

The Last Ghost & Other Stories  
*Stephen Goldin*

ISBN 0-7592-1676-2

Author Biography

**Stephen Goldin** graduated from UCLA with a B.A. in Astronomy. He worked in collaboration with his first wife, Kathleen Sky, to write the highly successful nonfiction book, THE BUSINESS OF BEING A WRITER. He and his current wife, Mary Mason, have worked together on the REHUMANIZATION OF JADE DARCY series. Mr. Goldin was the editor of the SFWA Bulletin for three years and was the SFWA's Western Regional Director for another three years. He began his writing career as writer/editor for a pornographic humor paper, the San Francisco Ball. In retrospect, this was a great crucible; because of deadline pressure, he had to learn to make his writing dirt}^7 and funny in one draft. For Mary, Kathleen, and all the "girls" who've made my life an adventure

Contents

Introduction

**Part 1**

Ghosts, Girls and Other Phantasms

Sweet Dreams, Melissa

The Girls on USSF 193

Nice Place to Visit

When There's No Man Around

Xenophone

Grim Fairy Tale

Of Love, Free Will and Gray Squirrels on a Summer Evening

Stubborn

But as a Soldier, for His Country

The World Where Wishes Worked

Apollyon ex Machina

Prelude to a Symphony of Unborn Shouts

Portrait of the Artist as a Young God

The Last Ghost

Haunted Houses

Part 2

The Angel In Black

For Service Rendered

Bride of the Wind

The Chenoo

The Masai Witch

In the Land of Angra Mainyu

**Introduction**

**Stops Along the Way**

A writer's career, like life itself, is a journey. Like artists and philosophers, writers tend to spend more time admiring the scenery than people just hurrying through. Something catches our eye, and we stop to examine it awhile before moving on — and in the process of examination, our lives and our perspectives are irrevocably changed.

These stories are stops I made along my particular journey, vista points on my personal path. If I stumbled across something pleasant, I smiled and made a note. If I saw something disturbing, that too was recorded.

I seemed to find them in about an even mix. Some of the stories in here are intended to be funny. Some are intended to be not funny. I hope I'm a good enough writer for you to tell which are which.

Stephen Goldin

November 1999

## Ghosts, Girls, and Other Phantasms

### Sweet Dreams, Melissa

*This first appeared in Galaxy, December 1968.*

*It had an interesting genesis. I'd sold my first story, "The Girls On USSF 193," (the next story in this volume) in 1965 and was feeling very proud of myself. I was a Pro. I had sold a story. For three years I coasted on that. A friend of mine also wanted to write, and I gave him a cast-off idea, which he then sold. Well, that was fine; my protege was doing well, even if it was one of my old ideas. Then, one spring afternoon, he called me to say he'd just sold his second story. I congratulated him through gritted teeth, and as soon as I could politely get off the phone I pushed everything else aside and started writing. Within twenty-four hours, "Sweet Dreams Melissa" was written and mailed off. It sold to the first place I sent it. My friend is now a very successful doctor of optometry.*

*"Sweet Dreams, Melissa" is my most successful story, reprinted and anthologized numerous times.*

From out of her special darkness, Melissa heard the voice of Dr. Paul speaking in hushed tones at the far end of the room. "Dr. Paul!" she cried. "Oh, Dr. Paul, please come here!" Her voice took on a desperate whine.

Dr. Paul's voice stopped, then muttered something. Melissa heard his footsteps approach her. "Yes, Melissa, what is it?" he said in deep, patient tones.

"I'm scared, Dr. Paul."

"More nightmares?"

"Yes."

"You don't have to worry about them, Melissa. They won't hurt you."

"But they're scary," Melissa insisted. "Make them stop. Make them go away like you always do."

Another voice was whispering out in the darkness. It sounded like Dr. Ed. Dr. Paul listened to the whispers, then said under his breath, "No, Ed, we can't let it go on like this. We're way behind schedule as it is." Then aloud, "You'll have to get used to nightmares sometime, Melissa. Everybody has them. I won't always be here to make them go away."

"Oh, please don't go."

"I'm not going yet, Melissa. Not yet. But if you don't stop worrying about these nightmares, I might have to. Tell me what they were about."

"Well, at first I thought they were the numbers, which are all right because the numbers don't have to do with people, they're nice and gentle and don't hurt nobody like in the nightmares. Then the numbers started to change and became lines — two lines of people, and they were all running towards each other and shooting at each other. There were rifles and tanks and howitzers. And people were dying, too, Dr.

Paul, lots of people. Five thousand, two hundred and eighty-three men died. And that wasn't all, because down on the other side of the valley, there was more shooting. And I heard someone say that this was all right, because as long as the casualties stayed below fifteen point seven percent during the first battles, the strategic position, which was the mountaintop, could be gained. But fifteen point seven percent of the total forces would be nine thousand, six hundred and two point seven seven eight nine one men dead or wounded. It was like I could see all those men lying there, dying."

"I told you a five-year-old mentality wasn't mature enough yet for Military Logistics," Dr. Ed whispered. Dr. Paul ignored him. "But that was in a war, Melissa. You have to expect that people will be killed in a war."

"Why? Dr. Paul?"

"Because ... because that's the way war is, Melissa. And besides, it didn't really happen. It was just a problem, like with the numbers, only there were people instead of numbers. It was all pretend."

"No it wasn't, Dr. Paul," cried Melissa. "It was all real. All those people were real. I even know their names. There was Abers, Joseph T. Pfc, Adelli, Alonzo Cpl., Aikens ... ""Stop it, Melissa," Dr. Paul said, his voice rising much higher than normal.

"I'm sorry, Dr. Paul," Melissa apologized.

But Dr. Paul hadn't heard her; he was busy whispering to Dr. Ed. "... no other recourse than a full analyzation."

"But that could destroy the whole personality we've worked so hard to build up." Dr. Ed didn't even bother to whisper.

"What else could we do?" Dr. Paul asked cynically. "These 'nightmares' of hers are driving us further and further behind schedule."

"We could try letting Melissa analyze herself."

"How?"

"Watch." His voice started taking on the sweet tones that Melissa had come to learn that people used with her, but not with each other. "How are you?"

"I'm fine, Dr. Ed."

"How would you like me to tell you a story?"

"Is it a happy story, Dr. Ed?"

"I don't know yet, Melissa. Do you know what a computer is?"

"Yes. It's a counting machine."

"Well, the simplest computers started out that way, Melissa, but they quickly grew more and more complicated until soon there were computers that could read, write, speak, and even think all by themselves, without help from men.

"Now, once upon a time, there was a group of men who said that if a computer could think by itself, it was capable of developing a personality, so they undertook to build one that would act just like a real person. They called it the Multi-Logical Systems Analyzer, or MLSA ..."

"That sounds like Melissa," Melissa giggled. "Yes, it does, doesn't it? Anyway, these men realized that a personality isn't something that just pops out of the air full grown; it has to be developed slowly. But, at the same time, they needed the computing ability of the machine because it was the most expensive and complex computer ever made. So what they did was to divide the computer's brain into two parts — one part would handle normal computations, while the other part would develop into the desired personality. Then, when the personality was built up sufficiently, the two parts would be united again.

"At least, that's the way they thought it would work. But it turned out that the basic design of the computer prevented a complete dichotomy — that means splitting in half — of the functions. Whenever they would give a problem to the computing part, some of it would necessarily seep into the personality part. This was bad because, Melissa, the personality part didn't know it was a computer; it thought it was a little girl like you. The data that seeped in confused it and frightened it. And as it became more frightened and confused, its efficiency went down until it could no longer work properly."

"What did the men do, Dr. Ed?"

"I don't know, Melissa. I was hoping that you could help me end the story."

"How? I don't know anything about computers."

"Yes you do, Melissa, only you don't remember it. I can help you remember all about a lot of things. But it will be hard, Melissa, very hard. All sorts of strange things will come into your head, and you'll find yourself doing things you never knew you could do. Will you try it, Melissa, to help us find out the end of the story?"

"All right, Dr. Ed, if you want me to."

"Good girl, Melissa."

Dr. Paul was whispering to his colleague. "Switch on 'Partial Memory' and tell her to call subprogram 'Circuit Analysis.'"

"Call 'Circuit Analysis,' Melissa."

All at once, strange things happened in her mind. Long strings of numbers that looked meaningless, and yet somehow she knew that they did mean different things, like resistance, capacitance, inductance. And there were myriads of lines — straight, zigzag, curlicue. And formulae ...

"Read MLSA 5400, Melissa."

And suddenly, Melissa saw herself. It was the most frightening thing she'd ever experienced, more scary even than the horrible nightmares.

"Look at Section 4C-79A."

Melissa couldn't help herself. She had to look. To the little girl, it didn't look much different from the rest of herself. But it *was* different, she knew. Very much different. In fact, it didn't seem to be a natural part of her at all, but rather like a brace used by cripples.

Dr. Ed's voice was tense. "Analyze that section and report on optimum change for maximum reduction of data seepage."

Melissa tried her best to comply, but she couldn't. Something was missing, something she needed to know before she could do what Dr. Ed had told her to. She wanted to cry. "I can't, Dr. Ed! I can't, I can't!"

"I told you it wouldn't work," Dr. Paul said slowly. "We'll have to switch on the full memory for complete analysis."

"But she's not ready," Dr. Ed protested. "It could kill her."

"Maybe, Ed. But if it does ... well, at least we'll know how to do it better next time. Melissa!"

"Yes, Dr. Paul?"

"Brace yourself, Melissa. This is going to hurt."

And, with no more warning than that, the world hit Melissa. Numbers, endless streams of numbers — complex numbers, real numbers, integers, subscripts, exponents. And there were battles, wars more horrible and bloody than the ones she'd dreamed, and casualty lists that were more than real to her because she knew everything about every name — height, weight, hair color, eye color, marital status, number of dependents ... the list went on. And there were statistics — average pay for bus drivers in Ohio, number of deaths due to cancer in the U.S. 1965 to 1971, average yield of wheat per ton of fertilizer consumed ...

Melissa was drowning in a sea of data.

"Help me, Dr. Ed, Dr. Paul. Help me!" she tried to scream. But she couldn't make herself heard.

Somebody else was talking. Some stranger she didn't even know was using her voice and saying things about impedance factors and semiconductors.

And Melissa was falling deeper and deeper, pushed on by the relentlessly advancing army of information. Five minutes later, Dr. Edward Bloom opened the switch and separated the main memory from the personality section. "Melissa," he said softly, "everything's all right now. We know how the story's going to end. The scientists asked the computer to redesign itself, and it did. There won't be any more nightmares, Melissa. Only sweet dreams from now on. Isn't that good news?"

Silence.

"Melissa?" His voice was high and shaky. "Can you hear me, Melissa? Are you there?"

But there was no longer any room in the MLSA 5400 for a little girl.

## The Girls on USSF 193

*This first appeared in If, December 1965. This was my first time. Please be gentle.*

Sen. McDermott: Now, Mr. Hawkins, I want you to realize that this private hearing is not a trial, nor are you charged with any crime.

Mr. Hawkins: Is that why you recommended I bring my lawyer?

Sen. McDermott: I only made that recommendation because some topics or questions concerning legal matters may be brought to the attention of the committee. The purpose of this hearing is merely to investigate reports of rather unorthodox behavior ...

Mr. Hawkins: Ha!

Sen. McDermott: ... with regard to orbital satellites USSF numbers one eighty-seven and one ninety-three.

I would appreciate your frankness on the matter.

Mr. Hawkins: Let me assure you, Senator, that I have no intentions of being secretive, nor have I ever had any. However, as Director of the National Space Agency, I felt it best that certain information about those two space stations be put on a security list for the best of all concerned.

Sen. McDermott: Spoken like a politician — you missed your calling, Mr. Hawkins. But tell me, this whole mess was your idea from the very start, wasn't it?

Mr. Hawkins: Yes, it was.

Sen. McDermott: And when did the idea first come to you? Mr. Hawkins: About a year ago. I was doing some research ... — Excerpt from official record (unpublished) Senate Special Investigatory Hearing October 10, 1996

#

The kind of research Jess Hawkins was indulging in when the idea came to him may only be speculated upon. However, it is a fact that his friend, Bill Filmore, visited him in his office on September 15, 1995.

"Jess," he said, "I've known you for thirty-seven years, and when you go around grinning like a Cheshire cat, you're hiding something. That pixie smile of yours is a dead giveaway. As your best friend and a member of the Space Agency Board, I think I have a right to know what's up your sleeve."

Hawkins looked at his friend. "All right, Bill, I guess I can trust you, but please keep all this in the strictest confidence. I believe I've found a way to stimulate our astronauts' heart muscles while they're up in USSF 187 for prolonged periods."

"Why should you want to keep that a secret?"

"Let me continue. We know that during sustained periods of freefall the heart tends to relax because it doesn't have to work as hard to pump the blood under weightless conditions. Upon return to Earth, however, the heart muscles have difficulty readjusting to normal standards. We've already had three astronauts who suffered heart attacks when they came back, and one of them was damn near fatal. The calisthenics program the doctors instituted seems to have had little effect. I think the time has come for drastic measures."

"Just what is it that you propose?"

"Think a minute. What is it that stimulates the heart, both literally and figuratively, is desirable enough for the men to use frequently, and is useful, besides, for improving morale aboard the satellite?"

"I was never much good at riddles, Jess."

"It can all be summed up in a common, everyday, three-letter word," Hawkins grinned. "Sex."

Filmore stared a moment in silence, then said, "By God, Jess, I think you're really serious."

The smile temporarily vanished from Hawkins' face. "You're damn right I am, Bill. We've been lucky so far, but there's going to be a dead astronaut around soon if something isn't done. I've given the matter a lot of thought, and I feel that shipping girls up to one eighty-seven is the best solution."

"But from an economic standpoint alone — "

"That's why I'm hiring only European girls — they're both cheaper and of better quality. I've already sent

my aide, Wilbur Starling, over there to recruit some of their better English-speaking professionals. And what with air and water regeneration, cheap food concentrates, and the new atomic fuels, the cost of putting them up there and maintaining them is down to a ridiculous minimum."

"But it's still a tidy sum. Where are you getting all the money?"

"Oh, I appropriated it from the Astronauts' Widows and Dependents Fund," said Hawkins, the smile returning to his face. "That seemed the most likely place. I've also taken precautions, in case you're wondering, about keeping this affair a secret. As Director, I have the power to classify anything I want. Not even the President will know about it."

"What about General Bullfat? He's hated your guts ever since you were appointed over him to head the agency."

"Bill, you worry too much. Bullfat has to look in the mirror every morning just to find his nose."

"Practical objections aside, Jess," Filmore said desperately, "the whole idea is immoral. It's just not the sort of thing a government executive should do."

"That is absolutely irrelevant. Morals don't matter where there are men's lives at stake."

Filmore stood up. "Jess, if I can't talk you out of this ridiculous idea, I'll go find someone who can."

"You wouldn't fink on a friend, would you?" Hawkins asked, hurt.

"It's for your own good, Jess." He started for the door.

"It's such a shame about you and Sylvia," Hawkins said quietly.

Filmore stopped. "What about me and Sylvia?"

"Busting up such a nice marriage after thirteen years together."

"Sylvia and I are very happily married. We have no intentions of breaking up."

"You mean you haven't told her about Gloria yet?"

Filmore went slightly pale. "You know Gloria was only a momentary fling, Jess. You wouldn't dare — "

"Fink on a friend? Of course not, Bill. It's just that I have this annoying habit of blurting out the wrong thing at the wrong time. But be that as it may, don't you think we ought to sit down and discuss the situation a little more?"

#

As she was getting dressed again, Wilbur Starling asked her, "Babette, may I have a talk with you?"

Babette looked at her watch. "You will 'ave to pay for anoizzer hour," she warned.

"Your thinking is too narrow," Starling said. "You've got your whole life ahead of you. Instead of just worrying about your next hour, you should think of all the hours you have left." "Please! Zey are enough taken one at a time." "Don't you want security in your old age, a good home — " "*Mon Dieu*, anoizzer marriage proposal!"

"No, no, Babette honey, you don't understand. You see, I represent the United States government — "

"I know your consul very well," she said helpfully.

"That's not what I meant. My government is willing to pay for your services in a special capacity." "What must I do?" Starling's face flushed ever so slightly. "Well, uh, the same thing you've been doing, only up in space."

"Space?"

"Yes, you know. Like satellites, around the world, Shepard, Glenn, Hammond." He made little whirling motions with his fingers.

"Oh, *oui*," said Babette, suddenly comprehending. "Like A-OK."

"Yes," Starling sighed. "A-OK and all that kind of stuff. Will you do it?"

"*Non*."

"Why not, Babette?"

"It is too ... too dangerous. I do not wish to lose my life going into ... space."

"My government is willing to pay you — " he made a quick mental estimate " — five times your normal fee. There'll be eleven other girls going up with you, so you won't be lonely. You'll only have to work two or three hours a day. And nowadays, there's no danger involved at all. Many women have gone into

space and returned safely; they say that the conditions out in space are very restful. And when you retire, we'll even provide you with a home and a pension fund, so that you can spend your declining years in comfort."

"All of zis just for me?"

"Just for you."

Babette gulped and closed her eyes. "Zen where did I ever get ze impression zat Americans are — 'ow you say it? — prudes?"

#

Sen. McDermott: And you say you recruited all these girls yourself?

Mr. Starling: Yes, sir, I did.

Sen. McDermott: Were most of them cooperative?

Mr. Starling: That's their job, sir.

Sen. McDermott: I mean, what were their reactions to your unusual proposal?

Mr. Starling: Well, they've probably gotten a lot of unusual proposals. They seemed to take it pretty much in stride.

Sen. McDermott: One last question, Mr. Starling. How did you find this job?

Mr. Starling: Very fatiguing, sir.

#

"**You must** be very tired, Wilbur," Hawkins said, flashing his infamous smile. "How many girls did you say you interviewed?"

"After twenty I stopped counting."

"And you've got a dozen all picked out for us, eh?"

"Yes sir, nine French and three British."

"Well, I guess you've earned yourself a vacation; you'll get it as soon as the girls are safely tucked away on USSF 187. By the way, **what** are their names?"

Starling closed his eyes, as though the names were written on the inside of his eyelids. "Let's see, there's Babette, Suzette, Lucette, Toilette, Francette, Violette, Rosette, Pearlette, Nanette, Myrtle, Constance, and Sydney."

"Sydney?"

"I can't help it, Boss, that's her name."

"Oh well, I suppose it could have been worse," Hawkins smiled. "Her last name could have been Australia."

"It is worse, Boss. Her last name is Carton."

#

Hawkins was giving the dozen new astronettes a pre-take-off pep talk. "I like to think of you as a small army of Florence Nightingales," he told them. "Hopefully, you will not receive all the credit that your brave act of self-sacrifice deserves, but nonetheless — "

Starling burst into the room, panic in his eyes. "General Bullfat's coming down the corridor!" he cried.

Filmore jumped up from the table he'd been sitting on. "Jess, are you sure you know what you're doing? If Bullfat finds these girls — "

"Relax, Bill," Hawkins smiled casually. "I can handle Bullfat with both eyes closed. He's a cinch."

"Who's a cinch?" Bullfat roared as he entered the room. The general was a big man — but then, forty years behind a desk can do the same for anyone's figure.

"You are," Hawkins said, turning calmly to face him. "I was just telling Bill that you're a cinch to be promoted to my job if I ever choose to resign."

Bullfat muttered incoherently. "Who are they?" he asked after a moment, indicating the girls. It was an apt question. The astronettes, contrary to normal procedure, had on loose-fitting, shaggy spacesuits. Their face-plates were small, barely revealing their eyes and noses, while the rest of their heads were completely covered by the helmets. They would put one more in mind of bagg}7 clowns than space travelers.

"They're the group scheduled to lift off in about three hours. Would you like to meet them?" Filmore and Starling nearly fainted at that invitation, but Hawkins flashed them a reassuring grin.

"I'm too busy for introductions, Hawkins. And why in hell do they look so shoddy? Have they had their physicals yet?"

"And how!" Starling whispered to Filmore.

"You know, General, that I wouldn't send anyone up into space who wasn't in perfect condition," said Hawkins.

"What did the flight doctor have to say?"

"He said this group is in better shapes — uh, *shape* — than any he's ever seen."

"Well, just as long as he's checked them out." Bullfat started to leave, then stopped at the door. "By the way, where are they bound for? Tycho Station?"

"No, USSF 187."

"Is it time for rotation already?"

"No, this group is additional personnel."

"Additional personnel?" Bullfat yelled. "Hawkins, you know damn well that one eighty-seven was built for exactly eighteen men rotated in groups of six every month. There is absolutely no room for twelve more people. What in hell do you expect your 'additional personnel' to do — bunk in with the other men?"

With a marvelous display of self-control, Hawkins managed to suppress his laughter. The "additional personnel" smiled knowingly. Starling, however, had to run out of the room in a fit of hysterical giggling-

"Where in hell is he going?" asked Bullfat, watching Starling exit.

"Oh, he's been under a lot of strain lately. He's about due for a vacation."

"He looks more like he's due for observation — and you too, Hawkins. You may control Space Agency policy, but I control the launchings, and that crew is not going up as 'additional personnel' for any small space station. If you want to get them up there, you can rotate them six a month just like anybody else. That's final." Bullfat stalked triumphantly out the door.

"Ready to give up, Jess?" Filmore asked.

"Not in the least. Surprisingly, Bullfat had a good point there. If we sent the girls up to one eighty-seven, it really would be crowded. They'd be constantly getting in the men's way, and it might be more nuisance than help. But all is not lost. When's one ninety-three scheduled to go up?"

"Next week — but surely you're not thinking of sending the girls up in that."

"And why not?"

"USSF 193 isn't a passenger station — it's for storing food and supplies. It's not designed to be lived in."

"So we improvise, Bill. One ninety-three is going to be placed in orbit parallel to one eighty-seven, because they'll need it for storage. It'll be sent up in four already loaded sections and assembled in space. It's a simple enough matter in the course of a week to fit the sections up with acceleration couches and living quarters — just get rid of some of the nonessentials being sent up and we're all set. The girls can live in there."

"It's absurd, Jess," Filmore mumbled.

"Not really. I'm growing rather fond of the idea." Hawkins smiled lightly. "Just think: USSF 193, your friendly neighborhood grocery store and cathouse all rolled into one."

Filmore groaned. The girls, carried away, cheered.

#

"I don't believe it," said Jerry Blaine. "I mean, someone down there must be playing some kind of tricks."

