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BULLDOG DRUMMOND AND THE GRIM REAPER

BOBBIE AXFORD AND THE raccoon eyed each other, separated by the thickness of her office window.

There was an uncanny glint in the raccoon's eyes.

It was a cunning glint, a knowing glint, a glint that stripped her naked. It was the kind of glint she used to see in the eyes of her ex-partner, ex-lover Bill, the treacherous rat.

"Get the hell off that ledge!" she shouted. She smacked at the glass with a rolled-up paper. The animal stood its ground, sure-footed, hairy, blackish-gray, hump-backed. The office was six floors up. In the old days she'd have been able to open the window, and with one quick shove the disgusting brute would have been history. But city windows didn't open nowadays.

Odd that the raccoon should have climbed up all this way. Curiosity? Death wish? The ceaseless quest for sexual fulfillment? Well, he wouldn't find much of the latter up here. The huge Axford Proximity Building contained many unusual things, but nothing resembling a female raccoon.

Funny that she should assume the thing was male. It was the eyes that did it. That lecherous gleam.

Enough of speculation. Time was of the essence, with the Harrods Christmas promotion coming up. Axford Proximity had rented a lot of space and she needed to develop a new and exciting proximity quest to wow the consumers. Casting a final suspicious glance at the raccoon, she returned to the business of guiding Ted through the Drummond scenario.

The robot was the latest in a long line of Teds. His predecessors had all met their doom in the giant construct that occupied most of the Axford Proximity building, which in turn sprawled over ten city blocks. Bobbie's staff primed the construct with perils, aids to survival and prizes, the computer set the parameters for the quest, and she led Ted through the construct's multiplicity of alternate pathways, checking out the quest's viability and recording the results on the master. The construct was known to the staff as the Grim Reaper. Death lurked around every corner.

At this moment the monitor showed Ted, currently playing the role of Captain Hugh "Bulldog" Drummond, standing in a tiny chamber. His rechargeable flashlight was playing over bright and featureless metallic walls, ceiling and floor. There was no obvious way out, but then there never was. It looked as though Carl Peterson, diabolical mastermind, had beaten him at last.

Ted, who was nothing if not sophisticated, felt a flicker of fear. Bobbie checked that the fear had been successfully recorded onto the master. Vicarious emotion was a recent achievement in proximity, and was going to be a big

selling feature at Harrods.

Next, she considered Ted's alternatives. The tiny oxygen vial could be useful; the chamber might shortly be filled with gas, water or whatever. Forget the plastic explosive; certainly it would blow a hole in those walls, but it would do the same to Ted.

She had to come to a decision soon, otherwise Ted would do it himself. And Ted, though sophisticated, did not always decide right.

And that reminded her of Bill Kilpatrick, who could never come to a decision about anything, except for the day he walked out on her and Axford Proximation. Bill was a vacillating ninny and she was better off without him.

Somewhere beyond the chamber walls came a muffled whir, and a terrified screaming from Ted recalled her to the task. She'd have to edit that out; Drummond would never have screamed in that cowardly manner. The robot's flashlight showed that the chamber was getting smaller. The walls were closing in, slowly but relentlessly. Neat idea. Now, what would a man like Drummond do in such a situation? She took a mental inventory of available aids to survival. Meanwhile Ted had drawn his laser pistol, a bad mistake. His first shot criss-crossed the chamber with deadly reflections, finally striking Ted himself, fortunately at much reduced power.

"You all right, Bobbie?" It was Rupert, her personal assistant, smoothing down his hair. Rupert was a good-looking bastard and knew it. He'd actually used a hologram of himself as a prize for a female quest. It had sold depressingly well. "I thought I heard someone screaming," said Rupert.

"That was Ted. He's in a jam. He's a good screamer."

"Did you know there's a raccoon outside the window?"

She turned to consider the creature thoughtfully, all business. "Think we can use him? Are raccoons, uh, deadly in any way?"

"They can carry rabies, I believe."

"Have we used rabies?"

"We have rabid bats and rabid dogs in the Reaper. Raccoons, I don't think so. I'll check it out." He stood behind her, his hands on her shoulders and sliding downward.

"Stop that," murmured Bobbie. "The raccoon will see."

"The hell with the raccoon."

"No, listen, I feel uncomfortable. There's something . . . human about the way that animal looks. It reminds me of Bill. Do me a favor, Rupert. Have one of the staff shoot it off, will you?"

"I'll shoot it off myself. Who needs it, huh? As if the pigeons aren't enough."

Rupert sensed rejection and his tone had turned sullen. "How is Bill, by the way?" he asked pointedly.

"I haven't seen that weird guy in months and I don't want to." Bobbie swung round in her chair. "Why do you ask?" She eyed him closely. There was something about Rupert she didn't quite trust. Were his eyes actually shifty or did they simply dart about alertly, the way a good personal assistant's should?

"I happened to run into his manager Slim Ferris yesterday. Business at Mindset Visions is brisk, he told me. They've rented space at Harrods too. Ironic, isn't it?" Rupert's eyes shifted, or darted.

"What's ironic?"

"You and Bill, I mean. You used to be partners here, now you're running rival businesses."

"We're not rivals." Angrily, Bobbie swung back to face the screen. What in God's name was Ted doing with that spray can in there? "Mindset Visions is in an entirely different line of business."

"Yet their sales go up as ours go down."

"Lots of things go up as our sales go down." But she was worried. Was proximation going out of style? Were people tiring of armchair adventures?

"Tastes change," said Rupert, echoing her thoughts. "People change, too. Remember 'Calves' Stilton?"

Bobbie remembered all too well. H.K. "Calves" Stilton was a legend at Axford Proximation. A man of mighty physique, he'd been their most inventive programmer until, working on a difficult detail of the Drummond quest, he'd gone berserk. "The hell with all this pretense," he'd reportedly shouted, "life's too short!" And he'd shattered the screen of his monitor with one kick of his oaken legs, hauled open the steel door normally used only by Ted, and stridden into the Grim Reaper personally.

They'd followed his progress on the monitors for a while, as he overcame peril after peril with muscular expertise and lightning reactions, until they lost him in a new scenario where eyespies had not yet been installed. When Bobbie left the office that evening, "Calves" was still in there, presumably battling Carl Peterson, the diabolical mastermind.

The story was taken up by Bill Kilpatrick, working late. Apparently "Calves" had emerged triumphant from the Reaper in the small hours, handed in his notice and gone home carrying his prize, a holographic reproduction of Miss Nude Earth 2024. It was later reported that he'd gone through a form of marriage with her; subsequently the couple had emigrated to Altair IV where they'd lived happily ever since.

Such was the legend of H.K. "Calves" Stilton, the only human ever to have walked the deadly corridors of the Grim Reaper.

