering outline, as if being viewed with insufficient pixels on a low-resolution screen. Above the mountain the sky was a washed-out gray, except for a V of deep blue which spectacularly mirrored the soaring pyramid. The slopes on either side of the valley were equally indistinct at the lower levels, becoming clearer only as the eye lifted toward where the peaks rimmed the sky.

Despite the physical presence of his four companions, DeGrasse felt peculiarly isolated. He had a sense that he was standing on the lower slope of something equivalent to a gravity well, that if he could go just a little farther — perhaps only as far the tent—he would arrive at a place where all things would ultimately come to him. "I am going on," he announced thickly, forcing leaden feet in the direction he wanted to go. He thought he heard vague voices of protest, felt weak graspings as hands reached for him and then fell away.

It was like wading through molasses, yet he persisted. A guard, gray uniformed with a crooked-cross emblem on his sleeve, snapped to attention. The commandant acknowledged the salute and entered his office.

The report was on his desk. Nominal complement of the camp, three thousand. Actual population crammed into the ill-ventilated and unheated huts, eight thousand. Deaths from "natural causes," one hundred and ten per week. Executions for various infractions, thirty per week. Average rate of replenishment; two hundred and twenty per week. Result; eighty additional dogfaces per week to be fed, housed, and somehow put to work.

The commandant went back outside. A few of the Phuili were working listlessly in the vegetable garden, while others swept the eternal dust off the concrete walks. As the commandant approached, one of the dog-faces uttered a peculiar cough and pitched snout down among the vegetables. A guard ran over, but the commandant waved him aside. Once, he remembered, he had hated these beings enough to wish them exterminated. Now they were merely a nuisance, to be tolerated because they were useful. But at this moment the commandant felt an intense curiosity. What *is* a Phuili? Are they really akin to the hellish manifestations he had experienced during that hallucinogenic-induced craze so many years ago?

With the toe of an immaculate boot, the commandant pushed the body over on its back. Old and emaciated, the dogface was obviously near death. Yet the expression in the large eyes was not the hate which surely should be expected. Instead, there was understanding. And warmth. Above all, there was sympathy.

Sympathy? For me?

The worst kind of punishment is often reserved for those who retain a vestige of conscience while they abuse the defenseless. In a moment, the distortions of two-thirds of a lifetime were purged out of the commandant/DeGrasse's brain with a cascading flood of realization and self-hate. Weeping, DeGrasse collapsed near the abandoned tent.

*Power corrupts. Absolute power corrupts absolutely.*

Gia Mayland was painfully aware of the old maxim as she tried to relax within the luxury of her self-imposed prison. She was not sure how she had got here, although there were vague, unconnected memories involving a walk through a mountain valley.

But in her role as Secretary General of the Union of Independent States, there was no doubt *why* she was here.

*Mighty oaks from little acorns grow.*

Another pathetic little truism among the truisms which she collected during the interminable hours when there was nothing else to do.

She knew when things were going to happen.

With thought alone, she could stop or alter them.

It had started in a small way, when from the other side of the continent she had willed her parents not to take that plane. Knowing what she did now of her powers, she could probably just as easily have disarmed the bomb and saved a few hundred other lives. But she had been selfish then—as she was infinitely more selfish now.

Her grandmother had never thanked her for the extra years granted by the permanent remission of the rare form of cancer which alone among cancers remained medically incurable. The old lady had instead scolded her peculiarly gifted granddaughter for going against the "will of Providence." After that, she who would later become the absolute ruler of the UIS had withdrawn from any further family contact. Parents and grandparent were emotional luxuries she could no longer afford.

*A goddess cannot have normal human relationships.*

The S.G. did not know if that was in the formal lexicon of truisms. If not, she would make it so by having it inscribed on her gravestone—if goddesses are allowed to die and have gravestones.

Once, there had even been a husband. But that was during another life, before she made deserts green and disarmed armies with a thought. Not many men could have stuck it through so long, watching his wife recede from her humanity as she became a machine for making miracles. Now she was only loved by the billions who could never know her personally; who were benefitting from the bland, stress-free and probably not very interesting world she had created for them. The few who did know her, mostly scientists and government officials, tried nobly to treat the secretary general as one of their own, and she was grateful for the pretence. But they could never entirely hide the fear in their eyes; their urge to escape from her presence even as they forced themselves to remain just a little longer than protocol demanded was necessary.

Altruism in its milder form is not uncommon among human beings. In the vast mid-range between the extremes of saint and sinner, she who was once Gia Mayland had shared that slightly higher ground with many who also shared her devotion to public service. Then the *power* came, and with it the skeptics who labeled her accomplishments as mere coincidence. Yet she had been

happy then, gauging her success in terms of the people she helped and the injustices she corrected. But the expansion of her abilities beyond those small beginnings had been remorseless, until ultimately—like trying to channel a waterfall into a teacup—it had become too great to serve individuals and small causes. It could never be "he" or "she" anymore, only "they." And even that pluralistic term seemed inadequate for one who was caring for the beach, as opposed to its individual grains of sand.