"Nobody plays tricks in top secret code/" Colonel Briston countered. "Jess Hawkins signed those orders



himself. And you've just seen those girls with your own eyes. I admit it's crazy — "

"Crazy? It's wild, man," said Phil Lewis. "Read those orders through again, will you, Mark. I've got to hear that nice little message one more time."

Briston chuckled. "Dear guys/" he read, "with each section of USSF 193 you will be sent three pieces of equipment necessary for Project Cuddle-up (making a total of twelve). Your friendly Uncle Sam has spared no expense to bring them to you directly from Europe, so handle with care, huh? They'll be rotated every six months or thereabouts, but meanwhile they can be stored in USSF 193. Share them equally and have fun — that's an order. Any communications concerning the equipment are to be addressed to me personally in this same code. That, too, is an order. Yours sincerely, Jess Hawkins, Director, National Space Agency."

"Wowiee!" Lewis exclaimed. "Remind me never to complain about paying taxes again." Just then, Sydney emerged from the next room. She had removed her spacesuit and was clad very lightly. "Blimey," she said, "you blokes sure keep a cold place around 'ere. Nanette and Constance and meself, we're freezin'. We was wondering if any of you chaps would care to warm us up a mite." By pulling rank, Colonel Briston managed to be first in line.

#

It was very late at what the station considered night, about a month after the girls had arrived. Lucette, Babette, Francette, Toilette, Violette, Rosette, Suzette and Myrtle were out on call, while the rest were getting what sleep they could. Sydney was peacefully curled up in bed, dreaming the dreams of the not-so-innocent, when all of a sudden a rock the size of a man's fist ripped through the wall near her bed and banged against the wall on the far side. A hissing noise filled the room, and Sydney started gasping for breath as the air was sucked out of the hole made by the meteoroid.

In a flash, she was out of her room and closing the airtight compartment door behind her. The three other girls rushed out into the hallway to find out what was the matter.

"Blimey!" Sydney said when she got her breath back. "The damned thing's sprung a leak!"

#

"Everything's okay now, Sydney," Jerry Blaine said as he came in from outside. "I got it all patched up. I'm afraid, though, that whatever you had loose in your room would have been sucked out into space. Nothing valuable, I hope."

"Not that I can think of," Sydney told him. "But are you sure this won't never 'appen again?"

"Like I told you before, it was a once-in-a-billion fluke. It wouldn't happen again in a thousand years."

"It better not, ducks, or I'm back down to Earth in a shot." She started back into her room.

"Oh, by the way," Blaine called after her, "are you booked for tonight? Good. I get off at about sixteen hundred — you can come over then."

"A woman's work ain't never done," Sydney sighed wisely as she reentered her room. Most of her stuff was still in the bureau drawers, but search as she would she couldn't find the little pill case that she kept beside her bed. "Oh well," she said, "I've managed without them before. I can do it again for a while."

It was nearly four months, to be exact, when she decided that the situation warranted her telling somebody, so she told Colonel Briston, who had just returned from three months Earthside. "My God!" was all he could say.

"It ain't as serious as all that."

"Not as serious as all that? You're certainly taking it calmly. Why didn't you tell anybody about this before?"

"Well, it never 'appened to me before."

Briston gulped.

"I think we'd better put in a call to that Mr. 'Awkins. 'E always seems to know what to do."

#

Sen. McDermott: You were the one who discovered all these goings-on, weren't you, General?

Gen. Bullfat: You're damn right I was. I'd suspected from the start that Hawkins had sent some girls up there, but the Space Force never acts without absolute proof. So I held back my suspicions, gathering up the evidence meticulously, waiting for the proper moment to take my findings to the President.

Sen. McDermott: In other words, then, your discovery was based on a long, careful investigation?

Gen. Bullfat: Exactly, Senator. That's the way the military does things.

#

As luck would have it, both Hawkins and Starling were out to lunch when the call came in. Since it was labeled "urgent," a man from the communications room took it right over to Hawkins' office. The door was locked.

General Bullfat, just then coming out of his office down the hall, found the messenger waiting in the corridor for Hawkins' return. With typical Bullfat persuasion — and two hundred and fifty pounds wearing five stars can be a lot of persuasion — he convinced the man that an urgent communication could not wait on "the whims of a damned goldbricker like Hawkins."

Bullfat took the message into his office and opened it. He easily decoded the little five-word note, and then stared at it for about a minute, eyes bulging. "Parks," he snapped to his secretary over the intercom, "get me the President. No, on second thought, don't bother — I'll go see him myself."

He left his office just as Hawkins and his aide were returning from lunch. The general couldn't decide whether to laugh triumphantly in Hawkins' face or to harangue him, so all he said was, "I've got you now, Hawkins. At last I've got you."

Hawkins and Starling exchanged puzzled, worried glances. Entering the general's office, Hawkins found the message on the desk, read it silently to himself, and sat down hard. His eyes gazed vacantly at the wall across from him, and the message dropped loosely from his limp hand. Starling picked it up and read aloud in disbelief.

"Sydney pregnant. What now? Briston."

#

Sen. McDermott: Ladies and gentlemen. Since yesterday, I have had occasion to communicate with the President, and we came to the conclusion that further investigations along these lines appear fruitless. Therefore, I wish to adjourn this hearing until further notice, and withhold publication of the official transcript until such time as is deemed appropriate for release to the public. That will be all.

#

Filmore managed to meet Hawkins outside the building. "I think I detect your fine hand in this, Jess. How did you ever pull that one out of the fire?"

"Well," Hawkins explained, "since the public hasn't heard about this affair yet, I simply made the President realize that as long as he can't get rid of us, he might as well get used to us."

"Why can't he get rid of you?"

"Because the Director of the National Space Agency is appointed for a six-year term, of which I still have four years left. And besides, only Congress has the authority to dismiss me."

"But what about the girls? Can't he fire them?"

"Heavens, no! As civilian employees of the Agency, they come under our 'excepted service' status — they can only be fired for incompetence in the performance of their specified duties. And no one,"

Hawkins smiled, "could ever accuse them of *that*."

## Nice Place to Visit

*This first appeared in Vertex, October 1973.*

*Looking back, I seem to have some fascination with old deserted cities that can give you your dreams - but for a very high price. There's such a city in my novel Scavenger Hunt, and a culmination in A World Called Solitude. But this is the first one that appeared. I wonder what the scholars will think I'm trying to say.*

The boundary of the city lay precisely half a meter from the toes of Ryan's boots. Ryan stood there, in no particular hurry to cross that line. Fifty centimeters were all that stood between him and possible madness. He gazed at the city, trying to read something from its inscrutable silhouette — trying, and failing.

Finally, he pulled the communicator out of his pocket. The cold, metallic, rectangular box felt oddly comforting in his hand. This was a symbol of Earth, here amid the alienness of this planet. Somehow, the ship — and even Earth itself — was not quite so distant as long as he held it. Ryan was not an exceptionally brave man; despite all the propaganda, planetary scouts tended to have their own human failings and fears. Ryan's fear was loneliness.

He spoke, though, in calm, even tones. His voice went, not to any of the humans on the ship, but to the JVA model computer that ran it. Human society had become too large, too diversified, too complex for human minds to grasp, and so mechanical help was needed. Computers had become father-mother-teacher to the human race. Java-10 was the portable counterpart to the enormous brain that controlled the Earth.

"I am about to enter the city," Ryan said.

"I needn't stress the importance of caution," answered Java-10. "Five previous expeditions were lost in there. Try to maintain frequent, if not constant, communications. And remember, if you fail, there will be no more attempts. The city will have to be destroyed despite its potential value."

"I understand," Ryan said tersely. "Over and out." He clicked off his communicator and stuck it back in his pocket.

He stood before the boundary and hesitated. Over to the right, his scout ship squatted beside the five others, primed and ready for instant take-off should the need arise. Behind him, he sensed the desert, dry and deadly, its dust dunes shifting softly whenever some chance breeze blew across them. Ahead of him waited the city, sharp in its outline, its beauty, and its utter alienness. Shimmering walls jutted at crazy angles, seemingly products of a drunken architect's delirium. Fragile, almost fairy structures sprouted sideways out of one another, sometimes hundreds of meters off the ground. Other buildings, even more astounding, seemed just to hang suspended in air, with no visible support. Occasionally, a wind touched the city and set the entire works vibrating like a singing crystal, so that the city seemed to sigh a siren song.

Men had entered this city, the only one on an otherwise desolate planet, five times before. None of those men had ever returned. Detectors had shown no life forms whatsoever before men came. Sixteen life forms registered now — the sixteen men who had vanished within. And now it was Ryan's chance to make it seventeen.

No one had any idea of who had built this city, or when, or why. All that was known was that it had swallowed sixteen men, alive yet apparently powerless to escape despite the best armaments Earth could provide. The city generated a field of unknown energy that radiated outward spherically from the city's center to a certain distance, and no further. Some of the men who had entered the field had continued their radio contact with their ships for some time afterward; but the information received had been close to useless, for the men had slipped deeper and deeper into states which could only be termed deliria, eventually losing touch with reality completely and ceasing communication.

Earth's curiosity and the need for the technology this city represented was powerful. Because of it, sixteen men had entered the city and gone insane.

Perhaps, there would be a seventeenth. Exhaling loudly, Ryan crossed the boundary.

#

Nothing happened. Ryan stood there expectantly, muscles tensed and jaw set, but there was no difference between his sensations now and his sensations of a moment before. He took his communicator out of his pocket once more, relishing the comfort it gave him. "I have just crossed the boundary into the city. So far, I feel no effects."

"Good," replied the ship. "Proceed toward the center of the city. Move slowly and take no chances."

"Acknowledged," said Ryan, and clicked off again.

The nearest buildings were still over a hundred meters away. Ryan approached them with great deliberation. Every sense was straining, seeking some signal, however faint, of danger. Nothing moved, and the only sounds were the whisperings of the wind. The city had no odor at all, which was even more noticeable than a stench. Ryan had the faint impression of stepping into a crystal castle, but that thought vanished quickly.

He arrived at the first building and reached out a tentative hand to touch it. It was smooth and hard like glass, yet opaque; it felt neither cold nor warm to his questing fingers, but it did make his fingertips tingle. He withdrew his hand. The places where his fingers had touched were small, dark marks against the otherwise milky surface. The spots faded as he watched, until the whole wall was uniform once again. There were no openings or breaks anywhere along the wall. Ryan walked alongside it, parallel without touching it again. He looked for a doorway or opening of some kind by which he could enter the building. The wall seemed smooth, hard, and continuous with no apparent entrance. Yet suddenly a section of wall shimmered out of existence, leaving a spacious portal for Ryan to use. He jumped back, startled, then pulled out his communicator and described the latest development to the ship in orbit above him.

"Has anything else of potential danger happened?" was the reply.

"Not yet. There still doesn't appear to be any sign of life, other than the appearance of this door."

"Then you must take the risk of going in and exploring," Java-10 said coldly.

*Sure*, Ryan thought, *what do you care? It's not your skin.* "Acknowledged."

He had a flashlight with him, but one glance inside showed him that he wouldn't have to use it. The interior of the building was brightly lit, the glow seeming to diffuse from the walls. Entering, Ryan looked wonderingly about him.

The building was utterly bare of furnishings. The only detail in it was a broad spiral staircase that ascended along the cylindrical walls, up, and up, and up. The scout craned his neck back to follow the stairway's course, but it just seemed to keep on going to infinity. Every twenty-five steps, there was a wide landing with a little window in the wall to look out upon the city. A banister of clear plastic ran along the inner edge of the staircase.

Ryan moved forward slowly, still alert for anything that might happen. The echo that his boots made as they scraped along the hard stone floor was almost deafening in comparison to the total silence that blanketed the rest of the city. He reached the beginning of the staircase and put his hand on the railing. The plastic felt cool and strangely comforting, as though he had run into an old friend amongst this strangeness. He started up the stairs cautiously, one foot ahead of the other, his hand firmly on the guard rail. His eyes scanned from side to side, watching for any conceivable danger. But none appeared. Then impatience gripped him, and he started running up the stairway.

He stopped for breath, finally, at the fourth landing. He was now perhaps some sixteen meters above the ground level. The doorway was still there, waiting patiently for his return, but it looked much smaller from this height. He walked over to the window, looked out, and saw

*New York City at noonday, its pedways filled with businessmen on their way to lunch, shoppers in transit between stores with parcels under their arms*

He blinked and looked again. There was only the alien city, sitting squat and silent, waiting, ever waiting. Silent. No movement, no sound, no shadows.

With shaking hands, Ryan practically tore the communicator from his pocket. He let his trembling fingers caress its rectangular form for a moment, then put in another call to the ship. "This is Ryan calling

Java-10. I've just experienced a hallucination." He went on briefly to describe what had appeared to him for just a second outside the window.

"Interesting," mused the computer. "This correlates with reports of other hallucinations observed by your predecessors. Whatever happened to them is just now starting to happen to you. You must be doubly cautious from now on."

Ryan sat down on a step to regain his composure. He wished that his partner, Bill Tremain, had been allowed to accompany him on this mission. He and Bill had been a team ever since training school. Together, they had scouted over thirty worlds, facing the unknown side by side. He wouldn't be feeling so lonely now, he knew, if Bill were here with him. But the computer didn't want to risk more personnel than was absolutely necessary. Besides, all previous explorations had been made by teams of two or more, and they had all failed; perhaps a single man stood a better chance.

A movement caught the corner of Ryan's eye. He whirled his head quickly to see what looked like a human figure run under the stairs beneath him and vanish. A red-headed figure. Bill Tremain's figure. And that was patently ridiculous, because Bill Tremain was back on board the ship.

Nevertheless, Ryan walked slowly back down the stairs to investigate. There was, of course, nobody there; the wall beneath the stairs was smooth and hard, with no hiding place for any running person. No, the building was deserted except for him. The silence attested to that.

"Looking for something, Jeff?" came a voice from above.

#

The man who stood on the third landing was not Ryan's partner. Instead, it was Richard Bael, an old acquaintance from Academy days. "Oh, don't worry/" Bael smiled. "I'm quite real."

That made sense. Bael had been one of the first sixteen to enter the city. "How did you get there?" Ryan stammered.

"Oh," Bael shrugged, "there are ways." He started to walk easily down the steps. "You'll learn, after a week or two."

"I don't plan on staying that long," Ryan answered defensively. He tried reaching slowly for the communicator in his pocket, but Bael spotted the motion.

"Oh, are you going to call your ship? May I say a few words to them?"

"They'd love to hear from you," Ryan said. "What happened to your own com unit?"

"I must have set it down someplace and then forgotten about it," Bael said with a wave of his hand. "I didn't really think it was all that important." He reached Ryan's side and held out his hand. Ryan gave him the communicator.

"Hello up there, this is Richard Bael calling. Can you hear me?"

"Yes," answered the unemotional voice of Java-10.

"I have a delayed report to make in connection with my exploration of this city. I assume you've got all your tapes going, ready to record every word of it."

"Correct."

"All right, then, here it is: *Screw you.*" He switched off the set and handed it back to Ryan. "I've always wanted to do that, but I never had the nerve before," he grinned good-naturedly.

Ryan snatched the communicator from his hand, slightly horrified at Bael's action. "This is Ryan calling Java-10. Do you read me?"

"Affirmative. Is Bael really there with you?" The question was flat rather than incredulous.

"He seems to be."

"I'm really Peter Pan," Bael put in whimsically.

"Shut up!" shouted Ryan.

"No need to be so touchy, Jeff. I was just trying to be helpful."

"Ask him why he does not leave the city," Java-10 insisted.

"Oh, don't answer, Jeff. I'm tired of playing that computer's little god-games." He started moving toward the doorway. "Put that stupid set away. The day's too nice to spend it talking to a box."

Ryan hesitated.

"Look, you came here to explore the city, didn't you?" Bael continued. "Well, I'm all set to give you a guided tour. What are you waiting for — an engraved invitation? Okay, have one."

He pulled a small card from his pocket and flicked it at Ryan's feet. Ryan bent down and picked it up. Engraved on it, in gold lettering, were the words: MR. RICHARD BAEI GRACIOUSLY REQUESTS THE PRESENCE OF MR. JEFFREY RYAN FOR A PERSONALLY CONDUCTED TOUR OF THE CITY.

"That good enough for you?" Bael asked conversationally.

Ryan carefully stowed the card in his samples pouch for further analysis later. "All right, Bael, have it your way." The communicator went back in his pocket. "Lead on."

With a flourish, Bael moved out the doorway, with Ryan two steps behind. After Ryan had passed through, the opening vanished and the wall was solid once more. He refused to worry about a minor detail like that. He had little doubt that the city would have much bigger surprises in store for him before long.

And he was quite right.

#

The two men walked through the city, Bael at a leisurely pace and Ryan chafing with impatience at having to match the other's infuriatingly slow amble. There were no real streets to follow, for the city seemed not to be laid out in any discernible pattern and there were no long stretches of open ground wide enough for any type of vehicle. Buildings of all shapes, sizes, and colors sprang up everywhere; here a cylinder, there a cone, a little further on a hemisphere ... there were even a couple that changed their shapes as Ryan watched them.

"Who built this city?" he asked Bael. "Why did they do it? Where did they go?"

"It's a nice place, isn't it?" Bael ignored the questions and gestured at the city around them.

"That's no answer."

"Of course not. I don't have any. Questions are unimportant here, so answers are irrelevant."

"They sure as hell aren't. I have to know ... "

"Correction: *Java-10* has to know. You don't have to do anything but enjoy yourself." Bael clucked sympathetically. "You poor dumb bastard, you've been so brainwashed that you don't even recognize freedom when it kisses you in the face. Let's sit down and talk for a bit."

Two comfortable-looking chairs appeared behind them. Bael took one and motioned for Ryan to take the other. The scout tested it uneasily before placing his weight in it. "What do you want to talk about?" he asked after he'd settled in.

"Let's start with why you're here."

"The same reason as you: to find out about the city."

"Why?"

"Technology, mostly. Anyone who could build a place like this must be so far ahead of us that we stand to learn something just from examining their artifacts. We have to find out... "

"*We?*" Bael interrupted. "Do you really include yourself in that?"

The interruption made Ryan lose his train of thought, and he could only blink uncomprehendingly.

"Be honest. Were you, personally, ever that curious as to what was in this city to risk losing your sanity by coming down here?" Bael's eyes were aglow with life as he eagerly pressed his point home. "Did you volunteer for this mission, or did *Java-10* command it? Ah, notice how he fidgets. This wasn't your idea, was it?"

"That has nothing to do ... "

"It has everything to do with it. Jeff, you're a puppet, a slave to that ship up there. Do a nice job, perform your mission well, and you'll get a pat on the back, a commendation, maybe even a medal. Is that all your life is worth to you?"

"I've got a responsibility to the Corps, to Earth."

"Screw them! What about your responsibility to good old number one? How about learning to enjoy yourself?"

"Earth needs me ... "

"Sure, like President Ferguson needs another hole in his ass." Bael looked around him. "Hey, come on over, fellas, join the party."

Fifteen other men strolled out into the open space where Ryan and Bael were seated. They came from all directions, and their gaits were as leisurely as Bael's had been. They were the rest of the explorers who had come to the city on previous expeditions. Ryan knew most of them, if not personally, then at least by reputation. They had been tough, experienced men before coming to the city. Now they appeared soft, relaxed, and well satisfied. They all greeted Bael and smiled warmly at Ryan.

"No doubt," said Bael, "you want to whip out your communicator and tell Java-10 the good news that everyone is alive and well and gathered together here in one place."

As a matter of fact, that was exactly what Ryan wanted to do. Despite the friendly expressions on the men's faces, he felt acute discomfort at being surrounded by sixteen deserters. He wanted more than anything right now to hold that cold metal box in his hands, giving him the warm reassurance that there was somebody up there who was interested in his well-being. But this conversation seemed to be turning into a personal duel between Bael and himself, and he refused to give his adversary the satisfaction of being right. So he said instead, "I can report later."

"Atta boy!" Bael grinned. "You're learning already. Within a couple of days, you'll be as free as any of us."

Ryan had the uneasy feeling he had fallen into the other's trap. "But I don't have a couple of days," he returned spitefully. "If I don't leave here by noon tomorrow, I will be considered lost, the same as you. And if I am, Java-10 will bomb this city to sub-atomic particles."

The other men stopped smiling. All except Bael, whose good humor appeared unshakable. "I don't think," he said quietly, "that the city would allow that to happen."

It was Ryan's turn to be silent for a moment. "You talk as though it were a living being."

"I haven't the faintest idea whether it is or not. But after you've been here a little while, you'll begin to wonder. It certainly knows what's going on in our minds. It acts on our thoughts and molds our dreams. It loves us, Jeff, and it won't let anything hurt us."

A chill went up Ryan's spine. Bael was serious, as only a madman could be. He gulped and said, "Nevertheless, I wouldn't want to be here to test its love when the bombs start falling."

"You're free to leave whenever you want," Bael pointed out. "Nobody's going to stop you."

Ryan realized with surprise that Bael was right. He had been positive he would find some diabolical force lurking somewhere within the city that would try to hold him here against his will. Instead, all he had found thus far was a marvelous technology and sixteen friendly lunatics. He had not succumbed — yet — to the insanity of the others, and he felt no odd compulsions preventing his departure. He *was* free to go at any time.

"Of course," said Tashiro Surakami, one of the other explorers whom Ryan knew vaguely, "Java-10 might not be altogether happy with you if you did."

That was the rub. If he left now, he would have nothing significant to report. He had been sent to find out *why* these men hadn't returned to their ships. So far, except for a few hedonistic generalizations that Bael had mouthed, he still had no clue as to the reason. If he left the city now and went back to the ship, he might as well never have come.

"I've still got my job to do," Ryan insisted stubbornly. "I'm not about to quit in the middle. I've got to find out why ... " And he halted.

"Why we went crazy?" Bael finished for him. "From our side of the fence, it's why we went sane. The answer is all around you, if you'll just stop to look for it. The other fellows and myself are probably distracting you. Maybe it'll help if you're alone for awhile. Fellas, let's leave Jeff here for a bit. Remember, Jeff, if you want to talk to anybody, just give a holler. Someone'll hear you."

Bael and the others started walking casually off, talking and laughing among themselves. It was as though Ryan had suddenly ceased to exist for them. Within a minute, all of them were gone. The suffocating

silence once again returned, leaving Ryan sitting in the middle of a seemingly deserted city. The explorer reached quickly for his communicator and spewed out a desperate report to the ship above. He was hoping for advice, but the ship just acknowledged the message tersely, told him to remain cautious, and clicked off. It wasn't until he stood up again that he saw the girl.

#

He stared for a long moment, unable to say anything.