" 'Calves' was crazy," said Bobbie. "He must have been crazy from the start but we didn't spot it. Programmers are odd people. 'Calves' cost us two years' work on the Drummond quest. You'd think he'd have given us all the details of the program before he took off for Altair IV in that irresponsible manner. It's his fault we're having to run Ted through the quest." She sighed. "My God, I wish everyone was like Ted. I know where I am with Ted. He's simple, and he's rational."

"If that's the case," Rupert pointed out nastily, "why is he spraying the walls of that chamber with shark repellent?"

When Bobbie Axford described Bill Kilpatrick as weird, she was thinking of his disdain for material success and the wealth that came with it. Wealth, in Bill's books, stank. He blamed it for the break-up with Bobbie. To a certain extent he was right, but he didn't realize another factor was Bobbie's pride. She'd founded Axford Proximity and it had prospered hugely, then he'd come along and tried to get her to change direction. And the subsequent success of Mindset Visions suggested that he'd been right.

At the moment when Ted's metallic finger was squeezing the button on the can of shark repellent, Bill was sitting in the sordid living room of his tumble-down cottage at Foss Creek, a village with few amenities some thirty kilometers from the city, populated by dropouts and idealists.

It says much for Bill's strength of character that he'd maintained his squalid lifestyle despite the huge success of Mindset Visions, the business he'd started after leaving Axford Proximity two years ago. Bill was no fool. He'd taken the precaution of hiring Slim Ferris as General Manager and giving him a free hand. Slim's curriculum vitae included ten years for embezzlement of charity funds. Bill was confident that he, Slim, would ensure that he, Bill, could continue to live in the manner to which he was accustomed.

And now Bill, in his slovenly living room, was wearing the patented headset that represented one-half of his great invention.

The other half was implanted in the brain of his raccoon, McArthur.

Through the eyes of McArthur, Bill watched Bobbie sitting at her monitor. He watched the entry of Rupert the secretary, saw him pawing Bobbie, and his blood boiled. He couldn't hear what they were saying, the window was too thick. Then he saw Rupert stride purposefully from the room, and shortly afterward McArthur's instincts for self-preservation overrode Bill's power of suggestion. A section of ledge beside McArthur's right paw exploded and the raccoon bolted. Whirling impressions of white concrete and blue downspouts bypassed Bill's optic nerve and registered directly on the visual center of his brain. Fear caused his heart to race: like proximity, the mindsets supplied vicarious emotion. Finally the images steadied up, showing dark and ancient brickwork, damp grass and dead leaves. McArthur had gone to ground. The images faded. His faithful companion was unconscious, maybe dead.

Bill tried to come to a decision, always a difficult task. Should he ride boldly to McArthur's rescue, and risk a confrontation with Bobbie? Or should he sit tight and keep quiet? No, he couldn't let McArthur rot. He and the raccoon had

been through many adventures together. At least he should recover the body and give it a decent burial.

But when he arrived at the Axford Proximation he found it was not going to be so simple. Several police stood beside their vehicles, scanning the bushes with infra-red detectors. His heart leaped at the sight of Bobbie, looking beautiful, chatting to the officer in charge.

"What's going on?" he asked.

She favored him with the kind of glance he'd seen her use on McArthur. "Some busybody reported seeing laser fire."

"It is an offense to discharge a firearm within the city dome," explained the officer sententiously.

"I told you," replied Bobbie patiently, "it was probably a reflection from inside the building. We use all kinds of weapons in there. Anything my staff can dream up, we use it. We can simulate a nuclear holocaust if we want to. Your witness may have seen one. We have the necessary permits, if that's what you're worried about."

In the end the police departed, muttering, and Bobbie swung round on Bill. "What are you doing here, anyway?"

"I just came to pick up McArthur."

"Who the hell is McArthur?"

Bobbie was looking suspicious. Circumstantial evidence was required. "Just an ordinary guy, Winston McArthur, about one-eighty pounds. Salt of the earth. Lost a leg in a boating accident, poor fellow. Insurance wouldn't pay up for a replacement, would you believe it?"

"You're lying," said Bobbie coldly. "I don't know why, but you're lying. I can always tell. Now get the hell off my property before I call those cops back."

Bill watched her trot back into the building all long legs and angry buttocks, and after a decent interval began to search the bushes. He soon located McArthur lying under a juniper. The raccoon was unconscious, but Bill could detect a heartbeat. "Poor old guy, you'll be okay now," he murmured, gathering McArthur up and carrying him to the car.

As he drove back to Foss Creek, Bill pondered on Bobbie's continuing hostility. Did she dislike him personally, as she might dislike a hairy spider in her shower, or was it a generalized dislike of what he stood for? If the former, there was little hope of a reconciliation. If the latter, he could try standing for something else.

So what did he stand for right now? That was easy enough. He stood for Mindset Visions, business rival of Axford Proximation. He'd tried to sell the idea of the mindset to Bobbie when they'd been partners, and she'd refused. So after the bust-up, the angry words and the threats of legal action, he'd started up on his

own. And the mindset had proved a winner. People had enjoyed experiencing the real-life adventures of their pets and the thing had grown from there, with charter companies implanting lions so that their clients could follow the hunt and experience the kill and the feasting. That aspect was, Bill felt, all rather disgusting. He preferred the innocent prowlings of his raccoon although, even then, there had been that brutal episode when McArthur had raided the chicken coop. Nature was rough and raw and vivid, but that was what people liked, apparently.

He sighed. With the Harrods Christmas event coming up, the rift between him and Bobbie could only get worse.

WAS SHE losing her grip.? On replaying the master, Bobbie found she'd included shark repellent as an aid to survival, instead of a small but serviceable Diamondite multiple-use club. She restarted the Drummond quest in the shrinking chamber to put matters right. The unexpected meeting with Bill had added her thinking.

"Funny thing," said Rupert, standing at the window. "Your ex-partner's driving off with that raccoon. Why would anyone want a dead raccoon?"

She joined him in time to see Bill's ancient vehicle swaying off down the street. "I told you, he's weird . . . Wait a minute." Surely not! "Do you know what I think? That raccoon was Bill's tool! He implanted it with one of his goddamned devices and sent it to spy on us!"

"Why would he do that? He knows all our processes already."

"I'll tell you why. It's so he can release the solution to the Drummond quest to the media at the Christmas event! We wouldn't sell a single disk if he did that!"

"My God. Maybe it's as well Ted was screwing up in there."

Stung, she retorted, "Screwing up? You leave the solutions to me, Rupert, and stick to what you do best. I've been concerned that the quests are becoming stereotyped so I programmed Ted to introduce a random element. You see the results."

It was not Bobbie's day. There came a rumbling from behind the office walls. A hatch jerked open and a large cube of crushed metal thudded to the floor.