The secretary general looked out from her tower at the rolling foothills and the mountains beyond. As with everything else, weather-control had become a routine like sleeping and eating (although she was still reluctant to admit to even her closest associates that she was beyond the need of either). She created a small rain cloud, and permitted it to expand until its shadow filled the land between the tower and the foothills. She blinked, and lightning flashed. The accompanying thunder was barely a murmur behind the armorglas of the window-wall. She let the rain fall, and gained a tiny pleasure as the drops hit the window and then collected into bigger drops as they meandered their way downward.

Of all the things she could do, what did she want to do most? What is the ultimate selfishness?

*Cancel myself out.*

It was not the first time it had crossed the S.G.'s mind. But she had always rejected the idea because she could not imagine how the UIS could get along without her. A billion diapers to change and a billion noses to wipe; she could never abandon them now. Suddenly a tiny figure—a woman—unexpectedly clawed up out of the S.G.'s subconscious.

*Like hell you can't!*

The world dissolved—

Jameson DeGrasse looked up with surprise as the woman appeared out of the shimmering background and dropped to the dirt next to him. "Made it!" Gia Mayland exclaimed with a mixture of triumph and surprise.

Jason Kurber was the free world's secret weapon. His initial activation had occurred while he was a minor member of a diplomatic team which had been sent to negotiate an environmental treaty with the so-called "Guardian" of the Southern Republics. For nearly a century, the already depleted rain forests of the continent had been protected from the ravages of further uncontrolled cutting and burning. But when General Guederran decided to reward his millions of followers by granting them the forest lands to clear and cultivate, the nervous Organization of World Communities immediately sent its representatives to attempt to persuade him not to cancel the moratorium.

First the general laughed, then forced the entire delegation to witness the ceremonial flogging to death of an SR citizen who had dared to speak publicly against the edict. The general was still laughing when, as the environmentalist's broken corpse was being freed from the bloodstained uprights, Kurber's white-hot anger became channeled into a psychic blast which caused the general's gloriously uniformed body to do its best to turn itself into a pretzel. The Guardian's screams, as bones shattered and muscles tore, were even louder than had been his victim's.

If it was not for the presence within the delegation of a high-placed sensitive who recognized the nature and source of the weapon, Kurber would probably have remained unaware that he was the cause of General Guederran's spectacular demise. There followed months of training, during which Kurber learned that he did not have to be present in person to exercise his deadly talent against an unsuspecting target—just as long as that target presented him or herself as a real-time television image.

The weapon had one severe limitation. It could not be launched unless it was energized by an overwhelming sense of outrage. Nevertheless, certain publicity-hungry petty dictators, drug lords, crime czars and their ilk all succumbed in various unpleasant ways as "Project Justice" gained its stride.

It is human nature to abhor brutality. It is equally human to wish everything from torture to a shooting squad upon its practitioners. But wishing is not the same as doing, as Jason Kurber gradually came to appreciate. Although he had rid the world of a few unpleasant individuals, was it a better place because of it? Was *he* a better man because of it? To the first question, there was still no clear answer. To the second question—

*Thou shalt not kill.*

In its various forms the commandment was as old as humanity itself, and in its meaning equally complex. There were loopholes which allowed saints to kill with almost as much impunity as sinners, and often as brutally. From Torquemada's Holy Inquisition, to the witch-hunts of Salem, there has always been excuses.

As Kurber had his excuses. The problem was, of course, that excuses are fragile and cannot stand too much repetition. They tend to get thin.

First came the doubts. Then the nightmares. Kurber became afraid to sleep, then found he could not sleep. The sword lost its edge, the World Communities their weapon. Finally, within a locked room of the most heavily defended complex on Earth, Jason Kurber decided to summon the strength and then the outrage to destroy the worst killer of all.

He stood before the mirror—

*'It was not as difficult as I anticipated.'*

*'That is because we introduced nothing which is new. The five subjects were already conditioned by well established value systems. It was only necessary to weaken the partitions which their respective cultures had erected to separate what they see as the conflicting realities of mind and body.'*

*'It is an astonishing fission of what is, after all, the great singularity which is existence.'*

*'But necessary for those who are bound by the laws which govern the physical continuum. Until there is universal recognition of what a few of their more daring theoreticians are only just beginning to perceive, their evolution must continue in a strictly linear manner. It is why the discontinuance must be contained before what they refer to as 'time's arrow'*

*begins to spin without direction, and their minds and souls are destroyed by what they are not equipped to understand.'*

*'So be it. I hope those five motes know what they must do.'*

*'Do not color your judgment of them by arrogance. If they correctly negotiate this hazard, it is possible the ultimate outcome will be better than if the discontinuance had not existed*

*!'*

*'If they fail?'*

*'Then the flaw caused by the discontinuance will become a breach, and the breach a chasm which will absorb all things. The galactic mind will die before it is born.'*

*'There can be no greater tragedy.'*

*'Agreed. But as we have played our part, now the small ones will play theirs. As is often true in moments of crisis, it is the lesser who must be the greater.'*

"What are we?"