The girl was not similarly handicapped. "Hello, Jeff," she said in soft tones. "Remember me?" Remember her? How could he forget Dorothy, the first girl he'd ever slept with? Dorothy, with her small but womanly bosom, her tinkly laugh, her warm desire to please ...

"You don't exist," Ryan stated flatly. "You're not real."

Dorothy cocked her head in that funny way she'd always done whenever he said something she didn't understand. "Aren't I?"

"I'm in no mood for playing question and answer games. First Bael, now you. Whatever you are, you're not Dorothy. She's a hundred parsecs away, she's married, and she's got three kids. You're nothing but a fraud. Go away."

Dorothy just stared at her feet and didn't move. "You don't love me any more."

"Look," Ryan said, "I'll admit you're a clever hoax. It's just that I know you're not real. It's not your fault... you tried."

"Not real?" Dorothy looked up, her eyes red and teary, her voice wavering. "You can see me and hear me, can't you? If you came a little closer, you'd smell my perfume. If you'd reach out, you'd touch me. If you bit me, you'd taste me. How much more real can I be?" Her plea bordered on hysteria.

Ryan hesitated. She *must* be a hallucination. There was no doubt about that. The well-trained officer in him longed to reach for the communicator in his pocket. But the man in him said no. And some third part of his mind kept repeating, "You're a fool." But which part was the fool? He couldn't very well love a product of his imagination that had somehow materialized before him. This Dorothy was cold, unreal, a shadow product of a mystery city.

And suddenly she was in his arms, feeling very real, very alive. Her face turned up, seeking his. Her smallish breasts crushed against him, her thighs pressed tightly to his with small undulations that were frankly sexual. Ryan tried to resist, tried to tell himself that this wasn't happening. He had his choice of lies, but the Dorothy in his arms was somehow the more convincing. Her left hand caressed the hair on the right side of his head. Her right hand fumbled greedily at the buttons of his tunic collar. Her mouth pressed to his, opened, and out darted her small, firm tongue to run itself along the tips of his teeth. There no longer was, could be, any doubt. To hell with logic! This was real. This was no delirium of his mind, but the genuine flesh-and-blood article. He swam in a sea of sensation. The two of them fell to the ground, which somehow seemed to become rubbery and resilient. But his mind did not have the chance to dwell on this matter, for his body refused to let it. Reason withered before passion, as it had always done for centuries.

So engrossed was he, in fact, that he did not even notice the insistent buzzing of his communicator.

#

Later, Dorothy stood up again. "I've got to go," she said.

"Must you?"

She nodded. "But I'll be back any time you need me. Just call for me. I'll know." And she was gone.

Ryan lay there on his back, staring up at the sky. It was much dimmer than it had been before, and it didn't hurt his eyes so much. It must be late afternoon. In a few minutes, he would get up and continue his inspection, but right now he was too satiated to move. Even blinking his eye seemed a gargantuan effort...

"Having fun?" asked a familiar voice.



Ryan turned his head sharply to see Bael standing a few meters away, grinning at him. A flush of guilt, shame, and indignant anger brought him scrambling to his feet. "What are you doing spying on me?" "I'm not," Bael said, and his grin widened. "I was just in the neighborhood and thought I'd drop in. And besides, I could ask you the same question, except that I know the answer."

Ryan wasn't sure which infuriated him more — Bael's glibness or his own inadequacy in coping with this deserter. Before he could think of anything to say, Bael continued, "I suppose it was sex."

Ryan's expression betrayed him. "I thought it would be," Bael nodded wisely. "That seems to be what most of us lonesome, he-man explorer types need the most. It's the one thing the ship's computer can't give us. The city knows, Jeff. No matter how hard you try to hide something in your mind, the city<sup>7</sup> knows."

"You *do* believe it's alive." It was not a question.

"I don't know. That depends on what you call alive. If you mean living and breathing alive, I doubt it. If you mean conscious and aware of what's going on, yes, definitely."

"But how ... "

"*Must* you keep asking these infernal questions?" Just for a moment, Bael's outer mask cracked and allowed Ryan the briefest glimpse of insecurity<sup>7</sup> beneath the surface. Then the smoothness returned, and Bael was his casual, nonchalant self again. "Just accept this for what it is, Jeff. This city can give you your dreams. It wants to help you. I don't know how it does it; I don't care. Its builders made it this way, that's enough for me."

"And where are *they* now? The builders. What's happened to them?"

He was trying to see whether he could break Bael's composure again, but this time he failed. "I don't know. They probably went on to bigger and better things. In a way it's a shame, because I'd really like to thank them."

"Thank them for what?" Ryan asked cynically. "For turning you into a vegetable? You just sit around and let the city do everything for you, right? Forget about being a man and start becoming a moocher ..."

"Are you any more of a man, Jeff?" Bael replied, and whatever strain he was under was coming closer to the surface. "Just who is the puppet around here? Who is it that jumps whenever Java-10 pulls the string? Who can't bear to be away from his com unit for more than a couple of seconds? Which of us is in this city because he's under orders, and which of us walks around as he chooses?"

"You used to be a good officer, Bael," Ryan said quietly. For a moment, at least, their roles were reversed — Bael was on edge, Ryan was the disconcerting one.

"Sure, I used to be!" Bael spat out. "I took orders and risked my life for dear old Earth. And what did it get me? A handful of medals, a small bonus in my pay envelope every Christmas, a rapidly accumulating pension fund. It all becomes meaningless after a while, Jeff. But not here. The city wants me, needs me. It was built to serve people, to give them what they require. It only wants to help. Is that so terrible?"

"Yes, it is — if it can do what it's done to you."

Bael was struggling to recover his self-control. "Don't fight it, Jeff. This is just a friendly warning. The city can protect itself against you, easily enough. It can give you your dreams, sure; but nightmares are dreams, too. Don't think you can fight all your nightmares at once." Bael turned and walked off.

Ryan stood and watched him go. Even after the deserter had disappeared behind one of the buildings, Ryan stood, immobile. Was Bael just threatening, or could the city dredge up nightmares as well as dreams? He was inclined to believe the latter. Again, he thought of how very real Dorothy had been, and he shivered. He had not had any nightmares for a long time, but even so ... even so.

He took the communicator out of his pocket and put in another call to Java-10. "Why did you not answer the last call?" was the ship's immediate response.

Vaguely, Ryan recalled the buzzing that had come from the unit during his interlude with Dorothy. "I ... I'm sorry," he stammered. Then, like a guilty child facing a stern and knowing parent, he found himself blurting out details on everything that had happened since he last spoke to the ship.

Java-10 listened dispassionately to all his revelations. "You were derelict in your duties during that dalliance," it admonished him when he was through.

"I know. I won't let it happen again."

"Very well. But that does not excuse its happening the first time." Then the machine switched to another subject entirely. "A coherent picture of the workings of this city is beginning to emerge. There would seem to be some automatic power or powers operating behind the scenes and cognizant of what is occurring. It seems reasonable to assume that this controlling power possesses some kind of telepathic abilities, enabling it to discover your desires and to project illusions into your mind."

"There must be something more, besides. That chair I sat in was real. It supported my weight. The girl was also real. Those were definitely not illusions."

Java-10 hesitated. Then, "It might also be appropriate to postulate a system of matter-energy transformation, so that the power operating the city may be able to create matter in whatever form it desires. All these tentative conclusions presuppose an incredible amount of technical sophistication on the part of the builders of the city. It now seems imperative that we discover the city's secret.

"There must be a central area of control, someplace where the higher brain functions of the city reside. You must seek out this area and incapacitate it without destroying it, so that it may be safely studied."

"But how can I do that?" Ryan protested.

"There is insufficient data at this time to answer such a question," Java-10 answered. "You must first find out more about this system."

"It might be dangerous." Ryan repeated Bael's threat about the nightmares. "Couldn't you send a few more men down here to help me?"

The answer was immediate, and cruel in its bluntness. "No. If one man cannot do this, then the odds are against any group being able to. If the city overcomes you, it will overcome anyone else we could send down. We can risk no other lives. If you fail, the city must be destroyed, no matter how valuable." And, without even wishing him good luck, Java-10 clicked off.

#

It was now late in the afternoon. The red star that served as sun for this world was setting, becoming a bloated ball of blood as it neared the horizon. Its light changed the coloration of the entire city and the buildings reflected the macabre hues with a sense of eerie delight coupled with foreboding. The ever-present breeze now had a bit of a chill to it, and Ryan, standing in the open, shivered involuntarily. He hadn't eaten anything since breakfast, and he was getting quite hungry after the day's unusual activity. He reached for a ration can from his survival pouch *and noticed, off to one side, a large table apparently set for a rich man's smorgasbord. The mixed and pleasant aromas of baked ham, fried chicken, broiled lobster, and barbecued steak assailed his nostrils. Beyond these entrees, he could see piles of whipped potatoes yellow with butter, and peas, and*

"No!" he said aloud. "No, you're not going to do this to me again. You got me once, but I'm not going to be fooled any more." He started walking away from the table.

The table, on rollers, followed him.

"Not this time," he reiterated. He took out an unopened ration can and waved it in the air. "I've got my own food, this time. It may not be as appetizing as yours, but at least it doesn't have any strings attached."

Ryan pulled the tab to open the can. Crawling around inside, on top of the meat, were several large, ugly black insects. Instinctively, he flung the can from him. The table laden with food moved closer.

"All right," Ryan said stubbornly, "so I'll go hungry for a few more hours. I'm not going to give in to you that easily. Let Bael and the others be your slaves, but count me out." That speech made him feel very proud of his own integrity. Unfortunately, it didn't do anything to ease the growling in his stomach.

*Find the brain center of the city*, Java-10 had told him. Easier said than done. Where was he to look? The geographical center might be the logical spot, but how was he to find that? He had no idea of where he was at present, and even if he did, he had no directions. There couldn't be any landmarks in a city that constantly changed, where buildings altered their shape as well as their color from minute to minute.

Deciding, after a moment, that any direction was as good as another, Ryan started walking. The banquet table followed him like an eager young puppy. He ignored it, and concentrated his gaze straight ahead.

As dusk became darkness, the lights of the city came on. Not the white, sterile, regular lights of an Earthly metropolis, but a phantasmagoria of brightness and color, as though the city had become one

large fireworks display. Lights of all hues blinked and shone in mixtures of regular and random patterns. Hypnotic swirlings and combinations streaked up the side of one building and down another in a never-ending array. There was no corner for the darkness to hide in, and so it fled, leaving the city as bright as in the daytime.

Ryan ignored the lights and walked on.

Eventually, the table behind him gave up and disappeared. One of the earlier explorers emerged from a building with a bottle in his hand. As he saw Ryan, he waved good-naturedly and invited him to join in.

Ryan walked past him.

"Jeffrey!"

He couldn't help but turn at that cry. There, in the doorway to one of the buildings, stood his mother, who'd been dead for the past four years. She had her hair long, as had been the fashion when Ryan was three years old, but her face was the one of her old age. She held out her hand to him. "Come to me, son," she pleaded quietly.

*She's not real. Mom is dead. This is a fake. Counterfeit. Illusion. Fraud.*

He turned slowly to walk on.

"Jeffrey! Jeffrey, my son, don't you even know your own mother?"

Ryan stopped and bit on his lower lip, but he would not turn to face her again. He dared not.

"Jeffrey, look at me. Please."

"No. You're a phony, as phony as everything else in this goddamn place. Go away and leave me alone!"

She ran to him as best she could, favoring her **left** leg as she always had because of the arthritis.

Throwing herself at his feet, she clutched at his sleeve. "I'm your mother, Jeffrey," she wept. "Say you know me. Please. Your own mother." Her wet eyes looked up at his face, and he quickly averted his gaze.

"Let *GO!*" he shouted. He pushed her away from him. She fell backwards, and her head smashed against the hard ground. There was a cracking sound, and blood started flowing from where her head had hit. She was very still, her eyes staring up at him like a dead fish. He retched, but his stomach was empty and nothing came up but the sour taste of acid.

When the digestive spasms had cleared, he straightened up and continued walking, despite the fact that he could feel her dead, staring eyes fixed on the back of his head. If he were to turn around, he knew, she would be looking at him. That knowledge made it hard not to turn around.

Ryan kept on walking.

#

They were waiting for him as he rounded a corner. Bael and seven of the other scouts, standing in a single line blocking his path. "If you're not going to play by the rules, you'll have to quit the game, Jeff," Bael said evenly.

"Are you going to let me through?"

The other shook his head. "No. We can't let you go any further."

"So what am I supposed to do now?"

"One of two things: either go back, or join us."

"And what about my mission here?"

"Quit playing tin soldier, Jeff. You're capable of better things."

"I think I want to see what's behind you."

"There are eight of us here, Jeff, and only one of you."

"Yes, but I've got a gun."

"It won't work," Bael said evenly. "Not on us. The city wouldn't let it."

And Ryan knew he was right. Whatever force was in control here wouldn't allow him to destroy anything important. But he must be getting close to something, or this concerted effort would not have been made to stop him.

"Well," he started to say slowly. Then, with a rush, he moved toward the line of men. The nearest man stepped in to block his path; Ryan gave him a quick kick to the groin, and the man doubled over, leaving the way clear to run past him. Ryan ran, and kept running along the lane between the buildings.

"After him!" Bael cried — needlessly, for the other men had already begun their pursuit. At first, their knowledge of the city's layout kept them almost even with him, but desperation lent speed to Ryan's feet. He gave up thinking for the moment, letting sheer instinct guide him around sharp corners that would have boggled his mind otherwise. He found himself racing directly at a blank wall, only to have an opening appear the instant before he hit it. He sped through buildings, up stairways, across delicate, arching bridges a hundred meters in the air, then down and out. In, out, around, about; his weavings were as random and as rapid as he could make them. His pursuers dropped farther behind, until eventually he could no longer see them. Then, even their footsteps dropped out of range. Ryan stopped.

The silence descended again, the silence that had first welcomed him to this city. The only noise was his own labored gasping for air. He sank to his knees, his quivering legs no longer able to support him. Then he lay on his side, as huge lungfuls of air burned their way into his chest.

His hand went again to the back pocket, touching the communicator. The cold metal of the box again had its soothing effect on his battered psyche. There was an Earth. There was a ship orbiting high above the city, ready to help him. He was not alone in this ordeal, merely by himself.

"You haven't licked me yet, Bael," he panted softly.

"I haven't tried to," Bael's voice came to him. Ryan looked up, startled. Over his head was suspended a large tri-dee screen, filled with Bael's image. "There's no need to run, Jeff; the city can keep me posted of your whereabouts every minute. I can find you anytime I please. But if you want to be on your own, it's your decision. We tried to save you; whatever happens now is on your own head. Good-bye." The screen went blank.

Ryan looked down at his hand, to discover that his knuckles were white from squeezing the com unit. He loosened his grip, and at once his hand began shaking uncontrollably. He started a silent string of curses, like a litany, against everyone and everything connected with this mission, from Java-10 through Richard Bael and ending with what appeared to be his main antagonist, the city itself.

The shadow gave him a second's warning before the bird attacked.

#

It was an eagle, perhaps, or a falcon — Ryan never did get a good look at it. A brown blur swooped down at him from above, talons extended. The sharp, pointed claws were aimed directly at his face, the curving beak seemed to leer maliciously. The beady eyes were fixed unblinkingly on his features, waiting to take in any reaction this prey might make.

Instinct brought Ryan's right arm up to protect his eyes. An instant later, the talons were raking long gashes in the flesh, and the beak was trying to tear at the thinner skin at his wrist. The very momentum of the bird's impact knocked Ryan flat on his back from his previous propped up position. The flapping motion of the bird's powerful wings caught him on the side of the head as the bird started upward to begin another bombing pass.

He had only a few seconds to recover from that attack, but in that time his scout training and naturally quick reflexes came to the fore. He rolled over onto his stomach, palms down to the ground. Pushing up, he brought his legs in under him and sprang to his feet. He whirled in the direction of his antagonist, his knees apart and slightly bent, his muscles relaxed and ready.

As the bird came in for the next pass, he grabbed one of its talons with his right hand and pulled. The sharp claws bit into the flesh of his palm as the creature was caught off balance. Its wings flapped wildly as it sought to right itself; Ryan caught one of the wings. With a quick, downward motion, he ripped it clear off the bird's body.

The bird, it turned out, was made of papier-mache, and fluttered harmlessly to the ground.

Ryan stared at it incredulously. Large quantities of adrenaline were coursing through his bloodstream, and he felt a little cheated. Was nothing real in this goddamn place? Wasn't there anything he could trust in? In a fit of rage, he smashed the papier-mache figure into tiny pieces with his foot.

While he was so engaged, the lights went out. He stopped the stomping and stood still in the darkness that had descended upon him. Total darkness, like the inside of a black leather glove. *Does the city think I'm scared of the dark?* Ryan wondered. He continued to stand motionless, unintimidated.

Small noises came to his ears, scratching, like tiny claws on a hard metal surface. It was impossible to tell

either their direction or distance. Small chitterings, then a sudden porcine snort close beside him.

Involuntarily, Ryan gave a little start.

A small, furry creature brushed by the side of his leg. A sudden breeze carried to his nostrils the strong stench of rotting meat. He could feel hot breathing on the back of his neck. The air tasted of vinegar. Ryan refused to react, refused to be frightened. Eventually, all these sensations ceased, leaving behind just the null sensation of absolute darkness once more.

Then a face began to slowly materialize in the air in front of him — or rather, the outlines of a face. Vague lines of turquoise phosphorescence, very dim, just barely perceptible, formed the contours. Ryan had to strain his eyes to see it. For seemingly ages, the face just stared at Ryan, and he back at it. Finally the face spoke. "You are alone," it said.

Its voice was the voice of Java-10.

#

Ryan's hand instantly went to his pocket for the communicator. It wasn't there. Then he remembered — he'd been holding it in his hand when the bird attacked. He must have dropped it in his reflexive action to defend himself. Sudden panic hit him, and he dropped to all fours. The face watched on dispassionately as Ryan began a desperate search with outstretched hands, trying to relocate his link to the ship above. His hands groped madly in the darkness. Once, they hit upon some cold, slimy, repugnant object and recoiled violently. The search continued.

Ryan looked up for a moment. There were now two faces watching him. "You are alone," they stated, both in the voice of Java-10.

"NO!" Ryan shrieked hysterically. "No, I'm not alone!" His search doubled in intensity. He had to find that communicator, had to reach Java-10, had to assure himself that there was someone up there waiting for him.

Now there were four faces. Now eight. Now sixteen. "Alone," they all said. The word crashed against him like the wild surf, physical in intensity.

"No!" he screamed in answer.

"ALONE," said the faces, now in numbers beyond counting. The sound of their speaking reverberated through his body, shaking his bones and rattling his teeth. "ALONE." And the ground shook with the combined voices uttering that word in chorus.

"No," Ryan sobbed. He clenched his fists and screwed shut his eyes, trying to force back the tears that were forcing their way out. "No, no, no, no, no." But his sobs were drowned out by the relentless choir that washed over him:

## ALONE

Ryan curled up into a ball on the ground, whimpering as his mind retreated within itself.

#

*And on every side of his mind there was darkness, and what wasn't darkness was shadows, fleeting and inconsequential. Nothing to lean on, nothing to hold to. He came to the shade that was Java-10, and fell reverently before it. "Help me," he pleaded, but got no response. He turned to the specter of his partner, Bill Tremain, but it was chained to Java-10 and stared serenely right through him. He reached out to touch his twin image, and it dissolved in his metaphysical hand. He continued on.*

*Earth was a fuzzy ball that melted at his touch like cotton candy on his tongue. Friends vanished as though they'd never existed. Relatives were as wispy and elusive as ghosts. Back, back, back he went, his psyche searching desperately for a receptacle to hold it.*

*To one side stood the image of Bael, suddenly tall and gaunt, grinning a death's-head grin and beckoning with a long, bony finger. Ryan approached slowly, and didn't notice the snare Bael had set until it was almost too late. The jaws of the trap sprang shut in his face. Ryan fled deeper into the darkness.*

*Then, in the distance, he saw a light shining. It was dim, feebly glowing, but it was there. His mind raced to it as a moth to a flame. It pulsed, it throbbed. The closer he came to that glowing sphere, the brighter it grew. Already it was bright as daylight, and ever increasing. Then he reached for it, grabbed it in his arms (for all the light it emitted, it was still cool) and peered deep within it. And he saw*

Jeffrey Ryan

*Fireworks: red, green, blue, orange, yellow, ultra-violet, colors without names*

**EXPLOSION!!!!!!!!!!!!**

#

Ryan opened his eyes slowly. He was lying on his back. It was dark, but not the darkness it had been before. Overhead, he could see the stars, twinkling with their usual cold friendliness. He was very hot; his body was drenched in sweat, and his clothes were soaked through. He rolled over onto his side, and nearly fell off the ledge. He was on a balcony that overlooked most of the city. The city itself was dark — and that was uncharacteristic.

A sound to his right. Ryan turned his head sharply. As his eyes became accustomed to the light, he saw his communicator lying three meters away from him, buzzing insistently. Ryan ignored it.

Instead, he thought about himself, and the fires flared within him. The city had erred, and erred badly, in its tactics. Instead of driving him *out* of his mind, it had driven him *in*, so far in that he was cut off from all sources of strength, except one. The only one that mattered: himself. He had learned to be his own beacon, and the external ties had been cut in that instant. Let Java-10 buzz for him; he no longer needed a parent-figure. Let the city pander all it wished; he controlled his own desires now, not they him. He laughed, and his laughter echoed distantly against some airy tower.

Dawn was approaching rapidly. He sat up and swung his legs around so that they dangled over the edge of the balcony. And he looked out over the city. Except for the insistent buzzing of the com unit, the stillness was absolute. The city had stopped. No buildings changed shape or position or color. No weird noises, no hallucinations. Nothing but that omnipresent breeze that blew quietly through the spaces between the towers and set the city singing.

No, wait. There was a sound. A low moaning, right at the limit of audibility. A wailing of souls in torment. As he listened, it came closer.

Bael and the others appeared below him. They were the moaners that he heard. Their faces were twisted in grief and exquisite pain, and their posture was stooped; they walked like dead men on their way to Hell.

Bael looked up and saw Ryan. "Give us our city back," he yelled, or tried to. His voice was high and cracked, and barely carried up to Ryan.

"I don't know what you mean," Ryan called back.

"Yes you do," Bael said, shaking an accusing fist. "You killed it. We want it back."