Bobbie knelt beside it. "Is that you, Ted? Oh, Jesus Christ!" She felt tears in her eyes. She'd guided Ted successfully through more adventures than any of his predecessors; the dangers they'd shared together had, she felt, resulted in a bond between them. And now this. Through her inattention she'd allowed him to be bested by Carl Peterson the diabolical mastermind, and compressed to a fraction of his former self. "I'm sorry, Ted," she whispered brokenly.

"So what happens now?" said Rupert.

"I . . . I suppose we'll have to send in another Ted."

"There are no more Teds."

"What are you talking about?"

"That was the last. I warned you about this a week ago, Bobbie. Western Robotics have cut us off until we pay their account in full."

She stared at him. "Cut us off? What are we going to do? How are we going to finish the Drummond quest? What about the Christmas promotion?"

He hesitated. "There's one possibility. We could appeal to Bill Kilpatrick. Maybe we could use a mindset and send an expendable raccoon through the course. Or better still, a chimp."

"No way! I wouldn't appeal to Bill Kilpatrick if he was the last man in the Universe. Anyway, you can't command animals through a mindset. You can only influence them. In the end they'll obey their own instincts for self-preservation, and the Drummond quest is no place for quitters. I always said there was a weak link in Bill's goddamned mindset, and this proves it!"

"Do you have a better idea?"

She gazed at him steadily. "Rupert, in the past you've professed to love me. Maybe I've been cautious, maybe even cynical. A woman has a right to be cynical after an experience like Bill Kilpatrick. But maybe I've been unjust."

"What exactly are you getting at?" he asked warily.

"This is your chance to prove yourself, Rupert." She took hold of his arm persuasively. "If you truly love me, you'll do this for me."

"Do what?" Mounting alarm showed on his face.

"You'll deputize for Ted."

"Deputize for Ted? Forget it!"

"I'll be with you all the way, Rupert. I'll be sitting here at the monitor, suggesting alternatives, guiding you through. We'll do it together, Rupert. Partners in the Drummond quest. A melding of souls, battling adversity!"

"You seriously want me to step into the Grim Reaper? You must be mad!"

She released his arm. "So you won't do this thing for me?" she said quietly. "So you think I'm mad, do you? Well, Rupert, I'll show you just how mad I am. If you won't deputize for Ted, I'll do it myself!"

"Don't be ridiculous, Bobbie."

"So I'm ridiculous now, am I? Because I want to save Axford Proximity when you won't lift a finger to help? Well, don't you worry yourself about me, Rupert." Her voice rose to a ringing shout. "If 'Calves' Stilton can get through the Reaper and live to tell the tale, then so can I!"

Next morning the rain fell steadily. Bill Kilpatrick sat in his living room, watching the water dripping from his ceiling into a strategically placed bucket. McArthur lay in his basket nearby, shivering still suffering the effects of the previous day.

Bill was wondering not for the first time, what life was all about. It was fine to rid oneself of materialistic trappings and ambitions, but that shouldn't lead to such abject boredom, surely? What did he think he was achieving sitting here like this? Didn't he have something better to do? Should he take up a hobby, maybe search the foreshore for a suitable piece of driftwood and paint it to look like a brontosaurus? That's what most of the residents of Foss Creek did. They seemed happy enough doing it, too.

He was on the point of heaving himself out of his chair when the door burst open and Slim Ferris hurried in, rainwater cascading from his clothing. Bill was struck, as ever, by Slim's resemblance to the forest mandrill. The close-set eyes, the long red nose, the pronounced brow ridge and pointy head; they were all there. He couldn't have entrusted the fortunes of Mindset Visions to a more suitable man.

"Jesus, what a pigsty." Slim slipped out of his raincoat and shook water over the threadbare carpet. "I'll never understand why you choose to live like this, Bill. What are you trying to prove, for Chrissake?"

"This is my home," said Bill simply. "I like it this way."

"You should get a grip on yourself. Buy yourself a suit, get yourself a woman. Take an interest in the business."

"Take an interest in the business?" Bill was surprised.

"Well, not too great an interest. You know me, I like a free hand. But drop by the factory from time to time. Show the flag to the workers." Slim chuckled. "Some of them are beginning to think I own the whole shebang myself, can you believe it?"

Reassuring words. "So how are things going? Are we keeping our heads above water?"

"Things are going just great, Bill." The tiny eyes gleamed with enthusiasm. "We have all the headsets stockpiled for the Christmas bash and the veterinarians are implanting the recipient animals right now."

"Most people will want to have their own pets implanted, won't they?"

"Sure, sure. But cats and dogs can be boring, know what I mean? We've got a nice line in hyenas, hammerheads, cobras. I have a great idea for our next venture."

"Do we need another venture?"

"Diversity, Bill, diversity is what oils the machinery of commerce. You know what we need? A game farm. Wild animals in their natural habitat, near as we can

make it. Goes over big with the preservationist kooks. Wildebeest, zebra, gazelle, all that stuff. Lodges overlooking waterholes. The herds coming to drink in the evenings."

"And the lions moving in for the kill?"

"As they did in Africa, Bill, as they did in Africa. Culling of the weak. Strengthening of the herd. We run it nature's way."

"Except that our lions would be implanted with mindsets."

"Well, yes." A shrewd look disfigured Slim's face. He sat down in the chair opposite Bill, leaning forward confidentially. Glancing over his shoulder, he said, "Sure, people enjoy the kill, why not? But there's a twist I'm discovering. A proportion of our customers -- say twenty-five, thirty percent -- a significant number, marketwise, want to be wildebeest. Or zebra, or gazelle. Get it? They want to be prey." Slim leaned back, smiling proudly in the way of a mandrill who has imparted valuable information to the dominant male. "Takes all sorts, doesn't it? It means a sizable reduction in the projected cost of maintaining the herd."

"Listen, Slim, you haven't been promoting cockfighting again, have you? I told you I wouldn't stand for that."

The manager of Mindset Visions looked hurt. "We make the mindsets, we implant a few, we sell the rest. We don't implant fowl of any kind. Their heads are marginally too small, for one thing."

"I heard rumors, that's all."

"Speaking of rumors, have I got news for you!" A look of predatory glee spread over Slim's face. He possessed a wealth of facial expressions, few of them acceptable in human society. "My spies tell me Axford Proximation is in a financial bind! Looks like they won't have their new product ready for the Christmas promotion! We're going to clean up at Harrods!"

Bill felt no answering joy. "Financial bind?"

"Western Robotics have cut them off. Bobbie Axford's run out of Teds for trial runs on the Drummond quest; you remember, 'Calves' Stilton's baby?"

Bill stiffened. "The Drummond quest?"

"Yeah, so guess what! The Axford woman is going into the Reaper herself this morning! I mean, actually following the routes, checking out the alternatives and trying to find the solution. Apparently 'Calves' Stilton went off without a word. How dumb can you get? She's history, Bill. History!" He hesitated in an unusual moment of self-examination, sensing a certain tactlessness. "Of course, I know you and her had a few tumbles in the hay once, but all that's water under the bridge now, I guess, huh?"