"The future, I think," Kurber said as he backed out of the tent and stood up. Cal Bremmer's still-sealed sleeping bag was sagged in on itself, and the pillow still bore the imprint of the old man's head. Cal had clearly made himself comfortable before he conducted his final experiment.

"The future." DeGrasse considered a moment. "If there is to be one, I gather we somehow have to get rid of this—er—mystery." He looked thoughtfully at the flickering scenery. "Do we know how?"

"Do we?" Gia echoed.

Klipis smiled. Normally such an emotion is difficult to read from the relatively inflexible features of a Phuili. But this smile was empathic; radiated from a being who was at harmony with herself and the universe. By most standards, the old Phuili had always been that way. But this was something profoundly more. What had been the form of her revelation? Kurber wondered.

"Each just learn many zings," Klipis said gravely as she looked at her companions. "Iss not twue?"

"About intolewance," Hreomlupfrozzipnkiaplaziz said.

"About intolerance," DeGrasse echoed. A five-fingered hand reached out and clasped a hand with four fingers.

"I was God, or something equivalent." Gia spread her hands. "Believe me, it is a hellish responsibility."

Her husband nodded. "So is being an avenging angel. After a while, you start to realize that instant justice is not necessarily good justice."

"For me, not more doubts," Klipis said. She was the acknowledged leader now, and Kurber was

content. Nevertheless, questions remained. "What has been the point?" he asked. "I suppose we are all better people now, but how does it help what we are supposed to do? And who—or what—did it to us?"

Even as he asked the last question, Kurber realized there was no simple answer. The mental playlets they had each experienced had originated within themselves; there could have been no other source. The miracle was the sudden ability to self-examine, to suffer through unpleasant truths and equally unpleasant lies, finally to appreciate the difference. If that had been imposed, so be it. Although Kurber preferred to believe it had all been a natural side effect of the phenomenon which clung around them like a psychic cloud.

The other questions had been unnecessary. To exorcise the problem, they needed to work together. Minutes ago, that would have been difficult if not impossible. Not now.

In her quaint way, Klipis put what they needed to do into words. "We wish it not."

They sat and faced each other; a little circle of five. *We wish it not.*

And then it wasn't.

Gia opened her eyes. She felt weak, hungry, and immensely satisfied. Kurber helped her to her feet. Her husband was haggard, unwashed, and with at least three days growth of beard. Equally unshaven and dirty, DeGrasse groaned to his feet. "My god, how long—?"

"Long enough," Kurber said, rubbing his stubble and looking wide-eyed at the peaceful scene around them. It was just a mountain valley now, dappled with cloud shadows and at peace. Even the pressure in his bladder suggested a delightful normality. A few minutes later as he, Gia, and DeGrasse met again at Cal Bremmer's tent, their two Phuili companions appeared bearing the backpacks which had been left behind at the end of the trail.

The first need was to satisfy their hunger. So they ate companionably and quietly, for the moment needing nothing more than the pleasurable sense of accomplishment.

"I have a feeling that Cal will be back on Serendip sooner than anyone expects," DeGrasse said finally.

Gia nodded. "I am sure of it." She turned to Klipis. "This change in us. Do you think it is permanent?"

"What change?" the Phuili asked solemnly.

Kurber chuckled. "OK, so we are still more or less what we were. Except that before all of this happened, we did not *know* what we were!"

"Semantics," DeGrasse grumbled. "We are the same yet we are different. Face it, this is a situation in which words are inadequate. So let's just accept, huh?"

"I agree." Gia hugged her knees to her chest and stared at the dull glow of the power-pak radiant which added a pleasant warmth to the campsite. "Although I am still unsure exactly what we did here, I do know one thing—"

"Zat we are wiser?" Harry asked.

"Yes." Gia held up a hand with thumb and forefinger almost touching. "But only that much."



*'It is unfortunate that the breach remains unsealed.'*

*'That would have been too much to expect. It is sufficient that the young ones believe they have eliminated the problem.'*

*'Yet sooner or later they are bound to discover that they merely displaced the discontinuance a few diameters off-planet.'*

*'There is little reason for any of their spacecraft to be in that particular location. Nevertheless, because rediscovery does of course remain a statistical possibility, it becomes necessary to continue the watch.'*

*'So be it. The watch continues—'*