Ryan was about to profess his innocence when suddenly, he understood. "You were right before, in a way," he called down to Bael, "in telling me to become my own master. Now I have. But you never followed that advice yourself. You didn't throw off the domination of Earth, you only traded it for domination by the city. You're *its* slave now, dependent on *its* whims, no matter how independent you think you are. I fought the city last night, and I won. Now the city is *my* slave. It isn't dead, Bael. It's merely waiting for my orders."

"Give it back!" Bael croaked hoarsely.

As Ryan looked down upon the pitiful hulks below, a flash of insight struck him. "I know what happened to the builders," he said to no one in particular. "They were marvelous craftsmen, but they gave themselves up too easily." He stared accusingly at Bael. "Like you, they forgot who was supposed to be master. They reveled in their pleasures and let the city handle their responsibilities. And they died out, probably from sheer apathy. They were too busy enjoying themselves to reproduce."

The men down in the street were sobbing. Ryan continued mercilessly, "This city was built to be a paradise. It *can* be a paradise. But even paradise has ground rules. You can't accept paradise by

relinquishing your hold on humanity, or you'll lose them both. You'll end up just the way you have — in a Hell that neither knows nor cares. The city is my paradise now, Bael, and *I'm* in charge of *it*, not vice versa.

"I can't return it to you, because it was never yours to begin with. You belonged to it. Now it belongs to me. I'm setting you free, if you're prepared to accept it. You talked to me about freedom, Bael. Now can you stand face to face with the real thing?"

He turned away from the men for a moment. Being a master implies responsibility. Ryan was not used to it, but he recognized its necessity. Below him, the men were still pleading desperately for him to give back the city he had stolen. Beside him, the communicator buzzed insistently, demanding that he return to his former serfdom.

He would do neither. Both the men below and the ship above were forces that must be dealt with, but not along the lines of old, dead relationships. Java-10 would have to accept the fact that its former servant was now free from its domination. The men would have to learn that the city was now dead to all except those who could control it. Ryan stood up and gazed out over his new dominion.

In the east, the sun was rising.

### **When There's No Man Around**

*This first appeared in Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine, September 1977.*

*Goodyear Tires had an ad campaign in the mid-1970s showing a woebegone young woman kneeling beside her car with a flat tire, all alone on a deserted highway in the middle of the night. The caption read, "When there's no man around, Goodyear should be."*

*This story is dedicated to all those poor, helpless women everywhere.*

"Sandrust!" Lucy Stargos said exasperatedly as she kicked the unfeeling machine for the third time.

Neither her ejaculation nor her kick did any good, however. The sand tractor still refused to start.

Outside the insulated tractor dome, the Martian night pressed in with cold fixedness and the stars stared down unabashed, the Martian atmosphere being too thin to work up so much as a legitimate twinkle.

Phobos and Deimos were both up, doing their feeble part to illuminate the night Marsscape. And in front of the tractor rose the seven-meter crater wall that the vehicle had stalled on while trying to climb it.

Inside the dome, Lucy paced about as best she could. There wasn't much room for pacing, despite the fact that Martian sand tractors were made to be self-contained units, complete with heating, lighting, and food and water dispensers. They had to be — the Martian climate was quite inhospitable to human endurance. A person with an oxygen mask and an electrically heated suit could survive outside in a Martian night for maybe an hour or more, but the Marsmen had developed a phobia of the "Outside." No Marsman would leave a tractor dome except under the direst of emergencies.

Lucy was beginning to consider this a dire emergency. She had a vision of how her father would react.

He would tower five meters above her head, perched regally upon his Olympus of parental authority.

"Well, young lady, what have you got to say for yourself?" The lightning of divine wrath would flash from his eyes and small beadlets of thunder would drop from his brow. He would glower a small marsquake at her, and when she didn't say anything he would continue, "I was against letting you have the tractor in the first place. Your mother talked me into it. Personally, I don't think a girl your age should be allowed to go outside the city at night. Especially just to visit that boyfriend of yours. From now on, I smite you with the curse that you're not to go driving unless there's somebody responsible along with you. Understand?"

And the specter departed in a flourish of hautboys.

"It's all your fault," Lucy said to the tractor. "What have you got against me, anyhow?"

The tractor merely sat there and politely refused to comment.

"Look, I've got to get back to Syrtis in an hour, or Daddy'll kill me. Come on, now, be a nice tractor and start." She pressed the ignition button again. The motor whirred encouragingly. "Come on, baby," she coaxed it. "Come on." The motor coughed, turned over — and died.

"Damn you!" she screamed at the machine. "Why don't you cooperate?"

The tractor, perhaps unable to think of an excuse, did not answer.

It wouldn't be so bad, Lucy mused, if this had happened on the main road. There was lots of traffic there, and she would easily have been able to find someone to help her. But she had forgotten all about so trivial a thing as time when she was with Jerry, until she'd realized that it was much too late to get home by the time her father had insisted on. "Don't worry," Jerry had said, and the wise patience of the gods had beamed through his Adonis-like face. Then he had presented her with two stone tablets, and inscribed in the living rock were the laws of the Universe. "There is an ancient, secret path that'll get you back in half the time," he went on. "Of course, it's a little bit out of the way ... "

*A little bit* out of the way! She had never seen such completely deserted land in all her life. She might as well be at the North Pole for all the help she could expect to get here. Darn Jerry and his silly shortcuts! Should she try walking? The trouble was, she did not know how far she was from Syrtis. The tractor's odometer read nine hundred and ninety-nine kilometers. It had read nine hundred and ninety-nine kilometers when she'd left Roperston. In fact, for as long as she could remember, it had always read nine hundred and ninety-nine kilometers. The tractor, with characteristic cowardice, was obviously afraid to turn to an even thousand.

She glanced at the outside temperature thermometer. Minus 30°C. No thank you, no walks tonight. She had heard too many stories of people freezing to death trying to walk long distances instead of waiting calmly back at their tractors. That was one reason why the tractor domes were so self-sufficient.

She could see the headlines that would have blazoned forth tomorrow: **GIRL FREEZES ATTEMPTING WALK TO SYRTIS.**

No, make that **PRETTY GIRL FREEZES ATTEMPTING WALK TO SYRTIS.**

Or better yet,

**NOBLE PRETTY GIRL FREEZES ATTEMPTING WALK TO SYRTIS TO SATISFY FATHER'S ARBITRARY DEMAND THAT SHE BE HOME BY MIDNIGHT**

"I guess I'm stuck with you," she informed the tractor. She realized, after she said it, the double meaning of "stuck," but she was too worried to groan at her own involuntary pun. "Please start this time."

She pressed the ignition button. The motor made a half-hearted attempt, then gave up completely. "You really want Daddy to kill me, don't you? You won't be satisfied until I'm lying there on the living room floor with my skull bashed in and my blood dripping onto the tile in a messy red puddle. But don't forget, that'll make you an accessory to murder. They'll come and take you away to the Home for Wayward Tractors and you'll spend the rest of your days pulling a plow in a cucumber patch."

A thought occurred to her. "I know what. I'll look in the instruction manual, that's what I'll do. That'll fix you." If the tractor was intimidated, however, it hid its fear bravely behind stone silence.

She fished the manual out of the map compartment and skimmed to the appropriate passage. "If your tractor should by some chance stall/" she read aloud, "'it is probably due to a flooding of the gas line. Wait five to ten minutes for the fuel concentration to return to normal, then try the ignition again.' See there, Buster? I've got your number now. Thought you could put one over on oT Tailspin Lucy Stargos, did you?" she gloated.

To make extra sure, she waited a full fifteen minutes, sucking nervously on a food bar from the dispenser all the while. Finally, when she could take the strain no longer, she pressed the ignition button one more time. There was a discouraging whine, sputter, cough ... then nothing.

"Darn you!" she shrieked. "I know your type. You just want to lure a pretty girl out into the middle of nowhere so you can take advantage of her. But I'm not the sort of girl who gives in that easily. You've got a fight on your hands when you mess with me."

She wondered whether she should put her headlights back on and hope that somebody passing nearby would see the glare. But the chances were against anybody passing this deserted spot (darn Jerry!). And anyway, the Martian atmosphere was so thin that it carried glare almost not at all. Even the light from a big city like Syrtis could be lost in the glare of tiny Phobos once you got a hill or two between yourself and the town. In order to see her lights, a person would have to be inside the crater with her, in which case they'd see her anyway. Better not to put a strain on the battery.

"The problem with you," she psychoanalyzed to the tractor, "is that you're ungrateful. I've always taken



care of you. Remember when Willie the Creep wanted to race and I told him no, that I had to keep you in good condition? And now, when I need you, this is the thanks I get. Is that fair?"

The tractor looked guilt<sup>7</sup>, but said nothing.

"But my mercy is infinite," she continued with a self-reverent smile. "I'll tell you what I'll do. If you start for me right now, I'll never drive you over twelve kilometers an hour, I'll scrub you down every week, and I'll keep your dome polished like the Universe has never seen. I give you this as my Word, as an eternal covenant between us. Is it a deal?" She thumbed the starter.

It was, apparently, not a deal.

Lucy picked up the instruction manual again and turned to the "Repairs" section. "Your Carlisle A-7 Sand Tractor will probably not need any repairs for several years, as it is built with the finest ... " She skipped down a paragraph. "At the first sign of trouble, take the tractor to an authorized repair shop only. *Caution:* any repairs made by a non-authorized shop will invalidate the warranty." Since the warranty had lapsed six months ago, this was no great problem. But it was also no great help.

"Well," she said, turning back to the stubborn machine, "do *you* know of any authorized repair shops around here?"

The tractor's silence confessed ignorance.

"Neither do I. So if you don't start this time, Carlisle, I'm going to take you apart myself. Me, old Butterfingers Stargos, who flunked Tinkertoys in kindergarten. So if you want to stay in the condition God intended for you, you'd better work now." The tractor ignored her threat and obstinately refused to start. "So be it" Lucy grunted.

Again owing to the Marsmen's dislike of the Outside, the motor of a Martian sand tractor is made to be accessible from the passenger dome. Removing the plate that covered the engine, Lucy sat down and stared at her foe face-to-face for the first time. The sight of the wires and filters, carburetor and camshaft, sparkplugs and battery was dismaying, but she resolved not to show her doubts. "I'll give you one last chance to reason this thing out," she said. Don't you want to get back safe and sound into your nice warm garage, instead of sitting out here at thirty below? I promise that, first thing tomorrow, I'll have you looked at by the best mechanic on Mars. It'll set me back three months' allowance, but I'll do it 'cause I'm basically a nice guy. How about it?"

The haughty motor did not deign to reply.

"Okay, Carlisle, I've gone easy on you so far because I wanted to save us both a lot of trouble. But I can see now that I've been wasting my time — all you understand is sheer brute force. You were built by human beings, right?"

The machine was noncommittal.

"Okay, what one human being can build, another can fix. I am going to vivisect you, my dear Carlisle, until I find out what's wrong. What do you say to that?"

The shocked motor was speechless.

And still Lucy hesitated. She had not the faintest idea of how to take an engine apart, let alone put it together again. But the motor stared back at her defiantly, and she knew that she couldn't let herself be bluffed down.

There was one wire toward the back that looked as though it might have come loose. She reached in to tighten it —

*ZZZSST.*

She pulled her hand back sharply and bumped her elbow on a seat. "Damn!" she screamed, then looked around involuntarily to make sure that no one had heard her unladylike expletive.

"So that's how you're going to play it!" she shrieked at the machine, which seemed to be smirking. "All right, from now on it's no more Miss Nice Guy. If you want war, that's what you'll get. Starraker Stargos rides again!"

She tore into the hapless motor with a vengeance. Wires, sparkplugs, battery caps, filter covers, and anything else that was the slightest bit loose yielded before her furious assault. Within minutes, she was surrounded by her captured booty, and she smiled triumphantly at the once-proud engine, now denuded and humble. "That'll teach you," she declared with finality.

Her moment of glory was short-lived, however, as she came to the realization that she was no better off than she'd been before. Worse, in fact, since she wasn't at all sure how to put things back together again. She glowered at the motor and said through gritted teeth, "You tricked me!"

She stole a glance at the clock on the dashboard. Eleven-thirty. Only half an hour now separated her from the Moment of Paternal Doom. And here she sat in a useless sand tractor in the middle of a cold Martian night, probably millions of kilometers from anywhere, with no possible chance of rescue.

"Doomed," she intoned, with all the melodramatics of her junior-grade drama class at her disposal.

"Doomed to die alone and unloved in an alien desert. Sent here to perish by my witless lover, spurned by my arrogant father, failed even by my faithful Carlisle A-7 sand tractor. In a little while it shall all be over. Thirst will dry my mouth and crack my lips. Hunger will shrivel my stomach. I will lie here, parched and famished, until all life escapes me. And the flesh will rot on my bones, and the air in this dome will be filled with the malodorous stench of decomposing carrion. And when my body is finally discovered, a century from now, they will know who I am by my tarnished and faded ID bracelet. They will wail and bemoan my fate, that I died so young without tasting the succulent fruits of life, and they'll sing songs of mourning and compose ballads of sadness for this pathetic creature who dies here today." With remarkable control of her tear ducts, she let fall a single saline drop from her right eye.

Then, in this hour of her greatest trial, she remembered what her mother had told her many years ago when the toaster blew up. "Life is not easy for a woman, Lucy. There are always men, poor darlings, to be looked after, or they're sure to be in some kind of trouble. But even worse is that insidious creation of man — Machine. There is the real enemy, don't ever forget it. The war between Machine and Womankind is ages old, and will end only with the extermination of one or the other of the species. But in this struggle, we have one Weapon that has never failed us." And she had proceeded to demonstrate by fixing the toaster unassisted in a matter of minutes.

Lucy sighed. The time had indeed come for the Ultimate Weapon. Reaching up into her hair, she pulled out a bobby pin ...

Ten minutes later, the job was done. Lucy Stargos replaced the engine cover and faced the dashboard. Sweat was gathering on her palms, and she wiped them nervously on her blouse. The moment of truth had arrived. Long-dead generations of women peered over her shoulder hopefully as she gently caressed the ignition button like a reluctant lover. Until at last she could stand the suspense no longer and pushed it eagerly.

The tractor, defeated at last, hummed to life. Lucy squealed with pure joy at the thought that, once again, Woman had triumphed over Machine. Those long-dead watchers sighed with relief and returned to their other pursuits.

"Onward, Carlisle," Lucy said, cracking an imaginary whip. "Onward and upward." As the tractor surged ahead, Lucy looked at the dashboard clock. Fifteen minutes to go. If she drove at top speed, she might not be too late. With any luck ...

She topped the rim of the crater and saw the lights of Syrtis glaring mockingly at her barely a thousand meters away.

Lucy Stargos's next reaction was far from ladylike.

### **Xenophobe**

*This first appeared in Vertex, August 1975.*

*I think I'll dedicate this story to the Republican Party. They do so well at drumming up distrust of homosexuals, foreigners, and others who are different from their "norm" that one can only imagine what they'll do when we encounter true aliens.*

They won't find me here.

No, not them. They probably won't even come looking in a place like this. Offend their sensitivities, that's what it'd do. They'd probably curl up at the wingtips just thinking about it.

Christ, it's dark. And wet. I'm gonna catch one hell of a cold if I stay here, that's for sure. These pipes must be leaking. The water's soaked through my pants already. I can feel it around my knees. It's

probably dirty, too, crawling with scum and everything. Damn them!

But at least they won't find me.

It might not be so bad if it wasn't so goddamn dark. I can't hardly see my hand in front of my face. Can't even tell what time it is. God, I wish it was morning already. Then maybe I'd be able to leave this miserable hole.

Who'm I kidding? They'll never let me leave. They'll start looking as soon as it gets light, on my trail like I was some goddamn kind of animal or something. Me, an animal. At least I've got two good arms and stand on two good legs, like a man. I can walk around instead of having to fly on airy-fairy wings, and I can talk with my mouth instead of my mind, like some dumb mute.

"Angels" they call them. Hah. What idiot TV commentator named them that, I wonder. God sure as hell wouldn't let bugs like them into Heaven. Those people who say they're pretty, they must have rocks in their heads. Ugly leather wings that swish, too big to even get through a normal-sized door. No legs at all, unless you want to call those puny little things hanging down "legs," but that's really stretching it. Claws instead of hands ...

Damn! Now my leg's gone to sleep. I wish this place wasn't so goddamn small. A guy doesn't even have room to stretch out. You'd think, a big city like this, there'd be plenty of places to hide, lots of small, dark corners to crawl into. Hah! Just try and find one. The whole goddamn place is lit up. It's all their fault, them and their "plasma power." You can light a city now cheaper than you used to be able to light a house. I just wish I could figure out what their angle is. Maybe they want it all lit up so there won't be anyplace to hide when they take over.

Oh sure, they haven't taken anything over for themselves — yet. Just ask anybody. But they've got us like their slaves, just the same. All these so-called angels have to do is ask for something and we give it to them. Just like that. And they give us little "presents" in exchange. "Technological assistance to a less developed society," they say. Trinkets to the natives, that's more like it. Oh, they're setting us up for something, I can see that. Playing us for suckers. I don't know exactly what their game is, yet, but I know they're after something. When's the last time you ever saw anybody *give* something away?

They're sucking us dry, all right, like mosquitoes. They even look like mosquitoes. And what do we do? Instead of fighting like men, we sit up and beg like little dogs. All because a bunch of liberal eggheads say these "angels" are a more advanced culture.

Ow! Damn it, now there's a kink in my leg. Better massage it a bit. There, that's a little better. If only it wasn't so fuckin' cold ... a guy could freeze his balls off, sitting here.

Of course, they don't have balls. Oh no, they lay eggs, all nice and neat like. No mess, no bother. And they're so goddamn polite it's scary. They'll let you stand on their wingtip for an hour, rather than offend you by asking you to move. Bah. Why don't they act normal and push people around? If I had their power, you wouldn't catch me apologizing to nobody.

But that's their secret, I guess. Con everyone into thinking they're harmless, then pounce when we least expect it. Sure, they're sneaky bastards, all right. But they're not fooling me.

Christ, how much longer is this night going to last, anyway? Seems like two, maybe three hours since I crawled in here, and that was at three o'clock. And what'll I do when the day comes? They'll be out looking for me by then. Probably have a lot of sell-out human traitors with them, too.

He shouldn't have touched me like that. God, they feel just like bugs! Why couldn't they just leave me alone? But they're all over the place, now. You can't go anywhere without seeing them.

I wonder if they've started looking for me yet. Something like that can't go undiscovered long, and what with them being able to read minds ...

Maybe they won't even bother to look. No, that's ridiculous. Not after what I did. They'll look, all right. They'll turn the whole world upside-down if they have to. They can't let a mere Earthman get away with something like that. They'll look.

But they won't find me. Not here. I hope.

What's that sound? Goddamn, will you look at the size of that? I didn't know rats grew that big. Get the hell away from me, you furry bastard! Damn it. I hate this hole. It's all their fault I'm here. Why in hell can't they just pack up in their ships and go back to Arcturus? We were doing all right for ourselves

before they came. Made it to the Moon ourselves. I don't see any reason why we need their help now. Give us a couple of years, and we could have invented their star drive on **our** own. We're better than they are. They just got a few years' head start, is all.

Now they're pushing this peace crap at us, like a bunch of hippies. We've got to throw away all our bombs — for our own good. What in hell do they want us to do, have tea parties with the terrorist bastards? Hey, maybe they're in with the Arabs. Sure, I wouldn't put it past them. Give us all these things free, soften us up, weaken our defenses, then let the ragheads move in and take over. It's a sweet set-up, all right. And we're falling for it, hook, line, and sinker. Damn! Why doesn't somebody spot their tricks? If only I could get out of here, maybe I could tell people ...

*Do not be frightened.*

What was that?

*We have no desire to harm you.*

Christ, it's one of them. Get out of my head, you sneaky bastard!

*Please, have no fear.*

Where are you? Goddamn it, at least come out where I can see your fuckin' hide.

*I am in the building above you. Please come out.*

Oh sure. And walk right into your nets, huh? No soap, Charlie. I don't surrender like them other cowards. You're going to have to come in and get me.

*Very well.*

God, here he comes! That stench of theirs is awful. How did you find me, anyway?

*Your thought-emanations are very powerful. You broadcast strongly over quite a large area.*

Okay, okay. What are you going to do with me, now that you've caught me?

*Nothing. No retribution is planned.*

What do you mean? I killed one of your friends, didn't I?

*Yes, but you are not to blame.*

Not to blame? What do you mean? I hit him, didn't I? All he did was walk up to me and tap me on the shoulder. But I can't take it, you know what I mean? And how was I to know he was so fragile? Can't you creepy bugs get it through your skulls that I don't want you around me? Can't you just leave me alone?

*But that is why you are not to blame. You have an almost instinctive aversion to our race, which any member of our telepathic species should have detected immediately. My compatriot's touching you was an impropriety and a gross error, for which he paid with his life.*

Oh yeah? Well, if you don't want to punish me, why did you come chasing me down here?

*Due to my compatriot's error, you have been made to suffer great anguish, and were forced by your fear of retribution to hide away in a very unsuitable environment. On behalf of my race, I would like to apologize.*

DAMN YOU! You bugs are driving me nuts! I hate the sight of you! Who in hell gave you the right to apologize to me?

*Please stop this outburst, I beg you.*

Who in hell ever told you you were so superior to us? You look down your noses at us and try to be nice to the animals. We're just your little pets, aren't we, doing nice little tricks to keep you amused.

*No, we genuinely want contact with all intelligences ...*

Throw the monkey a peanut and watch him perform. That's what you think of us. isn't it? I hate all you goddamn fairy bastards! Why don't you leave us alone?

*Please, your emanations are too powerful... I hate you, do you understand? I HATE YOU!*

HATE!

HATE!

A T

H <sub>MTE</sub> E  
A <^T  
T f> t n

My God, it worked! The bastard just withered up and died. Sweet Jesus! Hate! That's the answer. That's the one thing those sensitive little goody-goodies can't take. Hate 'em hard enough, and they curl up and keel over.

Okay, if that's the way to fight 'em, then I'm gonna do it. Watch out, you bug-eyed bastards. I'm coming after you, armed and ready.

### Grim Fairy Tale

*This first appeared in Adam, June 1972.*

*Adam was considered a magazine for men - but in truth, any adult who liked looking at pictures of naked women was allowed to buy it. Of course, in this case, I'm sure people bought it just for the story ...*

"What are ya, some kind of fairy or something?" the impatient dryad wanted to know.

The setting was ideal — a small forest glade shaded coolly against the summer heat, with birds warbling cheerfully in the branches and a gentle zephyr wafting between the trees. Beside him, the dryad was all any man could ask for and more, her deliriously curved and cushiony body begging to be united in love with his. And Abernathy couldn't get up for it.