But Bill was on his feet, shrugging on an ancient raincoat, hauling McArthur from his basket. "Come on, Slim! There's no time to lose. We have to get Bobbie

out of the Reaper! She doesn't know the whole story. It's certain death in there! The Drummond quest killed 'Calves' Stilton!"

"But I thought he married --"

"No, he didn't! It's all a myth! 'Calves' never made it! I invented the whole story myself!"

"Goddamn." As Bill's ancient car bucketed along the narrow lane out of Foss Creek, Slim was unusually silent. Somewhere in a forgotten corner of his black soul there had once glimmered a tiny flame of romance, sustained by the image of "Calves" Stilton and the hologram of Miss Nude Earthlivinghappily ever after. Now the flame was dead, and Slim was the poorer for it. "Goddamn," he said again, unable to account for his curious feeling of depression.

Bobbie Axford, dressed in black leotards and accompanied by Drummond's faithful mastiff Uppercut, stood in an octagonal room. There was an identical door set into each side, each with its brass knob. Which knob would "Bulldog" Drummond have turned?

The answer was simple. Drummond stood over six foot tall and was broad in proportion. He was huge, powerful, and direct. He was an expert boxer, marksman and so on. He hit first and asked questions afterwards. He was pretty well invincible. He wouldn't have pussyfooted around turning doorknobs.

Drawing her small but deadly automatic, she took a short run, leaped and smashed open the nearest door with both feet. As it hit the wall behind her she rolled into a crouch, automatic at the ready. The room was unfurnished apart from a single chair. In the chair sat a man, bound and gagged, blood seeping from a terrible wound covering the whole of one side of his face.

The room reverberated to a heavy thud and a yelp from Uppercut, instantly cut off. She spun round. A huge block of concrete stood where the dog had been. It had dropped out of the ceiling and would have reduced her to two dimensions if she'd hesitated on the threshold.

She ran to the injured man and ripped the gag from his mouth.

"Who are you?" she cried.

"Professor Masterson," was the faint reply.

"Who did this to you?"

"Peterson," the man whispered. "Carl Peterson, may his soul rot in hell. He's the devil incarnate. He aims to take over the world. He tortured Sanderson, but Sanderson wouldn't talk, so he killed him with a garden spray a few minutes ago."

For the first time, Bobbie noticed the naked body of a man sprawled on the floor behind the chair. His skin was covered with angry red blisters. She knelt beside him. The body had an odd, sickly-sweet smell.

"Don't touch him!" screamed Masterson. "It's death!"

"You'd better tell me what happened."

He was weeping tears of weakness. "It started months ago. I couldn't help it. I've never been a brave man. I tried to hold out . . . But in the end I gave him the formula. I --"

"The formula? she asked keenly.

"I developed it myself, and I curse the day I did, but at the time I thought it might come in useful. A deadly poison similar to that used by certain Amazon tribes on their blow-darts, blended with a highly corrosive liquid. One drop of this substance on the skin will kill almost instantly. I happened to mention it at a dinner party one evening, and Peterson was interested. Oh, yes, he was very interested, was that devil Peterson."

"I imagine he would be. It's his style."

"Since then, he's been mass-producing it . . ." The voice was becoming fainter. "And now he's talking about a trial run."

There was no time to lose. "Which way did he go?"

"He went upstairs, or was it downstairs?" For an instant, the eyes held a gleam of cunning. "Which was it? I . . ." His eyes rolled up. His head lolled. He was dead.

There was a door in the far wall. Bobbie kicked it open and rolled through. This time, the Drummond method met with scant success. There were two flights of stone steps immediately beyond the door; one leading up, the other down. With no chance to consider alternatives, Bobbie tumbled downward into darkness. A door slammed shut behind her.

Picking herself up shakily, she took out her rechargeable flashlight and examined her surroundings. She was in a small, featureless, windowless room. The place had a curious smell that she recognized instantly. It was not the sickly-sweet smell of the body upstairs. It was the sharp, metallic smell of shark repellent.

Her route had converged with the route of the late Ted.

At least she knew what to expect next. She took out her small but serviceable Diamondite multiple-use club. The whirring noise started up. The walls began to close in. She extended the club to its maximum length, slightly greater than the span of her shoulders.

Ted had finished up as a cube. What did this tell her? Two opposite walls must converge to a pre-determined point and stop. Then narrow sections would emerge from the other two walls like plungers, reducing her space to a tall box. Then a square section of the ceiling would descend, and her space would become a Ted-sized cube, and she would be crushed. Bobbie had often boasted to the media that there were very few fake effects in the Grim Reaper. This was real. For an

instant she knew fear.

She shook it off. There would be time for fear later on. Right now, she knew the answer. As the walls approached she positioned the club carefully at right angles. The walls met the ends of the indestructible club, the whirring deepened. She heard a sharp splintering sound. A crack developed in one wall, spreading rapidly. With a crash, a jagged section fell away. She stepped through into a large, well-lit room.

Huge rams stood against the walls, rods extended. In one corner was a heavy, humming compressor. It seemed a lot of expensive equipment for the sole purpose of reducing a robot to a cube. No wonder Axford Proximity was in financial difficulties. She'd have a serious talk with Rupert when she got out.

Rupert. Was he recording her adventures the way she'd taught him yesterday afternoon, or was he goofing off? She looked around for an eyespy lens, and spotted one at the top corner of the room.

"You'd better not be missing any of this stuff, Rupert!" she shouted, hauling open a door and running up a flight of stairs.

She paused at the top, in another octagonal chamber where Uppercut was waiting for her, having apparently dodged the concrete block after all. You couldn't make assumptions in the Drummond quest. She listened carefully at each door, and from behind the fifth she heard a soft coughing. Kicking the door open she found herself in a luxuriously appointed bedroom. An old woman lay in bed, frail, skin like parchment, clearly at death's door. Her left hand lay limply across the brocade coverlet. Faded eyes flickered open.

"I'm sorry," said Bobbie. "I didn't mean to intrude."

"Come in, my dear, come in. Sit yourself down. It's not often an old lady like me gets visitors. Tell me, what brings you to these parts?"

Uppercut snarled softly. Had Bobbie stumbled into the wrong scenario? This looked like a Regency quest. Many quests used common scenarios; it saved space and money.

She was about to leave when she noticed something. The old woman's left hand had come alive, and the fingers were beating a ceaseless tattoo on the bedclothes. She stared, hardly able to believe the evidence of her eyes. That old habit was a giveaway every time, no matter how impenetrable the disguise might otherwise be. The fingers drumming, as though practicing on an invisible piano. It was Peterson lying there!

"Carl," she murmured. "My old adversary. We meet again."

"Curse you, Drummond!" snarled the other. He leaped from the bed, kicking aside a half-hearted attack by Uppercut, revealing himself as a tall, powerful individual wearing a tux. "It will be the last time, I assure you. Take him, Mustafa!"