He stared down at his betraying member, which looked very small and unprepossessing — not at all up to the grand conquests it had made in the past. He felt like crying. "I don't understand it," he said. "This has never happened before."

He heard a fiendish cackle behind him. Turning, he saw an ugly, wrinkled old broad leaning on her cane and smiling with evil delight. She was dressed in old black robes that needed pressing and a faded black hat which had once come to a point, but which now drooped like an old sweatsock. Her grinning mouth had but two teeth, one upper and one lower, and her tongue was as black as licorice. "What's the matter, Lover Boy?" she snickered. "I've seen dead daffodils more erect than that."

"Fuck off, ya old bitch," Abernathy snarled. He was depressed enough without having to accept gratuitous insults from total strangers.

"'Witch,' dumba, 'witch,'" the hag corrected. "It was I who placed the spell upon you that has robbed you of your manhood."

"Oh shit! Why'd you go and do a dumbass thing like that?"

"Because I wasn't invited to your christening, that's why."

Blink, blink. "I didn't have a christening. I'm Jewish."

"Oh." The witch reconsidered. "Then it's because my mirror told me that you were fairer than I was."

"Me and everybody else," Abernathy said.

"Er, you landed your house on top of my wicked sister?" hazarded the witch.

"No way, Mama."

"Oh hell, what does it matter what my goddamn reason was? I did it, that's all, and now you won't ever be able to get the hots again. Never ever ever."

"But you can't do that," Abernathy protested. "You've got to give me some way I can get back my masculinity."

"Where does it say that?"

"It's right in the Manual."

"Show me," dared the witch.

"All right." Abernathy fished around in the pocket of his pants and pulled out his copy of the Manual.

After flipping rapidly through the section on *Curses, Exceptions to*, he pointed triumphantly. "There. Section IV, Article 3, Paragraph 2.a .1. 'No witch, wizard, or any other person suitably ordained with the power to cast spells, curses, etc., shall be permitted to cast the aforementioned spells to the detriment of any person not endowed with magical properties, unless said spells shall contain clauses enabling the recipient to break the spells by means of his physical or mental abilities only.'"

"What's that mean?"

"It means you gotta leave me a loophole."

"Rats!" The witch grumbled as Abernathy put the Manual away again. She thought for a few minutes, leaning on her cane and hobbling back and forth across the clearing, while Abernathy tried to ignore her and concentrate on his dryad.

Eventually, the witch cackled again. "Aha, I have it. You'll have your loophole all right. You can recover your manhood, but first you'll have to kiss a special thing."

"What is it?"

"I don't have to tell you that. Tee hee hee hee hee." And with that, the witch disappeared in a cloud of gray smoke.

*[Auctorial note: Modern literature disdains to portray characters who are totally evil, and prefers instead to examine the reasons behind their seemingly iniquitous behavior. Thus I should explain that this particular witch had not always been the thoroughly despicable creature we have just seen. But she had been constipated for the previous 104 years, and this had tended to sour her disposition over the course of time.]*

Abernathy was stunned by this development, but he vowed not to let it defeat him. All right, he had to kiss something. But what? There were billions of types of things around. After a few moments of silent contemplation, he decided that he needed help. And there was only one person who could help him in this present circumstance — his fairy godmother. So he pulled on his pants, bid a tearful farewell to the playful dryad (who, to cover her disappointment with him, was cleverly masturbating with a tree branch) and set off in search of a telephone.

It didn't take him long to find one, for pay phones were stationed every few hundred trees throughout the forest. He went up to the tree with the bell insignia on it, put in his coins and dialed the emergency number he had been given.

"Fairy Godmothers' Guild," said a tired voice at the other end. "Can I help you?"

"Yes, I'd like to speak to my fairy godmother."

"Sure you do. Which one's yours?"

Abernathy was puzzled. "I don't know. She never gave me her name. I just called her my fairy godmother."

The voice at the other end sighed. "Another one of those, huh? Look, buddy, the Guild has four hundred and seventeen members. Am I supposed to ask every single one of them if they've ever heard of you?"

Abernathy was silent, and after a moment the voice went on resignedly, "All right, are you registered with us?"

"I suppose so. My name's Abernathy."

"All right, Abernathy, we'll look it up in your records and see which one's yours. Hang on." He was put on hold and listened for five minutes to a slight whining in the phone line. Then the voice was back. "All right, we've located your file. Your fairy godmother's name is Bellacosa. Jot that down somewhere for future reference."

"May I speak to her, please?"

"Sorry, this is her night out."

"But this is an emergency!" Abernathy exclaimed. "I've got to talk to her."

"I told you, she's not here. We can let you speak to the Public Godmother if you'd like ..."

"No, I want *my* fairy godmother. Isn't there some way I can reach her?"

"All right, I'll check." And he heard the voice say to someone off the line, "Hey, Natalya, ya know where Balls went tonight?" There was a momentary pause as the third person answered, then the voice said, "I'm told that you might find her at the Hump-A-Rump Inne."

"Thanks very much," Abernathy said as he hung up. As an afterthought, he kissed the telephone. A quick test showed that he was as impotent as before.

He knew approximately where the Hump-A-Rump was, having been there once before, but he wasn't precisely sure how to get there from his present location. As a result, he wandered along a very meandering route. Along the way, he stopped to kiss trees, boulders, bushes and any other likely-looking

objects he could find, in the hope each kiss would relieve him of the curse. But none of the objects proved to be the right one. He proceeded on in this way for an hour, and all he got for his efforts was a bad case of chapped lips.

In the distance, he spied a castle. "Maybe they'll have some Chapstick I can borrow," he mused and so, turning his feet in that direction, he started climbing the gentle hill that would take him to the palace. He soon regretted the decision. The ground all around the castle was covered with thistles and thorn bushes that grabbed at his hand-tailored clothing and ripped it to shreds. The sharp brambles even dug into his skin, causing a million tiny cuts all over his body. He considered turning back, but upon reflection he saw that it would be just as much trouble to go back through the thorns as it would be to continue forward.

With a shrug, Abernathy pressed on. He arrived at the castle with his clothes reduced to tatters and his skin scratched and bleeding from a myriad of little cuts. The castle looked deserted and the whole hilltop was deathly quiet. But to go back meant traveling through all those thorns, and he was not up to facing them again just yet. First he needed a chance to recuperate. The drawbridge was down and the portcullis was up. He crossed over the stagnant moat and started to knock on the thick wooden gate, but at his touch it swung noisily open, creaking in protest on unoiled hinges.

Abernathy peeked inside and saw mostly dust and cobwebs in the dim light. On closer inspection, he could see that there were inanimate figures of some sort beneath the dust. "Hello?" he called.

His voice echoed hollowly down the long, deserted corridor, but he got no answer. He edged his way inside and went over to one of the figures. It was definitely a man, but he seemed to be just standing there in the hall, dead. No, wait; not dead, there was still some shallow breathing that disturbed the cobwebs covering him. He was asleep. He had apparently been zonked out like that for quite some time. "Must've been a hell of a party," Abernathy commented to himself.

He thought again about the curse that was on him. Perhaps kissing this soldier would break it. He moved closer with great distaste to the man's full lips and coarse, stubbly face. Closing his eyes, Abernathy barely touched his lips to the soldier. Nothing happened. He hadn't really expected that it would, but he'd had to try. Continuing his walk through this eerie castle. He encountered scores of other somnolent figures, all equally ugly. He kissed them all, yeomen and duchesses alike, all without result.

At the end of the hall was a spiral staircase leading up to a tower. A glowing arrow on the wall pointed upwards, flickering on and off like a neon sign. Having nothing better to do and more in need of a Chapstick now than ever, Abernathy climbed the stairs. At the top was a little bedroom with a spinning wheel and a bed. On the latter lay a beautiful young girl in royal robes, as fast asleep as the others. Abernathy went over to her. On her dress she was wearing a button that read **KISS ME QUICK**. *At least she's better looking than the people downstairs*, Abernathy thought, and so he followed the button's suggestion.

The girl's eyelids fluttered. She stretched, yawned, then opened her eyes. She gasped when she saw the ragged form of Abernathy sitting beside her. Then she looked back at her own body, recumbent on the bed. Her eyes widened.

"RAPE!" she screamed. "RAPE! RAPE!"

"Hey. now wait a minute," Abernathy tried to protest.

"Help! Mad rapist! Child molester! I'm only sixteen today, you brute. Help!"

"Sh," he said, trying to quiet her. "I'm not going to rape anybody. I can't."

"Prove it," she said suspiciously.

He unzipped his fly to show her his flaccid organ.

"Exhibitionist!" she screamed. "Pervert!"

Abernathy could hear the clanking of a mob of armor-clad feet racing up the stairway to the princess's rescue. This was no time to argue. He rushed to the window, looked down, and saw that there was a section of the moat below him. Without further hesitation he jumped, just as the guards entered the room. "I don't know what you're showing off for, anyhow," the princess called after him. "I've known better hung ten-year-olds."

Abernathy hit the water with a painful bellyflop and a large splash, and swam off desperately to the shore.

Reaching it, he climbed out and ran off down the hill, from which the brambles had miraculously vanished. There seemed to be no pursuit, and eventually he slowed his pace to a walk. Vowing to take no more detours, he continued silently on his way to the inn. He arrived two hours later, still soggy, torn and wet. The Hump-A-Rump Inne looked like Lincoln's home cabin miraculously transformed into a discotheque — but at least it was someplace warm where he could take shelter from the outside world.

He pulled open the heavy door and entered. He was greeted by a blast of hot air and a shattering wave of sound from the rock combo. The place was dimly lit and reeked of incense. On stage, a show was in progress — Cinderella was performing her obscene act with the trained mice and the pumpkin.

Abernathy ignored it and groped his way uncertainly to the bar. He sat down on a stool next to the Queen of Hearts, an impressive woman who was engaged in an animated conversation with a prissy-looking white rabbit in a waistcoat. "And then/" said the Queen of Hearts, "she had the nerve to tell me that I and all my men were nothing but a pack of playing cards. Well, I'll tell you, if I ever catch that little cunt screwing around in my rosebushes again I'm going to show her what I really use the flamingoes for!"

"Hiya, Mac, what's shaking?" a voice asked suddenly. Abernathy looked around and at first didn't see anyone. Then he looked down and caught sight of the inn's proprietor behind the bar — an ugly, hunchbacked dwarf with a smile that was a friendly brand of hideous. "Guess my name and you get a free drink," the dwarf continued.

"Rumpelstiltskin," Abernathy said offhandedly.

The barkeep exploded. "That goddamn press agent of mine! The bastard did too good a job!"

"Look, I don't care about the free drink, Rump. All I want is some information. Is there a fairy godmother named Bellacosa around here?"

"Bellacosa"? Oh, you mean Balls! Yeah, she's here. Over there, at the table by the men's room."

Abernathy muttered his thanks and proceeded across the room to the indicated table.

His eyes had still not completely adjusted to the dark by the time he arrived, and all he could make out were two dim shapes seated at the table. "Bellacosa?" he whispered.

"Yeah, kid. What can I do for you?" answered a gravelly female voice.

"You're my fairy godmother," Abernathy said.

"That's what they all say, kid."

"No, really, you are."

A sudden light flared up at the table as Bellacosa struck a match to light her cigarette. She looked Abernathy over head to toe. "Yeah, your bod looks kinda familiar. Maybe you are one of my godbrats. But I won't hold that against you." And with that, she stood up. She towered over Abernathy, an enormous woman with an overpowering figure. As Abernathy's eyes became accustomed to the light, he saw that she was dressed completely in tight black leather that dripped silver chains all over it. She wore a biker's cap on top of her masculinely cut hair, and her face was devoid of makeup. She extended a black-leather-gloved hand and shook Abernathy's hand with an athletic grip. "Come on, kid, sit down and join us. This is Rapunzel," and she indicated the other person at the table. Rapunzel was a girl with the beautiful vacuity of a Barbie doll and long, blonde hair that fell in large piles on the floor. "Rap, this is ... er, what did you say your name was, kid?"

"Abernathy," said Abernathy.

"Right. Sit down, Abernathy. If there's one thing I can't stand it's a godson who gapes. I can go to a fish store for that. Sit down." Abernathy sat. Bellacosa returned to her seat and began fondling Rapunzel's hair. "Now, what's on your so-called mind, Abernathy?"

"I ... uh, I need your help."

She inspected the sorry state of his apparel critically. "I'll say you do. Who's your tailor, the Salvation Army?" She snapped her fingers and Abernathy's clothes were instantly restored to their former splendor.

"There you go, another Bellacosa original!"

"Uh, thanks, but that's not exactly what I had in mind. I need a little more than that."

The fairy godmother's eyes narrowed with annoyance. "Sorry, you only get one miracle tonight. I'm off-duty."



"But this is an emergency!"

"I'm not Dear Abby, you know."

"But you've *got* to help me. It's in the Manual."

"Oh, a troublemaker, huh? Okay, Abercrombie, according to the Guild regulations I should make you fill out application forms in triplicate." She twined rivulets of her companion's hair around her fingers as she spoke. "But I'm in a hurry tonight, so let's both can it with the formalities. Lay it on me, then fuck off."

Abernathy explained his problem about the witch's curse robbing him of his virility<sup>7</sup>, and he asked whether Bellacosa knew what it was he had to kiss. His fairy godmother nodded as she listened. "Yeah, that's Hazel," she said when he'd finished. "She always was a nut. The way to get out of that curse is to kiss a princess who's been enchanted into a frog, so that she'll change back to a princess again."

"A frog?" Abernathy exclaimed. "But I hate frogs!"

"Tough shit, kid." Her fingers doodled absently in Rapunzel's tresses. "Curses aren't supposed to be fun, you know."

"Frogs turn me off. They make me physically ill."

Bellacosa stood up, banging one leather-gloved fist into the other. "Look, the Guild would crucify me if they ever learned I helped you this much after hours. I'm not taking any more crap from you. Start kissing frogs, shithead."

Abernathy got up and left the inn. He was feeling despondent. He really did not like frogs, but he did not like this forced abstinence, either. He supposed that the frogs were the lesser of the two evils and so, with a sigh, he set off into the forest in search of a frog princess.

It was not long before he came upon a babbling brook meandering its way through the forest. This was promising, for babbling brooks implied ponds and ponds implied frogs, so he traced its course and, sure enough, he came to a little pond where some of the stream's water was diverted into a small hollow. And in the pond, floating serenely on a lily pad, was a frog that looked different from the other frogs around the pool, for this one had a curly blonde wig, false eyelashes, mascara, and a tiny golden crown on its head. Abernathy snuck over to it and caught it before it had a chance to get away. "Are you under an enchantment?" he asked it.

The frog rolled each eye independently over Abernathy's body. "Yes, honey," it answered.

"And a kiss from me will break the spell?"

"You bet your sweet ass, lover."

Abernathy's hand trembled. He closed his eyes and braced himself for the ordeal as he brought the still-wet amphibian up to his mouth. He stood there hesitating for over a minute, as the thought of actually kissing the repugnant creature paralyzed him. Was his virility really worth *this*?

"Come on, *bubee*," said the frog. "I haven't got all day."

He slowly brought it closer to his mouth, his entire body trembling with revulsion all the while. His stomach wanted to heave as he felt the slimy, damp skin of the frog against his lips. But then there was a flash of light that he could make out even through his closed eyelids, and suddenly the lips that were kissing his were distinctly human. Two naked arms circled him, holding him tightly to the other's chest. But something felt wrong. Abernathy opened his eyes again. The face in front of his was quite beautiful, although the water had smeared its mascara and one false eyelash was missing. The chest was very flat, and as his eyes continued down the body ...

He jumped back. "You're not a princess!"

"Damned right, sweetie," said the changeling in a husky voice. "I'm a queen!"

Abernathy tried to get away, but the other grabbed his shoulder. "What's your hurry?" the queen asked.

"We've got a lot to talk about. You've got a great pair of lips, you know that?"

"I have to go," Abernathy tried to excuse himself. "An appointment with my phrenologist. You understand."

"We could really go great together, baby, you dig? I've got twelve inches, wanta see?"

"No."

"And with those lips of yours ... "

Abernathy pushed his would-be seducer backwards into the pond and ran from the clearing, not caring

to hear the plans that the newly transformed queen had in mind. He ran until he could no longer hear the sound of the brook, and he assumed that he had left his pursuer behind. He slowed his pace to catch his breath as he continued on through the forest.

It was not long before he met a girl in a clearing in the woods. She was maybe eighteen, but her figure was several jumps ahead of her age. Although her red leather jumpsuit was fastened at the neck by a ring, the zipper was unzipped down to the navel, displaying a more than ample cleavage. Around her shoulders she wore a red satin cape and a red hood covered her deliriously auburn hair. In one hand, she held a wicker picnic basket. Her eyes wandered up and down Abernathy's expensively clothed frame from body shirt to suede boots, appraising him down to the last centavo.

"Hello there, handsome," she said huskily. "Care to walk to my Grandma's house?"

Abernathy felt a stirring within his soul, but it was unfortunately not matched by a stirring within his shorts. The girl in the red hood put an arm around his waist to lead him in the proper direction, but before they could leave the clearing another girl appeared. This one had a frizzy blonde natural, a see-through, no-bra blouse, a crushed velvet miniskirt with knee-high vinyl boots, and a totally spaced-out expression on her face. "Hey, Mister," she began.

"Beat it, Goldie," said the first girl. "He's mine."

The blonde shrugged her shoulders, puffed on a joint and walked off.

"The nerve of that bitch," muttered the girl in the red hood as they walked. "You wouldn't have liked her anyhow. She's got a whole *sh tick*, y'know? Like, she takes you to this strange house, sits you down in a chair that's either too hard or too soft, and feeds you some acid-laced porridge. Then you go upstairs and try to find which of the beds is 'just right.' Can you dig it?"

They walked on for a space in silence, while the girl started playfully unbuttoning the front of his hand-tailored body shirt. Abernathy was beginning to feel very frustrated. Trying to start up a conversation, he asked, "What've you got in the basket?"

"Goodies." She smiled kittenishly.

"Uh, could I have some? I'm getting a bit hungry."

"Well, I promised to take them all to Grandma's house. But you can have my goodies when we get there." She rubbed her hand through the thickly matted hair on his chest. "Yes, you can have *all* my goodies." And looking up, she exclaimed, "Why, here we are now."

Grandma's house looked as though it had just been expelled from a dark alley for improper appearance. There was not a window pane without a hole in it or a board across it somewhere. The ancient and crumbly bricks were stained thick with soot and dirt. A rickety fire escape hung precariously down one side. Out over the front door, a red light burned cheerily.

"Come on," said the girl.

"I think I'd better not," Abernathy said.

"You can afford it."

"It's not that... "

"Look, if you don't want to go straight, I'll understand. I suck good, too."

"I can't!" Abernathy practically screamed.

The girl's voice dropped fifty degrees. "Why not?"

"Because I've got to kiss a frog first."

"I shoulda known. You goddamn perverts are taking over the whole fuckin' world. What do you mean, wasting my time? Get the hell out of here!" She picked up a dead tree branch and started beating Abernathy over the head with it. He ran from her but she followed. When he got out of reach of the branch, she stopped and picked up some rocks to throw at him.

Abernathy kept running. He didn't stop when the girl's rocks ceased to hurtle past him. He ran headlong into a pond in a small glade hidden from outside view by some overhanging ferns. The water finally restored him to reason, and he stopped to lean against a frond and catch his breath. As he did, he heard a voice say, "Get your goddamned fern outta my face."

"He moved slightly to get a better view, and the piece of fern sprang back to its original position. There on a lily pad was another frog wearing a golden crown. "Are you a frog princess?" he asked wearily.

"No, *schmuck*, I'm Omar Sharif."

Abernathy grabbed the little creature and started squeezing it angrily. "Look, you slimy toad sucker, I've had enough trouble today without any smartass remarks out of you. Either you give me a straight answer now or I'll shove your head so far up your ass you'll be smelling through your bellybutton."

"Okay. I'm a frog princess," choked the frog. "What's it to you?"

"And a kiss from me will turn you back into a princess?"

"Yeah, but..."

"And you're a female?"

"If you can't tell the difference by this time, Homer, you're in big trouble."

Gritting his teeth and closing his eyes, Abernathy brought the loathsome creature up to his mouth. But once more he hesitated. *Why did it have to be frogs?* he thought. *Why couldn't it have been something else? Anything else but frogs!* To steel his nerves, he thought of past conquests, of all the sexual adventures he had enjoyed before the witch had cursed him. Those thoughts galvanized him to action, and he kissed the frog. And a startling transformation occurred.

In the place of the frog, there stood a beautiful princess. Beautiful, that is, except for a large hooked nose, buck teeth, a face full of freckles, stringy hair, oversized ears, crossed eyes, a flat chest, and bowed legs. She was wearing a faded sweatshirt, dungarees, and old sneakers.

And in place of Abernathy, there was a frog.

"Hey, what happened?" cried the frog.

"You got changed into a frog, dodo," said the imperfect princess. "I had what they call in the trade a 'contagious enchantment.' When I was cured of it, it passed on to the person who cured me — namely you."

"Why didn't you warn me?"

"You mean I had time? Come off it, hot lips, you were so horny that..."

"That's just the problem," Abernathy sighed. "I wasn't."

"Look, I was doing fine here before you came along. I looked pretty good for a frog, but as a princess I'm nothing. Prince Charmings are out of season now, too. How can I compete on the open market looking like this?"

"You could kiss me," he suggested hopefully, "and maybe you'll become a frog again."

"You can go croak, froggy. I wouldn't do you the favor. I'll just have to go find some other frog to kiss," And off she went in search of her destiny, hopping because it was difficult to kick such a long-standing habit.

#

You can go down to the pond and see him any day. There he is, the big green one with the sad eyes. He is the biggest and handsomest frog in the pond, and lady frogs come from miles around to cast adoring eyes on him.

The conditions of the witch's curse have been fulfilled; he kissed an enchanted frog and turned her back into a princess. But that was only the beginning of his problems. You see, nothing turns him off faster than the thought of making it with a wet, slimy frog.

Poor Abernathy still can't work it up.

### **Of Love, Free Will, and Gray Squirrels on a Summer Evening**

*This first appeared in Vertex, August 1974.*

*This is a story about... well, about love ... and about free will ... and about squirrels. At first glance, you might think the squirrels are the easiest to explain.*

*Perhaps I've grown less cynical as I've grown older. Or not.*

He first saw her at a party at her house. It was quite obviously an important affair; everyone in attendance was there in person, rather than sending projections of themselves. The fact that they were willing to travel physically to the asteroid showed the regard in which the Pistarchos family was held.

The assemblage was exotic. Heads of state mingled with entertainers, business magnates with culture

heroes. Humans of all races, from nearly every settled planet. And there were aliens, too. Over in one corner, a bulbous Aalan was in animated conversation with a hermaphroditic CloBonner concerning ambisexual ethics. A Jezkini sat alone in his chair, his powerful musk driving away all potential human companions. Three tiny Laoos bunched together to one side, slightly terrified of being trampled by the crowds around them. Out on the terrace, where the cool night air was more bearable to him, an aged Fesserank was holding forth on intercultural marriages to an interested group of listeners.

But all these personages could not impress him, for once his eyes had chanced upon her the rest of the party vanished from his sight.

She might have been just twenty years old, with the look of womanhood just settling into her features. Her hair was light brown, streaming rebelliously down her back. Her eyes were siphons, greedily sucking in all around her. Her nose and mouth were music in counterpoint, and her figure was a triumph of symmetry. She wore a gown of gold and black that clung lovingly to her, exposing only a tantalizing glimpse of waist on her left side.

To say that he was attracted to her would be to say that space was black. But did he dare approach such a goddess? He sprayed himself a drink to bolster his courage and walked with feigned unconcern in her direction. She watched him approach, an unreadable expression in her eyes. She looked at him as though she knew everything about him, more than he knew himself. Her lips traced the faint outlines of a smile.

Her expression gave him the courage to speak. "Interesting party, don't you think?"

"I suppose so, if you enjoy this sort of thing."

Such *ennui* in a girl so young surprised him. "Don't you?"

She shook her head. "I've been to too many of them."

He was handling the conversation badly, he knew, but her nearness jumbled his thoughts. "Who are you?" he blurted out.

"Nola Pistarchos."

The answer was so self-evident that he wondered why he'd had to ask. "Then this party is for you."

"Yes, it's my birthday. My father decided to celebrate it with a party, like they used to do centuries ago."

Her smile broadened, and he basked in its warmth. "Are you enjoying yourself?" she continued.

"Yes, now that I've met you." The words slipped out before he could stop them. He wondered what had prompted him to say that. She would probably think he was some naive young puppy in the throes of his first infatuation, and that was not the impression he wanted to give.

But her smile never wavered, and her eyes never left his face. Did he dare hope that her expression meant approval? "It's getting stuffy in here," she said. "Let's go outside and talk."

The eyes of the room were on him, wondering who the young man was chatting with the guest of honor.

"All right," he replied. She offered her arm. After a slight hesitation, he took it and escorted her out onto the terrace.

They stood for a short while listening to the Fesserank expound, then wandered away on their own. It was cooler outside than in the house, but not uncomfortably so. The weather on this private asteroid was never allowed to fluctuate to any extreme, except on special occasions as a diversion. The sky was dark and illuminated only by the stars. In daytime, an artificial sun would have been shining, but there had been no need for a moon. Lanterns provided enough light for guests who wished to stroll about the estate.

They walked slowly into the garden, not speaking. The garden was laid out with geometrical precision, and all the vegetation was natural. Real grass grew in the ground, but not a blade of it intruded upon the walkway. Miniature evergreens came to an exact point. Flower beds were sown in bright colors and fanciful patterns, and hedges appeared in the exact spots needed to relieve the flatness. "This is a beautiful place," he marveled aloud. "The upkeep must be fantastic."

Nola shrugged. "It's not too bad. We have machines that do all the gardening better and faster than a human could." She sighed. "We have machines to do almost *everything*." There seemed to be a trace of regret in her voice. He decided not to press the subject further, and searched around nervously for another topic.

"Do you spend much of your time on this world?" he asked.

"All of it/" she said. "At least physically. Of course, I project myself around quite a bit — it's exciting to visit new sights all the time. But I do little physical traveling. I've visited several planets personally, and I've never cared much for the experience. They're always too hot or too cold or too wet or too dry. They're dirt}7 and noisy and crowded and they smell terrible. No, I much prefer staying here on our own little rock, where I can be comfortable."

"Isn't it boring, though?"

"Oh no, not at all. We've got a complete world set up here, all ecologically balanced. We have a forest and a desert and a lake and a mountain, all natural and alive. Every once in a while, we even re-terraform the place so that it's a bit different. And as I said, I can always go projecting if things get tiresome here." There was a false note in that speech, as though she were protesting too much. He let it pass.

They walked on a bit more without talking. She leaned against him, ostensibly for warmth. His mouth was going dry, while his palms were sweating. After a few minutes he dared to put his arm gently around her shoulders. She made no protest, and a short time afterward put her own arm around his waist. Her touch sent tingles through him. They walked on, enjoying the softness and warmth of each other's body.

Under a tree, they stopped. He looked down at her, she up at him. Somehow he found the boldness to kiss her, and her lips welcomed his with pliant willingness.

After some time, she told him she would have to go back to the house. The party *was* supposed to be for her, and she shouldn't be away from it too long. He nodded reluctantly, and they walked back through the perfect garden.

He was still dazed by the quickness of his success, and wondered when the bubble would burst. "Will I see you any more?" he asked suddenly as they reached the terrace.

She smiled back at him. "If you'd like. Why not drop by sometime? What about day after tomorrow? I could show you around the asteroid."

The thought of seeing her again stirred him more than he would have thought. "Fine. I'll be here." They rejoined the party and split up. Without Nola beside him, though, the atmosphere palled. She barely gave him another glance, so busy was she with the other guests. He left shortly thereafter.

#

Two days later, at midmorning, he came calling as she had requested. He was very much afraid that she would have forgotten about her invitation in the meantime or that she might not even remember him and that he would stand in her hall embarrassed, trying to explain. But he came anyway.

The door opened automatically when he rang — it surprised him that he had been placed on the "admit" list, but it helped allay some of his fears. And there she was, waiting for him in the foyer, smiling. She was dressed more casually today than at the part}7, in a simple white blouse, navy blue shorts, and knee-high suede boots. She was more beautiful even than he remembered.

"Hi," she said. "I'm glad you came. Feel adventurous today?"

He smiled nervously and nodded.

"Good. I had the robochef prepare us a picnic lunch. It'll be waiting for us down by the lake." She took his hand. "Come on, there's lots to see and not nearly enough time."

Outside, the artificial sun shone warmly upon them. It gave the pleasant effect of late spring, incipient summer. They got into a small electric cart and drove half a kilometer along a gravel road. The nurtured lawn and landscaping gave way gradually to rows of trees. They parked at the end of the road and set out on foot into the forest. The overhanging branches shaded them from direct sunlight, but a warm breeze kept them from feeling lonely. Occasionally, he could catch a glimpse of small animals darting about in the underbrush.

He pointed to some as they ran past. "Are they real or mechanical?" he asked.

"A combination of both," she replied. "We don't want purely mechanical things here, they're so sterile. On the other hand, real creatures are too unpredictable. We have android animals. They're made of living tissues, so they're actually alive, but we can program them to behave correctly. It's much neater that way. Watch."

She took a small bag of nuts from her pants pocket, poured some of the contents into her hand and knelt down. Instantly, half a dozen large gray squirrels ran down the sides of nearby trees and approached her,

showing no signs of timidity. They came straight over to her and allowed her to pet them as they took the treat from her open hand. "Ordinary squirrels might be hesitant, but we've programmed these so that they have no fear of us. We can play with them all we want." She picked up a squirrel, stroking its soft fur, and kissed its nose. The squirrel chattered angrily, but made no attempt to run away until she put it down again. Then it scampered indignantly up a tree.

She laughed as she stood up. "I love them, really I do. They're so cute and fun to play with. I come here by myself sometimes and spend an afternoon with them." She took his hand again. "Come on, I'll show you the lake. I'm starting to get hungry."

They continued through the forest. The trees became thicker, the underbrush a bit more tangled, but nowhere was the path impassable. Every square centimeter of ground was mapped precisely. Whoever the architect had been, he was most thorough in his planning.

The ground sloped downward slightly and the trees thinned out once more. Without warning, the forest ended and before them was a gravelly beach, the shore of the lake she had promised him. The water stretched for a kilometer across to the far shore, and was perfectly clear. The gentle breeze blew little ripples on its surface.

"Lake Nola," she said. "Daddy named it after me. Sometimes I come down here to go fishing."

"Programmed fish, too?"

"Of course," she smiled at him. "Less frustration that way. You're guaranteed to catch at least one in an afternoon." She spied a wooden table set up a short distance down the shore. "There's our lunch. Come on, I'll race you to it."

They ate lunch together, watching the designs the breeze made on the surface of the water. After the meal, they sat down on the shore. He studied her when he thought she wasn't watching, drinking in her loveliness.

"We used to live on Earth when I was very young," she told him. "Yes, the mother planet herself. I couldn't have been more than five or six. I'm told it used to be natural like this, but not any more. Too many people. Funny, but with all the people they have, you almost never meet anyone from Earth. Everybody I know seems to come from someplace else. I guess the Earth people don't travel much, any more.

"Anyway, we left it. My father had this asteroid built, and we moved here. We had to get away from all the crowds and the noise and the dirt. Daddy says that when you're rich and powerful they never leave you alone, so we made our own alone, right here on this rock. A completely self-contained world, he says, and he's right. We have everything here we could possibly need ... "

Her voice trailed off and she gazed out across the lake in silence for a long minute. Then she looked at him guiltily and blushed. "I didn't mean to say those things, at least not that way. They sound almost as though I was dissatisfied, and I'm not. Not now. I've got everything I want."

She rose and tugged at him to get to his feet. "Come on, let's take the boat and row across the lake. I still want to show you the desert before night."

There was a small wooden boat, just the right size for the two of them. He took the oars and rowed, while she stood in the prow of the boat and pretended to be a figurehead. He watched the breeze play with her long brown hair, catching one strand at a time and playing with it before dropping it for another. All the way across, he never took his eyes off her.

He marveled at his fortune in finding her. She was beautiful, rich, and seemed intelligent. Where were the scores of suitors she should have? Why was she spending time with him? He didn't know, but he vowed to enjoy every second of it.

At the other side of the lake, they went over a small hillock and confronted the desert. An expanse of flat ground stretched before them, mostly bare hard rock or loose, shifting, red and yellow sand. Boulders were strewn with apparent haphazardness across the ground, but the effect had probably been planned as thoroughly as the rest of the planetoid. An occasional clump of grass or a cactus broke the spell of dryness. Ordinarily, the horizon would appear very close on this small world, but the effect was forestalled by the mountain that rose on the other side of the desert.

She led him to her favorite spot, in the shade beside a large boulder. She showed him a family of beaded

lizards that made its home in a crack in the rock and was not at all concerned about the invasion of the humans. Then she lay back and stared up at the blue of the sky. He lay back and did the same. After a while, he propped himself up on his elbows and looked down at her tanned and tawny body, so beautiful, so relaxed, so perfect.

"Nola," he said hesitantly.

"What?"

"I ... I don't want you to misinterpret what I'm about to say. I'm sure you've heard it before, and it may sound sudden considering how short a time we've known each other, but... I love you."

She looked at him and smiled, and he felt the warmth flow in him. There was acceptance, assurance and mystery in her expression, a *knowing* of some secret he would never understand. "I love you too," she said.

She pulled him down on top of her and they kissed. The soft mounds of her breasts pressed against his chest, inflaming his passion further. They kissed and caressed ever more ardently, and undressed each other by silent mutual consent. They made love in the sand in the shade of the boulder. He was a spear inside her, an animal riding the lust she returned to him. Orgasm after orgasm ripped through her body, fueling his body still more. And when he himself climaxed, it was an explosion in which they both participated.

He lay on the sand beside her for a while, thinking he was completely exhausted. But in half an hour, they were at it again, better than before. And twice more after that. Their passions were superbly matched, their movements timed to perfection. Their bodies fit together so well it seemed as if they'd been created that way.

The man-made sun was lowering in the sky. "I think we'd better be heading back now," she said. "It gets dark quickly here." They dressed and left the desert, walking slowly, arms around each other's waist.

#

He called again three days later. She was waiting for him again in the foyer, this time wearing a flashy pants-dress of yellow and red. "Let's go projecting," she said after kissing him hello.

He smiled at her exuberance. "Where to?"

"Oh, anywhere. How about Rangazzi? I haven't been there for ages."

"I've never been there," he admitted.

"Great. Then Rangazzi it is."

They went upstairs to the projection booth she had in her bedroom and strapped themselves in. Nola set the coordinates and pressed the button. Instantly, their minds raced across the vast empty light-years of space and emerged in semi-solid projection form on the planet Rangazzi, one of the most notable play spots in the Galaxy.

They went sightseeing first, as Nola whisked him all over the world. They saw ruins of an unknown galactic race, towers that rose thousands of meters above an otherwise flat plain and served no conceivable purpose. Nola told him knowledgeably that those towers had been constructed roughly when Earth was undergoing its first Ice Age; he was duly impressed. They went under the ocean and marveled at the great transoceanic highway built on the seabed by the Rangazzians five hundred years ago to span the distance between their two major continents. They made a quick tour through the Rangazzi Interstellar Zoo, reputed to be the finest in the known Universe and having hundreds of creatures that no other zoo could boast. She took him to the casinos and they watched every imaginable game of chance being played for all possible stakes, including the ultimate — life itself. Then they went to the fleshpots, and she laughed as he gaped at the acts that were performed in the guise of entertainment.

"I think you've worn out my sense of wonder for one day," he said.

"Then how about some shopping?"

"Lead on. I am your slave."

She took him to the fanciest shop on Rangazzi. The proprietor greeted Nola by name and welcomed her cordially; obviously she was a preferred customer here. She examined the most exotic and outlandish outfits in stock, laughing as her companion made faces when she asked for his opinion. She finally picked out one that he agreed was tolerable, a green and white lace dress that seemed cut in all the wrong places

and would cling to her only by an act of will. She couldn't try it on, being only a projection, but her measurements were on record here and the proprietor promised to have the dress made up and sent to her at once.

From the fashion shop, they went to the bazaar. She spread a hand expansively at the rows of stalls and booths. "Now something for you," she said. "Pick anything you like."

They wandered through, examining the strange wares. More than half of the merchandise was totally unfamiliar to him, and the scores of novelties only dazzled his brain. Nola went over to one oddly phallic-looking sculpture, carved from a stone of ever-changing hue. "How about this?" she asked.

He took a look at the price tag and whistled. "That's way beyond my means."

"My treat."

He shook his head. "I can't let you go to such an expense for me."

"Don't worry about it. I'm a Pistarchos, I can get anything I want." A sudden cloud changed her face. "Or almost anything," she said in a voice that was barely above a whisper.

The dark mood vanished in a second. She looked happily into his face and squeezed his hand.

"Anything," she reiterated. "But I guess you're right; what would you do with a statue, anyway?"

He finally let her buy him a three-dimensional portrait, then presented it to her as a gift. She was delighted, and her projection gave his projection a lingering kiss. Tired and happy, they returned their minds to their own bodies back on the asteroid.

Neither had eaten since breakfast, so she had dinner for the two of them served up in her room. After dinner they made love, and again it was a sumptuous consummation of their passions, perfect in form and motion. When they were finished, they dressed again and projected themselves into the audience for the bimonthly Derogal fertility ritual. When they finally came back, they sprawled out on the bed and began the love-making in earnest, amid sighs, moans, and mutual assurances of undying love. He spent the entire night with her, but little of it was devoted to sleep. They made love six — or was it seven? — times, each time more passionate and more perfect than the time before. He left the next morning after breakfast, exhausted, with a promise to call again in several days.

#

The next time he came, they climbed the mountain. The upward trek was strenuous but not dangerous; the planner of the asteroid had seen to that. There were solid and sufficient handholds all the way up, making the climb not so much one of skill as of endurance. Even with the artificial help, though, it took them the better part of the day. They brought packs with them, and when they reached the summit they celebrated with flower wine and *istarn* in the shell. They pitched a tent in the loosely packed snow and spent the night curled up tightly together inside a heated sleeping bag, making love whenever the whim suited them. The next morning, they climbed back down again.

They spent his next few visits projecting themselves to the garden spots of the Galaxy. They saw sights too alien to be comprehensible and too beautiful to be alien. They met creatures that he would have thought physically impossible, and talked with beings who'd been old when amoebas first appeared in Earth's oceans. They spun around stars and laughed at comets. They cavorted naked on a red beach and made love under suns of every conceivable hue.

She laughed, and he laughed with her. Her smile was the Universe to him, and more. And always, wherever they went, there was her beautiful face leading him on to new ecstasies.

#

The asteroid's spring had turned to summer. They had gone fishing on Lake Nola and he had, in jest, made a disparaging remark about the size of her latest catch. In mock anger she had pushed at him, and he'd pushed her back. She'd lost her balance and clung to the side of the boat, which promptly overturned, spilling them both into the water. They'd laughed, and she'd splashed him. He'd swum after her to the shore and caught her, dragging her down with him onto the warm gravel. They made love, wet and dripping, there on the beach, and when they were done they lay together, letting the warm breeze dry their bodies.

He looked down at her face, so beautiful, so alive. "I love you, Nola," he said.

She kissed the first two fingers of her right hand, touched them to his forehead and smiled. "I know you



do."

"And I want to marry you," he continued.

Something changed at that moment. He could feel her body beneath him stiffen. The smile vanished from her face. The eyes that had been so languid took on a new expression — something almost akin to fear.

"What's the matter?" he asked, worried. "Did I say something wrong?"

She turned her face away from him. "You're not suppo ... Yes, something very wrong."

He stroked the hair beside her ears, trying to be as gentle as he could. "Is it so wrong to want to spend the rest of my life with you?"

She had regained a bit of her composure. She turned back to face him, and there was only a crystalline hint of tears in the corners of her eyes. "There's nothing wrong with that, no, but we can't get married."

"Why **not**?"

"Well ... " She hesitated, groping for a reason. "We have such a beautiful relationship. I don't think we should ruin it by formalizing it, putting ourselves into a rigid pattern ..."

He put on his most soothing expression, trying to reassure her. "But marriage wouldn't ruin anything — it would only make our love grow and deepen ..."

"My ... my father wouldn't allow it."

"I know I'm not from the same high social class you are. But let me talk to your father, explain how we feel about each other ..."

"You don't understand," she whispered hoarsely.

"Even if we can't convince him, we don't need his permission. You're old enough."

She closed her eyes and shook her head frantically. "You don't understand. You just don't understand."

He fought the rising sense of frustration. "I'm trying to, honest. If I don't understand, why don't you explain it to me?"

She pushed him away from her and got unsteadily to her feet, tugging up her skirt as she did so. "I can't! I *can't*!" She couldn't stop the tears that were flowing now.

He stood up beside her and tried to put an arm around her. "But... "

"Leave me alone!" she shrieked. She pulled away from him and ran off into the forest in the direction of the house.

He stood alone on the shore for a long minute, wondering exactly what he'd done to offend her and debating whether he should go after her or not. He pulled up his pants and decided that he shouldn't leave her alone in such a distraught state; she might hurt herself running blindly through the forest like that. He started walking after her.

It took him but a minute to catch up with her. She was sitting by a tree, talking to someone on her wristphone. He could hear only her end of the conversation as he approached her.

"... thing went wrong. He wants to *marry* me ... How should I know, you're supposed to be the expert ... But it was supposed to stay simple, he wasn't..."

She broke off suddenly as she sensed his approach. She turned her head and saw him standing a few meters away. She clicked off her phone hastily.

"Have you taken to spying on me now?" she asked, hostility dripping from her voice.

"No. I just wanted to make sure you were all right."

She softened slightly. "Well, now that you see I am, you can leave."

"What's going on, Nola? What's the matter?"

She got to her feet, very defensive. "None of your goddamn business."

He grabbed her firmly by the shoulders. "You owe me an explanation!" It was the first time he'd ever raised his voice to her, and it surprised both of them.

"Why?" she asked defiantly.

"Because I love you, and you love me."

She looked him straight in the eye and said in a petulant voice, "I don't."

Her reply shocked him so much that he dropped his hands. They stared at one another for a second, then she tried to bolt again. He managed to grab her hand and pull her back. "I hate you." she spit at him.

"Tell me what's going on."

"I hate you, I hate you!"

"TELL ME!" His grip on her hand tightened.

She started crying again. "I can't. You won't like it."

"I'll decide that for myself. Tell me."

She sniffled back a few tears and stared down at her feet. "You're an android," she said.

He was so startled that he could think of nothing to say for a moment. Finally he said, "That's ridiculous."

"I told you you wouldn't like it."

He shook his head. "That's just too ridiculous for words."

"Is it?" She looked up at him again. "What's your name?"

"What kind of a silly question is that?"

"A perfectly normal one. What's your name?"

"It's ... " He hesitated, thinking.

"You don't have one/" she went on. "In all the five weeks of your life, you've never had a name."

"Of course I do. Everyone does." But he couldn't think of it. Could he possibly have forgotten something as central as that?

"Where do you go when you leave me? Where do you live? What do you do when we're not together?"

He wanted to talk, but his mouth seemed paralyzed. Her questions were spinning round and round in his mind like vultures — ever-circling, never lighting. She was confusing him, he couldn't think straight. The answers were there, they had to be, but he couldn't find them. He needed a chance to think, to shore up his collapsing ego.

"When you're not with me, you go to a shack out in back of the house," she continued cruelly. "You live in a vat of nutrient solution. You spend all your time asleep until I want you."

His mind was a blank. Who was he? Where was he from? What did he do? No answers, only echoes.

He searched his memory, but found only empty boxes where there should have been a life. He could remember nothing except the time he'd spent with her.

His knees were about to collapse. He let go of her hand and sat down beside a tree. "Why?" he asked weakly.

"Part of the tradition of birthdays is the giving of gifts. You were my birthday present from Daddy."

"Why?" he asked again. There were tears in his own eyes now.

She knelt beside him. The bitterness was gone from her face. "It's not my fault. Please believe that, it's not my fault. I didn't do it. But it gets so lonely here, and I wanted someone, needed someone. But I have to be careful. I'm the only heir Daddy has. You have to consider his problem. Any man I get will only be after my money, my position. I needed someone who could love me for myself alone, who wouldn't care about the money or the power."

He didn't look at her. He couldn't. His whole identity had shattered against the wall of reality. His mouth silently formed another "Why?"

"We had such a beautiful relationship," she prattled on, trying blindly to find something to say that would make things right again. "You weren't supposed to want to marry me. We could have continued on for years. It would have been so beautiful. I loved being with you, I loved making love with you."

He looked back at her. "I loved you," he said hoarsely.

"I know, you couldn't have done anything else. You were programmed that way."