Bobbie's arms were seized from behind. Despite her prodigious power she was

unable to free herself, her captor had the strength of ten men, not to mention the advantage of surprise. She straggled impotently, cursing. Peterson produced a cord, and in an instant her wrists were securely bound. Mustafa, who proved to be a gigantic, swarthy Turk, held her arm in a vice-like grip.

Stepping back, his equanimity restored, Peterson said smoothly, "This is indeed a fortunate meeting, my dear Drummond. I'm giving a little dinner party for various minor Heads of State and we'll be delighted to have your company. It's a rehearsal for a much bigger game, but I won't bore you with the details since you won't be around to play the next round. What a pity. I've so enjoyed our rivalry in the past."

Propelled by Mustafa, Bobbie was forced up a flight of stairs and along a dim corridor. Peterson paused before a pair of heavy, gilded double doors. "Trust you are going to watch your manners, my friend," he said. "You are about to meet some very influential people. I will untie your wrists so that you may join us at dinner. But," and the menace in his voice chilled Bobbie's blood, "any tricks, and it will be the worse for you."

"You may depend on my good breeding" she heard herself say coldly. "That, I think, is the difference between us, Peterson."

The master criminal flung open the double doors, revealing a brightly lit dining room with a dozen guests in formal attire, already seated. The table was laid with silver cutlery and Waterford crystal, a set Bobbie recognized from several previous quests. The only new item was a huge crystal chandelier instead of the more usual candles.

"Gentlemen," Peterson announced, "I'd like you to meet Captain Hugh 'Bulldog' Drummond, DSO, MC, late of His Majesty's Royal Loamshires. Captain Drummond will be joining us for dinner."

There were two vacant chairs. Peterson seated himself at the head of the table and Bobbie about halfway along, between a spare elderly man whose face was vaguely familiar and a heavily tanned man with an Australian accent. Peterson, toying with his food, watched with thinly veiled contempt as the diners noisily devoured appetizers in the form of barbecued chicken wings. Bobbie didn't eat, but tried a couple of wings on Uppercut. They appeared to do him no harm.

Meanwhile Mustafa was distributing finger bowls. Bobbie was about to use hers when she noticed an odd smell. A sickly-sweet smell, somehow familiar. What did it remind her of? And where was it coming from?

Suddenly she jumped to her feet and uttered a mighty shout, freezing the conversation dead with its intensity.

"Don't use the finger bowls, for God's sake! It's death!"

The guests stared at Bobbie in outraged amazement. Peterson laughed quietly.

"What do you mean, death?" said the Australian. "Is this some kind of a joke?"

"Perhaps this will convince you," she said coolly and, taking her finger bowl,

she set it down before Uppercut. The mastiff lapped it up with every appearance of healthy thirst.

Bobbie felt herself flushing. Could she, possibly, have made a fool of herself? It would be -- she felt herself slipping into her Drummond persona again -- damnably bad form. She watched Uppercut for a few seconds more, but the dog remained embarrassingly alive.

"My mistake," she murmured, sitting down quickly.

Mustafa served a cold consommé.

"Lord Charlton," the elderly man introduced himself to Bobbie in a dry murmur. "Fine dog you have, Captain. I had a mastiff myself, once. Had the brute put down. Worrying sheep, don't you know."

The Australian roared with laughter. "I had my mastiff put down because it worried my wife!" Still laughing, he turned to the man on his right. "Why did you have your mastiff put down, Bruce?"

Bobbie listened, annoyed. The discussion dragged on, dealing solely with mastiff euthanasia until the end of the fifth course. "Calves" Stilton had been economizing on dialogue again. If she'd told him once, she'd told him a thousand times. Talk was cheap but effects cost the earth.

Deep in thought, she suddenly awakened to the fact that everyone was standing. Peterson was raising his glass.

"Gentlemen," he intoned, "The King!"

As she automatically raised her own glass, a sickly-sweet stench caught at her nostrils. She stared in horror at the liquid, then at Peterson.

"Don't drink!" she shouted, then added apologetically, "It's death."

Amid general laughter the guests drained their glasses unscathed, while Peterson regarded her with a thin smile. "Jumpy, are you, Drummond? Nerves a little bit shot? You think this is death? I'll show you death."

And he walked across the room and pulled a lever projecting from the wall.

The chandelier shook and tinkled, and a deadly rain began to fall.

SLIM FERRIS was basically a coward. The notion of death was fascinating when applied to his many enemies, but lost its charm when it became personal and immediate. "Slow down, for God's sake!" he shouted. "You'll kill us both!"

"Life doesn't have much meaning if Bobbie dies."

"Life has all kinds of meaning if she dies! It's us dying I'm worried about. Anyway, how can we save her if we're both dead?"

The logic of this argument got through to Bill, and he eased his foot off the

pedal. "Sorry. It's just that there's all kinds of dangers in the Drummond quest that Bobbie doesn't know about. Real dangers as well as simulations. Dangers worthy of 'Bulldog' Drummond."

"Who the hell is this Drummond guy, anyway?"

"'Bulldog' Drummond? He was my childhood idol. The first of the super-heros, really. He was enormously big and strong, yet he could move quietly as a cat. If he got in a jam, and he usually did, he didn't mess around trying to reason his way out of it. He used his fists and his lightning reactions. He didn't know the meaning of the word fear. He was terrifically straight up and well-bred, too, although you never knew who his parents were. He had a group of friends who thought he was God. He drank vast quantities of beer, too."

"He sounds like 'Calves' Stilton."

"He could make split-second decisions. I used to wish I was like Drummond."

Slim eyed him curiously. "So how come 'Calves' programmed the quest? Why didn't you write it yourself?"

Bill hesitated. His secret was bound to come out, now. "Matter of fact, I did."

"What! But everyone at Axford Proximation thinks 'Calves' wrote it!"

"The truth is, 'Calves' might have looked impressive in the flesh but he wasn't very bright. I used to cover for him a lot. But he'd never admit he had problems, even to himself. He'd been straggling with a minor part of the program for days. I should have noticed and helped him out, but I was getting on with the big stuff. Then suddenly he lost patience, and before I could stop him he'd gone through the door of the Reaper to sort it out personally. I saw him die. Carl Peterson trapped him in a sea-cave on a rising tide. Poor old 'Calves' was dumb to the end. He built himself a raft instead of following a faint breeze of curiously fresh air to its source."

"Jesus."

"Slim, I designed the cave scenario. I killed 'Calves.' I couldn't face the truth and the guilt and the contempt, so I invented the Miss Nude Earth story and I let everyone think he'd done the work on the Drummond quest himself." He drew a deep breath. "My God, I feel better now I've got it off my chest."

There was a long silence between them. The domed city loomed ahead, silver and huge. Eventually Slim said, "It must have been difficult for you programming the quest, having to dream up ways of killing your hero off."