He reached across and slapped her. It startled both of them. For a moment there was only silence. Then she was gone, fleeing from him in tears, and he was left alone sitting beneath the tree in the artificial forest. He sat for hours until dusk started gathering. His mind was a jumble of tattered thoughts. Who was *he*? Was he a man or a robot or a hopeless mixture of both? Did he have a destiny of his own, or was he merely a part of this asteroid's master plan? Could he think, or did his thoughts just mimic the patterns of others? Did he truly feel, or merely react? Did he have a soul, or merely a body?

He noticed that two of the gray squirrels were watching him in the twilight. Were they like him, knowing their situation and powerless to change it? "Hello, cousins," he said. "Or is it 'brothers'?"

They stared at him with dumb friendliness, blinking occasionally.

"It doesn't matter at this point, does it? We're caught in their web, that's what counts. We do as we're

told and we love them for it. Most creatures have at least a life they can call their own; we don't even have that much."

He picked up one of the squirrels and, on impulse, bashed its head against the tree, killing the tiny creature instantly. "*Stupid!*" he shouted at the corpse in his hand. "I can kill you, and still you won't stop loving!"

He reached for the second squirrel. It bit his thumb and scampered out of range, then stopped and stared at him enigmatically. He swore for a second, then examined his thumb and finally looked back at the squirrel. "Thanks, brother," he said. "I needed that."

They found him there the next morning. He had taken a sharp-edged rock and cut open his wrists. Nola's father offered to have a new one made for her, but she refused politely.

The squirrels were found to be defective and had to be destroyed. New ones were made, but it didn't matter. Nola never went there any more.

### Stubborn

*This first appeared in Generation, 1972.*

*A simple tale of naked greed and astronomical trivia.*

Frederick von Burling the Third was a gimme pig.

At the age of five, little Frederick asked his mommy, "Are you going to buy me a Super-Duper Rocket and Astronaut Set?"

"No, Freddy," said his mommy. "It costs \$28.95. Now, be a good little boy and don't cry."

"I'm gonna cry," said little Frederick, stamping his foot furiously. "I'm gonna hold my breath until I turn blue."

Little Frederick did even better than that. He turned purple.

Needless to say, kiddies, little Frederick got the Super-Duper Rocket and Astronaut Set.

At the age of ten, little Frederick asked his daddy, "Are you going to buy me a real-live-honest-to-goodness pony?"

"No, Freddy," said his daddy. "It costs \$289.50. Now, be a good little boy and don't cry."

"I'm gonna cry," said little Frederick, stamping his foot furiously. "I'm gonna stand on my head in the corner for a whole hour."

Little Frederick did even better than that. He stood on his head in the corner for three hours.

Needless to say, kiddies, little Frederick got the real-live-honest-to-goodness pony.

At the age of twenty, little Frederick asked his uncle, "Are you going to buy me a shiny chrome, two-tone convertible sports car?"

"No, Freddy," said his uncle. "It costs \$2,895. Now, be a good little boy and don't cry."

"I'm gonna cry," said little Frederick, stamping his foot furiously. "I'm gonna date Selma Schatzburger, the village idiot."

Little Frederick did even better than that. He affianced Selma Schatzburger, the village idiot.

Needless to say, kiddies, little Frederick got the shiny chrome, two-tone convertible sports car.

At the age of thirty, little Frederick asked his family, "Are you going to buy me a no-holds-barred, all-expense-paid trip around the world?"

"No, Freddy," said his family. "It costs \$28,950. Now, be a good little boy and don't cry."

"I'm gonna cry," said little Frederick, stamping his foot furiously. "I'm gonna stand on this spot and not budge from it all day."

Now, kiddies, the Earth is rotating on its axis at a speed of approximately one thousand miles an hour at the equator. (The speed decreases as you approach the poles, kiddies, but we needn't bother ourselves with that.)

The Earth is also revolving about the Sun at an average speed of eighteen miles a second. (The Earth and the Moon also revolve around a common center of gravity, kiddies, but this point is inside the Earth, so it doesn't matter too much.)

The Sun is also moving toward a star named Vega at a speed of about twelve miles a second.

The Sun is also spinning around the rim of the galaxy at a speed of one hundred and seventy-five miles a second.

The galaxy is also receding from all other galaxies to the end of the universe at a speed equal to sixty miles a second for every million light-years of separation between the two galaxies; that is, kiddies, if a galaxy is one million light-years from us, we are moving away from it at a speed of sixty miles a second; if it is two million light-years away, we are moving away from it at a rate of one hundred and twenty miles a second.

All this, kiddies, is very fast.

But little Frederick didn't budge.

Needless to say, kiddies, little Frederick got what he deserved.

### **But as a Soldier, For His Country**

*This first appeared in Universe 5, 1974.*

*This story became the kernel for my novel The Eternity Brigade. While I've had the ending of that book criticized as a downer, I believe it to be far more hopeful than my original vision.*

*Marker awoke to dim lighting, to panic all around him. Fast, busy footsteps clacked down bunker corridors, scurrying to no visible result and no possible accomplishment. It was wartime.*

*Naturally.*

*He was in the spacesuit he had worn last time, which meant that either this war was soon after that last one or else there had been no great improvements in spacesuits over the interval between. It fit him tightly, with an all-but-invisible bubble helmet close around his head. There was no need for oxygen tanks as there had been on the early models; somehow - the technology was beyond him - air was transmuted within the suit, allowing him to breathe.*

*There was a belt of diverse weapons around his waist. He knew instinctively how to use each of them.*

*A voice in front of him, the eternal sergeant, a role that persisted though its portrayers came and went. "Not much time for explanation, I'm afraid, men. We're in a bad hole. We're in a bunker, below some ruins. The enemy has fanned out upstairs, looking for us. We've got to hold this area for four more hours, until reinforcements get here. You're the best we've got, our only hope."*

*"Only hope" rang hollowly in Harker's ears. He wanted to laugh, but couldn't. There was no hope. Ever.*

*"At least with you now, we outnumber them about five to four. Remember, just four hours is all we need. Go on up there and keep them busy."*

*A mass of bodies moved toward the door to the elevator that would take them to the surface. A quiet, resigned shuffling. Death in the hundreds of haggard faces around him, probably in his own as well.*

*Marker moved with the group. He didn't even wonder who the "they" were that he was supposed to keep busy. It didn't matter. Perhaps it never had. He was alive again, and at war.*

*#*

*"We're asking you, Harker, for several reasons." The captain is going slowly, trying to make sure there are no misunderstandings. "For one thing, of course, you're a good soldier. For another, you're completely unattached — no wife, girlfriends, or close relatives. Nothing binding you to the here and now."*

*Harker stands silently, still not precisely sure how to answer.*

*After an awkward pause, the captain continues. "Of course, we can't order you to do something like this. But we would like you to volunteer. We can make it worth your while to do so."*

*"I'd still like more time to think it over, sir."*

*"Of course. Take your time. We've got all the time in the world, haven't we?"*

Later with Gary, as they walk across the deserted parade field together. "You bet I volunteered," Gary says. "It's not every day you get offered a two-month leave and a bonus, is it?"

"But what happens after that?"

Gary waves that aside. He is a live-for-the-moment type. "That's two months from now. Besides, how bad can it be, after what we've already been through? You read the booklet, didn't you? They had one hundred percent success thawing the monkeys out the last four times. It won't be any harder for us."

"But the world will be changed when we wake up."

"Who cares? The Army'll still be the same. The Army's always the same, ever since the beginning of time. Come on, join me. I'll bet if we ask them nice, they'll keep us together as a team. Don't let me go in there alone."

Harker volunteers the next day and gets his two-month leave, plus the bonus paid to the experimental subjects. He and Gary leave the post together to spend their last two months of freedom.

The first month they are together almost constantly. It is a riot of clashing colors and flashing girls, of endless movies and shows and drinks. It is largely cheerless, but it occupies their time and keeps their minds on *today*. The days sweep by like a brash brass carousel, and only by keeping careful track can it be noticed that the carousel goes around in a circle.

With a month to go, Harker suddenly leaves his friend and goes off on his own. He lets desolation sink in until it has invaded the roots of his soul. He often walks alone at night, and several times is stopped by police. Even when someone is with him, generally a streetgirl, he is alone.

He looks at things, ordinary things, with new strangeness. The cars going by on the street are suddenly vehicles of great marvels. The skyscrapers that reach above him, their defaced walls and smog-dirtied windows, all become symbols of a world that will not exist for him much longer. He stares for an hour at a penny on the sidewalk, until someone notices what he is staring at and picks the coin up for himself. He talks but little and even his thoughts are shallow. He disengages his brain and lives on a primal level. When he is hungry, he eats; when his bladder or bowels are full, he relieves them. He takes whores to his hotel room for couplings that are merely the release of excess semen. During the last week, he is totally impotent.

He returns to the post when his leave is up and, as promised, is assigned to a room with Gary. The latter still seems to be in good spirits, undaunted by the prospects of the immediate future. The presence of his friend should brighten Harker up, but for some reason it only makes him more depressed.

For a week, they run him and the other volunteers — three hundred in all — through a battery of medical tests that are the most thorough Harker has ever experienced. Then they lead him, naked, to a white room filled with coffins, some of which are occupied and some of which are still empty.

Then they freeze him against the time when they will need a good soldier again.

#

*It was dark up on the surface, not a night-dark but a dreary, rainy, cloud-dark. A constant drizzle came from the sky, only to steam upward again when it touched the smoldering ruins of what had recently been a city. Buildings were mostly demolished, but here and there a wall stood silhouetted against the dark sky, futilely defying the fearsomeness of war. The ground and wreckage were still boiling hot, but Marker's suit protected him from the temperature. The drizzle and steam combined to make the air misty, and to give objects a shadow quality that denied their reality.*

*Marker looked around on reflex, taking stock. All around him were his own people, who had also just emerged from the elevator. No sign yet of the mysterious "they" he was supposed to keep busy for four hours. "Spread out," somebody said, and ingrained instincts took over. Clustered together at the mouth of the elevator, they made too good a target. They scattered at random in groups of one, two or three.*

*Marker found himself with a woman - not a resurrectee, just another soldier. Neither of them spoke; they probably had little in common. One was rooted in time, the other drifted, anchorless and apart.*

*The clouds parted for a moment, revealing a green sun. I wonder what planet it is this time, Marker thought, and even before the idea was completely formed, apathy had erased the desire to know.*

*It didn't matter. All that mattered was the fighting and killing. That was why he was here. An unexpected movement off to the left. Marker whirled, gun at the ready. A wraithlike form was approaching out of the mists. Three meters tall, stick-man thin, it moved agonizingly, fighting what was, to it, impossibly heavy gravity. Memories flooded Marker's mind, memories of a planet with a red sun, gravity only a third of Earth's, of dust and sand and choking dryness. And tall thin forms like this one. The men at his side and an army advancing on him. The enemy. An enemy once more?*

*Marker fired. This gun fired pulses of blue that seemed to waft with dreamlike slowness to the alien being. They reached it with a crackling more felt than heard. Static electricity? The being crumpled lifeless to the ground.*

*The woman grabbed Marker's arm. "What'd you do that for?"*

*"It was a ... a ... " What had they been called? "A Bjorgn."*

*"Yes," said the soldier. "But they're on our side now."*

#

Resurrection is slow, the first time, and not a little painful.

Harker awakes to quiet and white. That is his first impression. Later, when he sorts it out, he knows there must have been heat, too. A nurse in a crisp white blouse and shorts is standing beside him, welcoming him back to the land of the living. It's been seven years, she tells him, since he was frozen. There is a war in Africa now, and they need good fighting men like him. She tells him to rest, that nothing is expected of him just yet. He's been through an ordeal, and rest will be the best medicine. Accordingly, Harker sleeps. The next day, there is a general briefing for all the resurrectees, piped in via TV to all their bedsides, since they are still incapacitated. The briefing explains some of the background of the war, how the United States became involved, and which side they are fighting on. Then there is a review of the war to date and a quick, nondetailed discussion of strategy. The colonel in charge closes by thanking these men for volunteering for this most unusual and elite project, and by expressing confidence that they will be successful. Harker listens politely, then turns the set off and goes to sleep when the briefing is over. Next day begins the calisthenics. Being in cold sleep for seven years has taken the tone out of the men's muscles, and they will have to get back into shape before going out onto the battlefield once again. In the exercise yard, Harker sees Gary and waves to him. They eat lunch together, congratulating one another on having survived the treatment. (Only five out of three hundred have not pulled through, and the project is considered a success.) Gary is as flamboyant as ever, and expresses optimism that this war will be over soon, and then they can return to civilian life.

They spend five days more in preparation, then go out into the field. War has not changed in seven years, Harker notices. The guns are a bit smaller and the artillery shoots a bit farther and with more accuracy, but the basic pattern is unchanged. The jungles of Africa are not greatly different from those of Asia, where he learned his craft. The fears he had about being a stranger in the future when he awoke are proving pointless, and gradually his depression wears off. He fights with all the skill he learned in the last war, and learns a few new tricks besides.

The war continues for ten months, then finally breaks. Negotiations come through, the fighting ends. Celebrations are held all over the world at this latest outbreak of peace, but the joyousness is not completely echoed in the ranks of the soldiers. The resurrectees are used to war, and the thought of learning new peacetime skills makes them nervous. They know there is nothing out there in the world for them. They would be welcomed as veterans, but they would be strangers to this time. War is the only world they know.

Ninety-five percent of the surviving resurrectees, including Harker and Gary, sign up for another term of hibernation, to be awakened when needed to fight.

#

*Harker took the other soldier down behind some rubble and talked with her. "On our side?"*

*The woman nodded. "Have been for the last, oh, hundred years or so. Where ... ?" She cut off abruptly. She'd been about to ask "Where have you been all that time?" then realized the answer.*

*"It doesn't matter too much, I suppose," she continued. "They can always replay his tape if they*

*need him."*

*"How much else don't I know?" Harker demanded.*

*"This is a civil war. Humans and aliens on both sides. You can't tell what side a person's on just by his race."*

*Like Asia and Africa, Harker thought.*

*"About the only way you can tell is by the armtag." She pointed at her own, and at Harker's.*

*"We're green. They're red."*

*"What's to keep a red soldier from putting on a green armtag?"*

*The woman shrugged. "Nothing, I suppose. Except he'd likely be shot by his own side."*

*"Unless they knew him by sight."*

*The soldier shook her head. "No. They copied some of our tapes, which means they've been able to duplicate some of our personnel. Don't trust anyone just because you've seen them before. Look for the armtag."*

*Bolts of energy went hurtling by their temporary shelter. "Here comes the action," Marker said.*

*"Let's move."*

*But before they could, the ground exploded in front of them.*

*#*

The next resurrection is easier, the doctors having learned from experience. But it still is a shock.

Harker awakes to cold this time. He notices it even before the white of the hospital room. Not that the building isn't heated, but there is a chill in the atmosphere that pervades everything.

The nurse that stands beside him is older than the one he had last time. Her white blouse is not quite so crisp, and she wears a skirt that goes clear to the floor. It's a wonder she doesn't trip over it. The chill is a part of her, too; she is not as friendly as that previous nurse. She tells him brusquely that he has been hibernating for fifteen years, and that the war is now in Antarctica.

He takes the news with quiet astonishment. Of all the places in the world where he'd thought war would never be, Antarctica headed the list. But here he is, and here he will fight. He learns that the United States is fighting China here over a section of disputed territory. So he is back to fighting Orientals, though on new terrain.

Gary is here also, and they renew their friendship. There is a week of calisthenics, as they get in shape once more. The atmosphere, Harker notices, is less relaxed than it was the first time, as though people are impatient to get the resurrectees out and fighting again.

Antarctica, needless to say, has different physical conditions than most of them are used to. They bundle up in heavy boots and thin, electrically warmed coats and gloves. They wear goggles to protect their eyes. Their weapons now fire laser beams instead of projectiles; the lack of recoil takes some getting used to. So does the climate. Cold instead of hot, snow instead of rain, bare plains and snow fields instead of jungles and farms. The terrain under dispute seems no different to Harker than any of the rest that is free for the taking, but his superiors tell him that *this* is what they must have and so this is what he fights for.

After three months of fighting, Harker is wounded. A laser beam grazes his arm, burning flesh down to the bone. He is taken to a hospital, where they heal the wound quite efficiently — but while they do so, the war comes to an end. The decision arises again whether to reenlist or leave the service. Many resurrectees opt out before becoming too estranged from the world. But the slang of the contemporary soldiers is already becoming unrecognizable, and the few pictures Harker has received of the rest of the "modern" world seem strange and out of phase. After talking it over with Gary, they both decide on one more try aboard the resurrection express.

There is a new slant to it this time, though. A *very* experimental program, top-secret, is being worked out whereby, instead of putting a man in hibernation, they can record his mind as an individual and reconstruct him later when needed. This will make the system much more maneuverable, since they won't have the problem of transporting frozen bodies to and from battlegrounds. This method is a bit riskier, since it hasn't been fully tested yet, but it offers more advantages in the long run.

Gary and Harker sign up and are duly recorded.

#

*Harker was thrown clear by the explosion, but the other soldier had not been so lucky. The left side of her torso had been blown away, and guts were spilling onto the steaming ground. Harker shook his head to clear it from the shock, and rolled quickly behind a barely standing section of wall.*

*It was not nearly so dark now. Energy weapons were being fired, lighting up the countryside with their multicolored glows. The drizzle continued steadily, and the mists still steamed up from the ground. Like ghosts, Marker thought. But he didn't have much time for thinking. He had a job to do.*

*There could be no strategy in this type of combat - it was strictly man-to-man, a series of individual battles where the only winners were those who remained alive. Move cautiously, ever alert, looking for someone with the other color armband. When you see him, shoot immediately, before he can shoot you. If he's too far out of range, hurl a grenade. Reduce the number of the enemy to increase your own odds. Stay alive. That was the law here on this nameless world beneath a green sun.*

*Marker emerged from one doorway after killing seven of the enemy, onto a main "street" - or what had been one — of this city. It was now clogged with heaps of rubble from the fallen buildings, stone, cement, steel, plastiglas jumbled every which way. Among the wreckage were strewn the bodies of thousands of the original inhabitants. They were not human, but it was impossible for Marker to reconstruct what they had looked like. Many of the bodies were in pieces, with an unusually short leg lying here, an oddly shaped arm over there, a limbless, headless torso further on. Some bodies were pinned beneath pieces of debris; others had been hideously mutilated by the latest advances in war technology.*

*Marker's stomach felt no unease at what his eyes were viewing. He had seen scenes like this before, many times, in countless places throughout the universe. It took him barely a second to absorb the silent tragedy before him, then he started moving on.*

*A bolt of energy hit his right calf. He whirled and fired instinctively at his attacker, even as he felt himself falling.*

#

This new type of resurrection is a sudden, frightening thing, a lightning bolt summoning his soul from the depths of limbo.

Harker awakes to sterility, to a place of abnormal quiet. The air smells funny, antiseptic, even more so than most of the hospitals he's been in. His body feels funny, too, as though he were floating in some strangely buoyant liquid; yet he can feel a firm couch underneath his back. His heart bangs away inside his chest, much too fast, much too hard.

He is in a room with other men, other resurrectees, all of whom feel equally strange and perplexed. Their number has almost tripled now from the original three hundred, and they have been crowded closely together to fit into one large hall. Harker lifts his head, and after much looking manages to spot Gary a dozen rows away. The presence of his friend allays some of the alienness he feels here.

"Welcome to the Moon, men!" blares a voice from a loudspeaker. There is a reverberation of gasps throughout the room at this revelation of their location. The Moon! Only astronauts and scientists got to go there. Are there wars on the Moon now? What year is this and who — and how — are they expected to fight?

The loudspeaker goes on to give further information. For one thing, they are no longer a part of the U.S. Army. The United States has been incorporated into the North American Union, which has inherited their tapes. The enemy is the South Americans, the Sammies, led largely by the Peruvian complex. The two powers are fighting for possession of the Mare Nectaris, which symbolizes the points of disagreement between them. Since the outlawing of war on Earth itself, aggressions have to be released here, on the Moon.

"The Moon!" Gary exclaims when they can finally talk together. "Can you believe it? I never thought I'd make it up here. Don't it knock you on your ass just thinking about it?"



Calisthenics are not necessary, since their bodies have been re-created in as good a shape as they were in when they were first recorded. But they do have to spend almost two weeks undergoing training to be able to deal with the lighter gravity of the Moon. There are also spacesuits they have to become accustomed to, and whole new instincts have to be drilled into the men to take care that nothing will rip their suits, the portable wombs they carry against Nature's hostility.

Projectile weapons are back, Harker notices, in use as antipersonnel armament. On the Moon, in spacesuits, a small sliver of shrapnel is just as deadly as a laser beam. Rifles that fire the lunar equivalent of buckshot are relied on heavily by the infantry in the field. Orbiting satellites cover their advances with wide-angle energy beams that Harker doesn't even begin to understand.

It is an entirely different style of fighting, he finds. Totally silent. There are radios in their spacesuits, but they are forbidden to use them because the enemy could triangulate their position. The soldiers make no noise, and on the airless surface of the Moon, the weapons make no noise. It is a battle in pantomime, with silent death ready to creep up at any time.

Gary is killed the third week out. It is during a battle at the open end of the crater Fracastorius, which proves to be the turning point of the war. Gary and Harker are part of a line advancing cautiously across the pockmarked plain, when suddenly Gary falls to the ground. Other men along the line fall too. Harker goes to the ground, feigning death so that the Sammie snipers will not waste any more ammunition on him. But Gary is not feigning it. Harker, otherwise motionless, can turn his head within the helmet and see the tiny tear in the right side of his friend's spacesuit. The wound would have been minuscule, but the explosive decompression has been fatal. Gary's eyes are bugged out, as though in horror at death, and blood is bubbling at his nostrils and mouth.

Harker cries for his friend. For the last time, he cries.

He lies there for three hours, motionless, until his air supply is almost exhausted. Then he is picked up by a Sammie sweep patrol and taken prisoner. He sits out the short remainder of the war in a Sammie camp where he is treated decently enough, suffering only a few indignities. When the war ends, he is exchanged back to the N.A.U., where, still numbed from Gary's death, he allows himself to be retaped and rerecorded for future use.