Bill scowled, reliving an old grievance. "I wasn't dreaming up ways of killing off Drummond, not really. I was dreaming up ways of killing off Ted."

"The robot? Why?"

"It was the way Bobbie talked about him. Forever singing his goddamned praises and comparing him with me. 'Ted's so resourceful,' he mimicked in a high

falsetto. 'Ted's so decisive, so determined, so resolute. Nothing fazes Ted.' Well, I admit I'm not the most dynamic guy in the world, and I got sick of hearing about Ted. One day I caught Bobbie looking at me in a considering way, and do you know what she said? She said Ted was a better man than I. My God!"

"Shall we turn round?" suggested Slim hopefully. "Go back to your place and talk it through? Maybe have a beer or two?"

Bill uttered a short laugh. "Ironic, isn't it? Now Bobbie's facing all those dangers I dreamed up for Ted."

"You'll never find her. The Reaper covers ten blocks."

"I'll find her. I know the general location of the Drummond quest; the only problem is, I don't know which alternatives Bobbie might have taken, and I quit working on the program before I'd had all the eyespies installed. So we're going to call in at Mindset Visions and pick up our implanted small animals. Then I'm going to send them through the Reaper's wiring ducts. They'll be my eyes. One of them will find Bobbie, soon enough. Then I'll take a short cut in and get her out of there."

"Can you control fifty or so animals at once?" Slim was doubtful.

"I don't need to control them. I just send them scuttling through the ducts in the Drummond area, and I tune into them in rotation."

"We may never get them out again."

"They're expendable!" cried Bill. "Bobbie's all that matters!"

"It's good-bye to the Harrods promotion if you're going to sacrifice all our livestock," objected Slim. "Think, Bill. Is she really worth it? It's Bobbie Axford we're talking about. The woman who compared you unfavorably to Ted."

To Bill's credit, the car only slackened speed for a moment. "Ted's out of the way now. You told me yourself."

"There'll be other Teds."

"Not if Axford Proximation goes under, the way you said it would."

"To save Bobbie you'll have to solve the Drummond quest. So you'll hand Axford Proximation their Harrods promotion on a plate. That means they won't go under. So there'll be many more Teds, all better men than you."

"My God," muttered Bill. "What a quandary."

Bobbie whipped out her collapsible umbrella and extended it briskly.

"What the --" exclaimed Lord Charlton, regarding the chandelier. But he said no more.

All around her the dinner guests were slumping across the table like drunks, but

there was no alcohol in the frightful fluid that sprayed from the chandeliers; there was only death. The Australian, more resistant than the others through copious use of suntan oil, was staring at Peterson in horror.

"Why in God's name . . .?" Then angry blisters erupted on his forehead, and he too fell forward, dead.

Peterson watched from the far side of the room, motionless and silent apart from his habitual soft cough. He suffered from liver fluke, an incurable condition caused by a meal of undercooked escargots many years ago. It was his only known weakness. His cold gaze roamed around the table, coming to rest at Bobbie.

"So, Drummond, our little game is over. It has been easy, too easy. I like the umbrella; a nice touch. What a pity that it only postpones the inevitable."

"What are you going to do next, you devil?" Bobbie grated.

"Next ? Why, I'm going to hold the nations of the world to ransom, what else? I shall stockpile Professor Masterson's excellent fluid, meanwhile giving a few practical demonstrations of its worth. A blimp might be useful for spraying a large gathering at some kind of sporting event; the details are immaterial at this time. When I have convinced people I mean business, I shall start talking about water supplies, and the possibilities of unexpected contamination. Oh; the fluid dilutes very satisfactorily, my dear Drummond. A liter in a reservoir, and. . . Well, I leave you to dwell on the consequences. Meanwhile, I fear I must leave you. Oh, and by the way. If I were you I'd lift my feet dear of the floor."

So saying, he pulled another lever and, laughing maniacally, hurried from the room.

The deadly rain ceased to fall, yet Bobbie could still hear a splashing sound. It seemed to be coming from the double doors by which she'd entered. As she watched, they burst open and a tidal wave of liquid swept across the floor toward her. She lifted her feet hastily. The characteristic smell of Professor Masterson's poison was almost overpowering. The wave passed under her chair and the level continued to rise rapidly. She climbed onto the chair, balancing precariously.

But this was only a game, wasn't it? The poison was some harmless but evil-smelling junk formulated by that fool "Calves," surely? And the diners were all humanoid robots. So all she had to do was step down from the chair, wade to the door and out of here.

And yet . . .

It was all so convincing. She had to admit, "Calves" had done a good job. That stuff rising around her chair, it had all the trappings of something dreadful. One drop on the skin will kill almost instantly. That was what Professor Masterson had said. But the Professor was a robot, too.

And even if the stuff was merely some kind of sewage, she'd drown in here if she didn't hurry up and get out of this room.

So, it was a question of dipping her toe in and she'd have the answer. One way or another . . . She tried to do it. She failed. She stood there tottering, scared to touch the liquid, scared not to, indecisive as . . . As Bill Kilpatrick, for God's sake! what was the matter with her?

And then something floated into view, something so terrible that any thought of paddling was banished instantly from her mind.

It was the body of a man on a makeshift raft.

He lay face-down on boards roughly lashed together, dressed in the tattered remains of a blue track suit. One of his arms hung into the liquid. And below the elbow of that arm, flesh and bone had disappeared. . .

He drifted past her chair on the rising waters, and if she hadn't seen the decayed remains of his face, mouth contorted in a dying scream, she'd still have recognized that track suit, once stretched so tightly over a powerful frame.

It was H.K. "Calves" Stilton!

She stared at the blackened face, appalled. What tortures had this man suffered? How long had he been living in the bowels of the Reaper, eating the scraps thrown down the chutes for the piranhas, the rats and the cobras? And what about his reported escape and his marriage to Miss Nude Earth?

Obviously, it had never happened.

It was a lie, put about by that bastard Bill Kilpatrick. And the lie had prevented a search and rescue operation. In effect, Bill had condemned "Calves" to death in the brutal corridors of the Grim Reaper.

Bobbie found herself weeping. "God damn you all to hell, Bill Kilpatrick!" she cried.

And the fluid lapped against the underside of her chair.

"Sure Bobbie's in there," said Rupert easily. "I had her on the screen only a moment ago. Then I lost her."

"Of course you did," snapped Bill. "Didn't you know the Drummond quest was never finished? Most of the alternatives don't have eyespies installed yet."

"Bill's kind of fired up about all this, Rupe," Slim explained. "I told him what you told me about the, uh, financial squeeze and everything, and he reckons Bobbie's up against it in the Reaper. He wants to get her out, fast."

Bill was staring at Rupert. "You've been discussing Axford Proximation's financial affairs with Slim?"

"There's no call to use that tone of voice," said Rupert, hurt. "I wouldn't harm a hair on Bobbie's head. But I've got a sick wife and bills to meet, and you people pay well for information."

"Do we, Slim? My God, I don't like the sound of this! I never authorized industrial espionage!"

It was Slim's turn to look hurt. "I told you I had spies."

"Well, yes, but anyone can say they have spies. It's just a goddamned saying. I thought you just meant you'd heard rumors. But this is specific. This is a real spy, in the flesh." Bill regarded Bobbie's personal assistant in disgust. "This is goddamned Rupert."

"If it helps at all, he was lying about the sick wife. Actually, he's after Bobbie's body, buying her gifts and such."

"We pay him so he can satisfy his lust?" Bill was outraged.

"That's putting it a bit strong," Rupert objected. "I want you to know I respect Bobbie as a woman."

"You'd better. Because if you don't, I'm going to punch you on the nose!"

"You were worried about Bobbie in the Reaper," Slim reminded Bill hastily.

"Jesus, yes, I was forgetting. Take the raccoons through the main entrance, Slim. Square the programmers and the mechanics. Tell them raccoons are natural burrowers and have them push them into the ducting. Who said I couldn't make decisions? I just hope we're not too late!"

He put on his headset and in due course began to pick up visions of dusty tubing. Soon the raccoons emerged into empty rooms, open fields, rolling oceans, each with their hidden stock of perils awaiting the coming of the next Ted.

On his third rotation through the implanted animals, Bill saw Bobbie balanced on her chair in a flooded room. The level was still rising, and it was clear that she was past the point of rational action. Her mouth was wide open, her face contorted. She was screaming, by the look of her.

He took in the situation at a glance. "Rupert, let me have the pass key to the stock rooms. I'm going to need some equipment."

As the water lapped around the soles of Bobbie's shoes, she heard the creaking of rusty hinges from the door through which the master criminal had gone. Had he relented? Was he returning to cut off the flow of this dreadful liquid?

"Peterson!" she screamed.

"Well, actually, no, it's me, Bobbie." Of all people, it was Bill Kilpatrick, balanced on stilts and wading unsteadily toward her!

She'd never been so glad to see him. "Bill! Hurry, this stuffs going to come through my shoes in a minute. Turn round and let me climb on your back!"

But he seemed reluctant. "I'm not very good on these stilts. The dinghy would

have been better, but I didn't have time to inflate it." He lurched against the table, recovering his balance with difficulty. "I don't think I could carry you. It would be a disaster, really. I just know it."

"So what am I going to do? Stand here and die?"

"Well, what 'Bulldog' Drummond would do, you see, is to grab hold of the back of another chair and move it nearer the door, and step on it. Then he'd move the one you're on now in front of it, and so on. He'd step from one to the other, all the way to the door."

"My God, I never thought of that. That's pretty smart of you, Bill." Dragging the chair from under the slumped Australian, Bobbie made her way steadily to the short flight of steps leading to the door. With a thrill of horror she watched Bill's leg sink up to the knee in the fluid as he dismounted. But he seemed unharmed, although he scrambled onto dry land very quickly. "What is Professor Masterson's poison, anyway?"

"Water, I guess." He looked guilty.

"So why the stilts? Why did I have to go through that performance with the chairs?"

"Because of the piranhas, actually. All the water in the Reaper has piranhas in it; you know that."

They passed through the door, mounted the stairs and found themselves in yet another octagonal room. Bobbie looked from door to door uncertainly. Then from behind the nearest she heard the soft coughing that would destroy Peterson, one day. "Come on," she said, turning the knob.

"No!" He seized her around the waist, drawing her back. "That's not Peterson. My guess is, it's a tape recorder suspended over a pit of cobras -notice the echo?"

He pushed the door with the tip of a stilt so that it swung gently open, and sure enough the floor dropped away into blackness. A faint hissing came to her ears. She shivered and clung to Bill. "I'd have stepped right into that," she murmured. "'Calves' sure had some creepy ideas."

"Sometimes it doesn't pay to make snap decisions," said Bill. "I always like to reason out the possibilities -- it comes of being a programmer. And I kind of felt there might be a snake pit there."

"Sorry. I may have said some hasty things about you in the past, Bill."

He smiled in a masterful manner. "My guess is, Peterson will be in here." And he flung open the opposite door.

They found themselves in a domed circular room, vaulting and empty apart from a massive relief globe of the Earth in the center. The globe must have been at least five meters across, revolving slowly on a steel axis projecting from the floor. A circular platform ran around it at the level of the equator, also

supported on steel rods, dearly capable of being raised or lowered.

A tall man dressed in a tux strolled around this platform, keeping pace with the revolutions and examining a small area of the globe with absorbed interest.

"We meet again, Carl, my old adversary," said Bill softly.

Peterson swung around with a snarl of hatred. "Drummond! So you're not dead after all!"

"You've said that many times in the past, Peterson, but you won't be saying it again."

The master criminal recovered his equanimity, chuckling. "Too late, Drummond. Always too late." Still walking to keep up with the rotation of the globe, he indicated a small red button set in a mountainous area. "You see this button? When I press it in approximately ten seconds' time, a measured quantity of Professor Masterson's poison will be released into the Tokyo water supply. A great number of people will die, and the nations of the world will realize I mean business." His voice continued as he strolled around the far side of the globe. "Seven . . . Six . . . Five . . ."

Bobbie watched in wonder as Bill, with reactions worthy of "Calves" Stilton himself, sprang to a control panel on the wall and twisted a knob. The globe began to accelerate. Peterson came into view from the far side, breaking into a brisk trot. "Four . . . Three . . ." He began to ran. The button moved inexorably away from his outstretched forefinger. With an animal screech of rage, Peterson chased after it. The features of the globe became a whiffing blur. Peterson made one more desperate circuit of the platform, then jumped to the floor, panting.

Bobbie recoiled from the naked hatred in his face. "You've beaten me this time, Drummond," he snarled. "But the next time will be different."

"There won't be a next time, Peterson," said Bill coldly. "Die, you foul fiend."

And he raised his stilt and laid the robber tip, still wet, against the master criminal's cheek.

Whether the poison was diluted by the copious sweat streaming from Peterson's face, or whether he alone possessed some strange natural immunity, or whether it was merely good theater on the part of the programmer, Bobbie never knew. But it took Peterson several seconds to die. And in those seconds, the normally suave expression went through a hideous transformation until the master criminal was revealed as he really was, something scarcely human, something almost bestial, snarling and slaving and dropping into a crouch, fingers hooked and stretched toward them in a last instinctive compulsion to destroy. Then he collapsed and rolled onto his back and died, face erupting and peeling as the corrosive fluid continued to do its dreadful work.

"Not bad, huh?" said Bill.

Bobbie drew a shaky breath. "Let's get out of here, shall we?" She clung to

Bill's arm as they passed through a triumphal arch that had suddenly appeared beyond the globe. Words began to scroll down a huge screen before them. "I've been so wrong about you," she said. "You're quite the man of action, after all. I'm so sorry I called you a vacillating wimp . . ."

"Well, hell, I don't like to blow my own trumpet --"

But Bobbie wasn't listening. She was staring at the words on the screen, and her expression was undergoing a change not unlike the recent transformation of the late Carl Peterson.

CONGRATULATIONS ON DEFEATING
PETERSON THE MASTER CRIMINAL
PASS THROUGH THIS DOOR OR PRESS F10
TO COLLECT YOUR PRIZE
ANOTHER ADVENTURE SIMULATION BY AXFORD PROXIMATION

And the final, damning words:

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"You!" cried Bobbie. "You programmed the Drummond quest yourself! You told me it was 'Calves' Stilton, but all the time it was you! No wonder you showed up so well in there--you already knew all the answers. My God, what a fool I've been!"

"Well, I, uh . . ."

"And that's another thing! All those lies you told about 'Calves' living happily ever after with Miss Nude Earth, while really the poor guy was dying in there. I'll see you behind bars for that, you bastard! That's why Peterson was so convincing. He's autobiographical!"

"Let me explain about 'Calves.'"

"I don't want to hear it. I don't want to hear your voice or see your face ever again. Now just get out of my life, will you!"

So once again Bill Kilpatrick sat in his dingy living room, trying to persuade himself of the virtues of the simple monastic life, wearing his headset as he followed the adventures of McArthur. At the moment the raccoon was trying without success to catch fish in a tide pool, watched by the critical eye of another raccoon.

Simple pleasures, thought Bill determinedly, bored out of his mind.

There came a welcome knock at the door.

Slim Ferris was bubbling with enthusiasm, as ever. "Great news, Bill! Axford Proximation have pulled out of the Harrods Christmas promotion. My spies -- that is, Rupert -- couldn't record the final stages of the Drummond quest because the eyespies hadn't been installed. Terrific, huh?"

"Bobbie will never forgive me," groaned Bill.

"She didn't seem to blame you when I spoke to her yesterday. In fact she seemed to be talking in terms of a closer relationship between Axford Proximation and Mindset Visions. I even took her a few sample headsets to try out. They've still got half our implanted animals wandering about inside the Reaper."

"It's not just the Harrods thing. She blames me for the death of 'Calves.'"

Some of Slim's ebullience faded. "Too bad about 'Calves.' You know, he was kind of a hero of mine. I often used to wonder how he was doing, up there on Altair with Miss Nude Earth."

"A hologram of Miss Nude Earth. There's a difference." Bill was a stickler for accuracy.

"Yeah. Anyway, I told Bobbie about you sitting helpless at your monitor, watching 'Calves' drown in the cave. It was kind of a catharsis for me, talking about it. I didn't tell her you'd designed the cave."

"How did she take it?"

Slim considered. "Not bad."

"Well, what did she say, exactly?"

"I guess she said: 'How fortunate for Bill, not having to make a decision.' But then she kind of gulped, and I could see she'd appreciated your, uh, plight."

"I doubt if she'd appreciate anything about me. She thought I was spying on her through McArthur."

"I explained that. I said you loved her and needed to feast your eyes on her now and then. I tell you, you're back in favor."

"I can't think of a single reason why."

"Maybe she loves you. Or more likely," said Slim, always flexible enough to abandon an untenable theory, "Axford Proximation needs bailing out and she sees you as a source of funding."

Bill thought about it, watching idly while McArthur tried unsuccessfully to catch small fish. It was impossible that Bobbie should love him after the fiasco in the Reaper.

But did he still love her? Probably, and an unrequited love fitted in with the notion of a monastic existence. It compounded the gloom in a most satisfactory manner. Yes, he loved Bobbie, but he could never tell her because he couldn't face the rejection. And even if by some amazing chance she did love him, she'd be too goddamned proud to tell him. Stalemate.

"But I can't afford to bail her out," he said unhappily. A close relationship between the two corporations might have softened Bobbie up, given time.

"Of course you can afford it. You're worth millions."

Bill laughed bitterly. "Oh, sure." He waved an arm at his appalling living conditions. "It looks like it, doesn't it?"

"For Christ's sake, you don't have to live in this dump." Slim waved a print-out as a mandrill might wave a prime banana. "I brought the latest figures. Take a look, for once in your life. Bottom line, your net worth. Pretty goddamned good, huh?"

"But . . ." Bill felt his eyebrows climbing as he regarded the staggering figure. "But I thought . . . I thought you'd, uh . . . I mean to say, hell, you can't blame a guy for dipping into the till when temptation's shoved under his nose . . ."

Slim stared at him. "You thought I'd been creaming off the profits? Jesus, Bill, that hurts. After you trusted me enough to put me in charge, with my record?" His tone became aggressive. "I tell you, I've run a tight ship. I've never touched a penny of your goddamned money."

Bill began to babble as the figures on the print-out reproached him. "Hell, no, I didn't mean that. No, you misunderstand me, Slim. I just felt, you know, development costs . . . Inflation . . . New product advertising, all that stuff . . . I'm just surprised the bottom line's so goddamned big, that's all."

"Oh, that's all right, then." Slim regarded him doubtfully. "So what are we going to do about Axford Proximation?"

Bill tried to think about it, his brain still grappling with his unexpected wealth. Axford Proximation and Mindset Visions both sold adventure, basically. Maybe a merger was the way to go. That would bail Bobbie out.

But she was a proud woman. She'd never make the first move. And his very soul shrank at the prospect of approaching her. She'd assume he was trying to buy her body.

Jesus Christ, what a dilemma!

Animals didn't have that kind of problem. Idly he watched a pleasant scene through the eyes of McArthur. The raccoon had given up on fishing and was taking a mild interest in the animal on the far side of the tide pool. The two raccoons circled for a moment, then McArthur stopped and the other animal approached, head down, rump wagging. Bill felt himself flush. It was a female, and her intentions were transparent.

One of the ethical problems with Mindset Visions was the ease with which a peculiar pornography could rear its ugly head without warning. And, of course, the headset picked up all kinds of sensory impressions. In some ways, it was all more reprehensible than the killing and eating. This was something he didn't need; the release of base animal instincts when he was trying to consider how to approach the proud yet sensitive, vulnerable and retiring Bobbie . . .

The female raccoon winked.

He stared.

She winked again, quite deliberately.

He knew those eyes. He knew that wink.

His heart gave a leap of joy . . .

Casually, he said to Slim. "So Axford Proximation ordered a shipment of headsets, did they? Sounds like a demonstration of good faith, huh? I'll call Bobbie myself and talk about a merger."

"I'll get the number for you," said Slim eagerly.

"No. Not right away," murmured Bill, preoccupied. "Give me five, maybe ten minutes . . ."