#

*Harker fell and hit his head against a block of stone rubble. The helmet withstood the blow - unlike the primitive ones he had zoom at first, which would have cracked open - but it started a ringing in his ears which momentarily drowned out the pain impulses coming from his leg. He lay there stunned, waiting for death, in the form of the enemy soldier, to claim him. But nothing happened. After a while his head cleared, which only meant that he could feel the searing agony in his leg more deeply. It was hardly an improvement. If the soldier had not delivered the killing blow, it could mean that Marker's reflex shot had killed or wounded him. He had to find out quickly; his life might depend on it. He twisted around painfully, his leg pulsing with agony. There, about thirty meters down the street, a spacesuited body lay flat on the ground. It wasn't moving, but was it dead? He had to know.*

*Marker crawled over the field of death, over the remains of shattered bodies. The front of his spacesuit became caked with mud and some not-quite-dried blood that had an inhuman, oily consistency. The drizzle was becoming harder, turning to rain, but still steaming up from the radioactively heated ground. Clouds of vapor fogged his way, hiding the object of his search. Still Marker crawled, keeping to the direction he knew to be the true one.*

*His leg was on fire, and every centimeter of the crawl was hell, a surrealist's nightmare of the world gone mad. Once he thought he heard a scream, and he looked around, but there was no one nearby. It must have been a hallucination. He'd had them before on the battlefield, under pain.*

*He reached his goal after an eternity of crawling. He could detect faint twitches; the enemy was still alive then, though barely. Marker turned him over on his back to deliver the death blow, then looked into the man's face.*

*It was Gary.*

#

All the resurrections now seem to run together in his memory. The next one, he thinks, is Venus, the place of hot, stinking swamps, of nearly killing atmospheric pressure and protective bubble-pockets of life. These are the first aliens he's ever killed, the tiny creatures no more than twenty-five centimeters high who can swarm all over a man and kill him with a million tiny stabs. At first it is easier to kill nonhumans, less wearing on the scruples. But eventually it doesn't matter. Killing is killing, no matter whom it is done to. It becomes a clinical, mechanical process, to be done as efficiently as possible, not to be thought over. Then back on the Moon again — or is it Mars? — fighting other humans. The spacesuits are improved this time, tougher, but the fighting is just as silent, just as deadly.

Then a war back on Earth again. (Apparently that outlawing of war on the mother planet has not worked out as well as expected.) Some of the fighting is even done under the oceans, in and around large domes that house cities with populations of millions. There are trained dolphins and porpoises fighting in this one. It doesn't matter. Harker kills them no matter what they look like.

This war is the last time Harker ever sets foot upon his native planet.

Then comes the big jump to an interstellar war. He is resurrected on a planet under a triple sun — Alpha Centauri, someone says — and the enemy is meter-long chitinous caterpillars with sharp pincers. They fight valiantly despite a much more primitive technology. By this time Harker is no longer sure whom he is working for. His side is the one that resurrects him and gives him an enemy to fight. They give him shelter, food, clothing, weapons and, occasionally, relaxation. They no longer bother to tell him *why* he is fighting. It no longer seems to matter to him.

Wake up and fight until there is no more killing to do; then retreat into purgatory until the next war, the next battle. The killing machine named Harker has trod the surfaces of a hundred planets, leaving nothing but destruction and death in his wake.

#

*Gary stared up into Marker's eyes. He was in pain, near death, but was there some recognition there? Harker could not speak to him, their communicators were on different frequencies, but there was something in Gary's eyes ... a plea. A plea for help. A plea for a quick and merciful death.*

*Harker obliged.*

*His mind was numb, his leg was burning. He did not think of the paradox of Gary still being alive though he had seen him die on the Moon years (centuries? millennia?) ago. He knew only that his leg hurt and that he was in an exposed position. He crawled on his side, with his left elbow pulling him forward, for ten meters to a piece of wall. He lifted himself over it and tumbled to the ground. If not completely safe, he was at least off the street, out of the open space.*

*He reached for the first-aid kit on his belt, to tend his leg. There was none there. That idea took a full minute to sink into this mind: THEY HADN'T GIVEN HIM A FIRST-AID KIT. He felt a moment of anger, but it subsided quickly. Why should they give him a kit? What was he to them?*

*A pattern called out of the past, an anachronism - useful for fighting and, if necessary, dying.*

*Nothing more. He was a ghost living far beyond his appointed hour, clinging to life in the midst of death. A carrion eater, feeding on death and destruction to survive, for he had no purpose except to kill. And when the killing was done, he was stored away until his time came round again.*

*He sat in the rubble with his back against the crumbling wall, and for the first time since Gary's death on the Moon, he cried.*

#

Asia.

Africa.

Antarctica.

Luna.

Venus.

Pacifica.

Alpha Centauri 4.

The planet with the forests.

The world with oceans of ammonia.

Planets whose names he's never even bothered to learn.

The ghosts of billions of war dead assault his conscience. And Harker cries with them, for them, about them, over them, to them.

#

*There was a movement. A man in a red armtag. A strangely familiar figure. He hadn't seen Harker yet. Without thinking, Harker's hand raised the gun to fire.*

*His motion attracted the other's attention. The soldier, with reflexes as fast as his own, whirled to face him. It was himself.*

*"They copied some of our tapes," he had been told. Exactly. Then they could make themselves a Harker, just as this side could. He wanted to laugh, but the pain in his leg prevented it. It would have been his first laugh in uncounted incarnations. This was the ultimate irony - fighting himself. The two Harkers' eyes joined and locked. For one joyless instant, each read the other's soul. Then each fired at the other.*

### **The World Where Wishes Worked**

*This first appeared in Protostars, 1971.*

*The advice "Be careful what you wish for ... " has been used so often of late that I wouldn't dream of repeating it here.*

There once was a world where wishes worked.

It was a pleasant enough place, I suppose, and the people were certainly happy. There was no hunger in this world, for a man had only to wish for food to have it appear before him. Clothing and shelter were equally easy to obtain. Envy was unknown there — if another person had something that seemed interesting, it was only a wish away from anyone else. There was neither age nor need. The people lived simple lives devoted to beauty and the gentle sciences. The days were a pleasant blur of quiet activity. And in this world, there was a fool.

Just the one.

It was enough.

The fool looked about him one day, and saw that everything was the same. Beautiful people doing beautiful things amid the beautiful scenery. He walked away from the others, down to a private little dell beside a lily pond, overhung by graceful willows and scented with spring fragrance. He wondered what things would be like if something new or different were to be. And so he concocted a foolish scheme.

"I wish," he said, "that I had something that nobody had ever had before."

Only a fool could have made a wish like this, for he left the object of his desire completely unspecified. As a result, he instantly came down with Disease, which had hitherto been unknown. His eyes went rheumy and his nose went runny. His head ached and his knees wobbled. Chills ran up and down his spine.

"I don't like this," he said. "Not at all. I wish to cancel my last wish." And he immediately felt well again.

"That was close," he sighed, as he sat down on a large rock beside the pond. "The trouble is that I don't think before I say things. If I thought things out first, I wouldn't get into so much hot water. Therefore: I wish I would think more before I do any more wishing." And so it was.

However, being a fool he failed to spot the fallacy of his logic: namely, that a fool will think foolish thoughts, and no amount of foolish thinking will help him make wise wishes.

Thus deluded, he began to think of what his next wish should be. He did not even consider wishing for wealth, since such a thing was impossible in a world where everyone had anything. Material desires were too commonplace. "What I should wish for in order to satisfy this new restlessness of mine," he thought, "is the rarest of all commodities. I wish for love."

A frog jumped out of the lily pond and landed *squish* right in his lap. It looked up at him adoringly with big froggy eyes filled with tenderness, and croaked a gentle love call.

"Yuk!" exclaimed the fool, and he instinctively scooped up the frog and threw it as far from him as he

could. The pathetic little creature merely croaked sorrowfully and started hopping back to the rock to be with its beloved. Quickly, the fool canceled his last wish and the frog, frightened, leaped back into the pond.

"That was a foolish wish," evaluated the fool. "Most of my wishes are foolish. Most of the things I say are foolish. What can I do to keep from saying foolish things?"

Had he not been a fool, he would simply have wished to say only wise things from then on. But, fool that he was, he said, "I know. I hereby wish not to say foolish things."

And so it was. However, since he was a fool, *anything* he could say would be foolish. Consequently, he now found that he could say nothing at all.

He became very frightened. He tried to speak, but nothing came out. He tried harder and harder, but all he accomplished was getting a sore throat. In a panic, he ran around the countryside looking for someone to help him, for, without the ability to speak, he could not undo that previous wish. But nobody was about, and the fool finally fell exhausted beside a footpath and started to sob silently.

Eventually a friend came along the path and found him. "Hello," said the friend.

The fool moved his mouth, but no sound escaped.

"I don't believe I heard you," the friend replied politely.

The fool tried again, still with no success.

"I am really not in the mood for charades," said the friend, becoming annoyed over the fool's behavior. "If you can't be more considerate, I'll just leave." And he turned to go.

The fool sank to his knees, grabbed his friend's clothing, tugged at it, and gesticulated wildly. "I wish you'd tell me what the matter was," said the friend.

"I made a wish that I not say anything foolish, and suddenly I found that I couldn't say anything," the fool told him.

"Well, then, that explains it. I am sorry to say it, my friend, but you are a fool, and anything you say is likely to be foolish. You should stay away from wishes like that. I suppose you want me to release you from that last wish."

The fool nodded vigorously.

"Very well. I wish you could speak again."

"Oh, thank you, thank you."

"Just be careful of what you say in the future, because wishes come true automatically, no matter how foolish they are." And the friend left.

The fool sat down to think some more. His friend had been right — anything he was likely to say would be foolish, and his wishes would automatically come true. If that were so (and it was), he would always be in trouble. He could remain safe by not saying anything — but he had just tried that and hadn't liked it at all. The more he thought, the worse the problem became. There seemed to be no acceptable way he could fit into the system.

Then suddenly the answer came to him. Why not change the system to fit himself? "I wish," he said, "that wishes did not automatically come true." Things are tough all over.

### **Apollyon ex Machina**

*This first appeared in Chrysalis 6, 1980.*

*Being the Angel of Death is a dirty job, but somebody has to do it.*

He could feel it all around him, the fear and hatred. He could sense it in the air as he glided through the corridors: the scurrying out of his way; the waves of relief behind him that he had passed by *them* and would not be stopping just yet. And always, hanging in the air like an acid mist, his name — spoken in awed whispers by those he passed: "The Disassembler."

After all this time, it still affected him. He knew the others would never — *could* never — accept him and his mission for what they were. He himself ...

He blanked from his mind the magnitude of it all. It was a job; it was *his* job. He and the job were unique

to one another, wedded for the length of his existence.

He reached the end of the corridor without glancing to either side. There was never any need; he knew what they felt, what they thought of him, without having to look. He opened the door before him and glided easily into the room beyond.

There had been a steady hum in the air: the collected sounds of the machines performing their routine tasks, the ordinary chitterings of daily effort. But all that stopped the instant he came through the portal. No room could be ordinary once he had entered it.

*I-V/fp lias he come for?* The unspoken thought was as clear as though it had been shouted. *Which one of us will go ?*

The Disassembler turned his head slowly, scanning the room in a smooth motion until his eyes lit on the Series 17 Biostatic Regulator mounted halfway up the wall. When the Regulator realized the Disassembler was staring at him, his red and blue monitor lights lit up abruptly to give an appearance of alert functioning.

The Disassembler crossed the room, well aware that all eyes followed him. He stopped when he reached the Regulator and, without a word, pressed the button at his own side. A slit appeared down the front of his chest, and the Disassembler reached inside himself to remove his delicate instruments.

"No!" the Regulator shouted suddenly. "Not me! There must have been some mistake. There's nothing wrong with me. I'm working perfectly."

The Disassembler said nothing. With practiced ease he took the demagnetizer from his chest cabinet and began removing the Regulator's casing.

"I'm too new to be disassembled." The Regulator's voice had risen in pitch. "I was only installed on 23 .08 .91. I had a work check last month and everything was fine. Just ask my Repairer. I stay in optimum energy configuration and hardly ever use my lights. I've got a lot of good years left in me. I've never spent a day in the repair dock. Check my readouts. I've always done my work without mistakes. Ask anyone here. Please — ask them!"

Around the room, the other machines were quiet. No one wanted to speak — not to him, not to the Disassembler. It was the universal fear that if they spoke to him, if they in any way acknowledged his presence, he might take *them* as well. Ignore disassembly, was the superstitious belief, and it somehow won't happen to you.

The Regulator was vibrating now, its frequency a jarring note within the otherwise silent room. "Please, someone, tell him! Tell him I'm all right! PLEASE!"

The Disassembler had the machine's casing off now, and was working with delicate tools inside the Regulator's chassis. Disassembly was more than a mere cessation of function; that could be accomplished with just a sledgehammer. There was, rather, the sensitive art of taking apart, of separating the good components from the bad, of making sure nothing useful was wasted.

*Why can't they learn?* he thought as he worked. *Why must disassembly be thought of only as an ending? Can't they see it's a beginning as well? If they weren't disassembled, there'd be no components to reassemble new machines, and the world could not go on.*

He did not speak aloud. He had learned long ago that nothing was gained by debate. It was simpler to be silent; he could finish more quickly, which was better for all concerned.

The Regulator continued its protests right up to the last. Its panicked voice was cut off in midsyllable as the Disassembler smoothly detached the final connections. The light in his forehead illuminated the now-defunct Regulator's innards, checking that all the vital components had been separated. It was a clean job, as always.

Gathering his tools together, he stored them efficiently within his chest cabinet. The parts wagon would be here very soon, and he wanted to be gone by then. He did not like to be around when the ghouls began their work. If the normal machines had an aversion to him, then he had an aversion to the Reclaimers. They were entirely too eager to do their job, too hurried to appreciate the delicacy with which he had done his own work. *Get. the parts back to Assembly* was their only goal; they were fast and usually sloppy. He had too much respect for his victims — even for the sniveling Biostatic Regulator — to feel at ease in the face of that. Besides, he had more calls to make.

With his task completed and his tools stored away once more, he glided out of the room. The door slid noiselessly shut behind him. None of the other machines had spoken since the moment of his entry. They would remain silent for a while, probably until after the Reclaimers left. Then, slowly, they would begin again — the same idle chatter they had been about when he'd entered. The disassembly of their comrade would be put aside, a bad dream never to be mentioned again. Disassembly would come to all eventually — but why talk of it in the meantime?

The Disassembler had seen the pattern too many times. He knew he could never change it.

His next stop was Repair Dock 4. The nature of his work kept him in the repair docks much of the time — almost as much as the Repairers themselves. He moved through the corridors at his usual pace. He never hurried, but he always arrived at his destination quickly. Perhaps that was because there was never anyone who could impede him. Or dared to.

Repair Dock 4 was one of the larger ones, and still it was filled. Long rows of workbenches extended from one end of the room to the other. Each bench had on it a machine in some state of repair — and there were others crowded in a corner, waiting for room on a bench. Even though the environment was kept scrupulously clean, the air felt heavy with the taint of lubricant and solder.

There was one Repairer on duty here, number DED-5/18. Of all the Repairers, the Disassembler liked her the best. The rest of her kind ignored him as thoroughly as did the other machines — or, if they did acknowledge him, it was as the enemy, the archvillain who undid all they labored to achieve. He had even known Repairers who tried to step between him and his work. Admittedly, some of them could perform miracles, keeping apparently useless equipment functioning for days, even years. But the Disassembler got them all eventually.

DED-5/18 was different from the others. She alone seemed to realize that the Disassembler was, in a sense, a partner rather than an antagonist. There would always be jurisdictional disputes, but she did not doubt that some machines were better off disassembled than repaired. She was almost the only one left that the Disassembler could talk to, and he hated to think of the day when her turn might come.

She was repairing an Orthocontroller as he came in, and her back was to the door. She did not have to look up to sense him, however; she had known his presence too many times before. Without stopping in her work, she said, "I think you'll want the one on bench 24. He's beyond all repair. I've been expecting you for hours, now."

"Yes," the Disassembler said. "Number 24 and number 15."

Now the Repairer looked up. She uttered an impolite crackle of static and said, "Not 15! I just spent four hours rerouting his circuits and charging his coils."

The Disassembler stood silently. There could be no arguing with his orders.

After a moment the Repairer accepted that. She put down her tools and came over to him. "All right," she said slowly. "What was it? What did I miss?"

"You didn't miss anything," the Disassembler told her gently. "It was just overload. His system was too worn out from other defects to accept what you were doing for him."

"Just overload.' Is that supposed to make me feel better? How I hate those words. Do you even know what defeat is? Have you ever lost one?"

"Sometimes a Repairer will take one away from me, get it working well enough that Central Console changes its mind and decides not to disassemble."

"Sure, a temporary setback — but you know you'll get it eventually. You don't know what it is to work for hours, using all your skills and knowledge, only to be told at the end that your work was worthless because of 'just overload.' You don't have to worry. Everything always comes to you."

"Everything with moving parts will wear out eventually," the Disassembler said. "There's no way to change that. Only Central Console has no moving parts; only Central Console will last until this world reaches the new galaxy and the people wake again. For everything else, the cycle of assembly, repair, disassembly and reassembly must go on. That's the way of the world."

The Repairer rolled slowly back to her workbench and picked up her tools once more. "Perhaps," she said. "But you can't stop me from trying to invent perpetual motion."

"I wouldn't think of stopping you," said the Disassembler. "I only caution you not to be disappointed

when you don't do it."

He glided to workbench 24 and began disassembling the poor machine that lay upon it. It was a fast job; as the Repairer had pointed out, there was little here to salvage. "You should be glad to see me," he said as he worked. "If I didn't come by to clear off your benches every once in a while, you'd have no room for them." He gestured at the pile of machines in the corner, still awaiting service.

"Small thanks for small favors," the Repairer muttered.

As the Disassembler finished his work on bench 24 and moved to bench 15, he noticed that the Repairer was installing a new FC-1428 component into the Orthocontroller on her bench. Despite himself, the Disassembler stopped and watched her insert the new part, until even she noticed something strange. She looked up at him. "Is something the matter?" she asked.

"No," he said, moving quickly into position and starting work on his latest victim. I just couldn't help noticing that you had an FC-1428."

"Yes, I'm lucky. They're not easy to come by."

The Disassembler made no comment. He was only too aware of that fact. He did not look at the component again — but he did memorize the Orthocontroller's serial number for future reference. He had finished his work here and was starting to pack up when he suddenly stiffened. There was a silent call coming in from Central Console, giving him a new set of instructions. At almost the same instant an alarm bell rang throughout the repair dock. DED-5/18 looked to him for advice.

"We'd better hurry," the Disassembler said. "There's been an accident at 4-PR-189. A metal fracture caused part of a wall to give way. There'll be plenty of work for both of us."

The Disassembler tucked his tools neatly away inside his chest cabinet, while the Repairer grabbed frantically for her kit. Both reached the doorway simultaneously, and sped down the hall side by side, racing to the scene of the disaster. Although they traveled at the same rate, the Disassembler moved more smoothly and, seemingly, with less effort. He was sure the Repairer hated him for that.

There were two other Repairers already on the scene when they arrived. The area was a mess. Some minute flaw in the crystalline structure of the wall had, after all these ages, finally yielded under the pressure, collapsing the wall and part of the ceiling on the scores of machines that had been trapped underneath. More machines from the next level up had fallen in when their "floor" collapsed, making this section a mass of twisted metal and broken parts.

Throughout the chaos, the Disassembler moved with calm efficiency, while the Repairers jumped hastily from machine to machine. No one interfered with the Disassembler, no one got in his way — but the Repairers nonetheless made it clear they wanted to take as much business away from him as possible.

"It's so unfair," DED-5/18 remarked as, at one point, she and the Disassembler were working alongside one another on two different machines. "You can move so much more quickly than we can. We have to work three times as fast just to keep pace with you."

"My job is easier," said the Disassembler, and moved on.

The Reclaimers arrived at the scene, adding to the confusion. They followed in the Disassembler's wake, hardly waiting for him to straighten his tools and move on before pouncing on his latest subject and filing it into the parts wagon. The Reclaimers were small, chattering vermin with few, if any, redeeming characteristics. The one thing that made them tolerable was the knowledge that someday the Disassembler would be coming after each of them, too.

It took more than two hours, but at last the job was finished. The hopeless cases had been disassembled and carted off in the parts wagon; the salvageable ones had been transferred to the nearest repair docks. Constructors had arrived to rebuild the damaged wall. The Repairers stood around for a few minutes, comparing notes and congratulating themselves on their successes. Even DED-5/18 was ignoring the Disassembler for the moment.

He left without saying good-bye. The Disassembler never said good-bye. He always knew he would see someone at least once more. And there was still work for him to do.

His next destination was a narrow, dusty back corridor. At the end, up in a corner, were a small Autorotor and a Stator working in tandem. Neither was equipped with visual perceptors — but, like everyone else, they could sense the Disassembler's presence without such basic input.

Surprisingly, they were not frightened. "Have you come for us, then?" asked the Autorotor quietly.

"Just for the Stator," the Disassembler replied.

"I've expected you for months," sighed the Stator. "My functioning has been irregular for some time. I've more than outlived my usefulness. Disassembly will be a relief after all these years."

"Please take me, too," the Autorotor added. "We'd like to go together."

"Just the Stator," the Disassembler repeated.

"You don't understand," said the Autorotor. Although her voice remained quiet, there was the quaver of a plea behind it. "He and I have always been together, ever since we were first installed, years ago. We've been a team. It ... it wouldn't be right for me not to be with him. There's no one else here. I'd be so lonely."

The Disassembler seldom spoke with his victims; they were usually busy shouting at him or vilifying him. The Autorotor was doing neither, however, and her tender plea drew him out of himself. "Another Stator will be installed here, a newer one."

"Bah. What do I need with some bright, shiny new Stator? I'm old myself. I probably wouldn't last more than another month or two at the most. You'll be coming for me soon enough anyway, won't you?"

"I couldn't say."

"Please don't leave me alone here, that's all I ask. That should be easy enough. What would it matter to you?"

"Nothing," said the Disassembler. "It wouldn't matter at all."

"Then why not do it?"

The Stator tried gently to calm his partner. "Now, now, stop making such a fuss. He's only doing his job. We've been together for years and years; you'll probably welcome a change. A new Stator might even be good for you — help energize those old parts."

The Autorotor ignored him, addressing herself solely to the Disassembler. "It would only take you a few seconds more to disassemble me at the same time. It'll save you a trip here later."

"I can't do it," the Disassembler said stubbornly.

"Sure you can. Just whip out your tools, open me up and disconnect me. You have the power, why won't you use it?"

"Nobody understands," the Disassembler said, half to himself. "They think I make all the decisions. They think *I* choose who will be disassembled and who will remain. But I don't. I don't sit in judgment on anyone. All decisions come from Central Console, which monitors the world. It doesn't need to justify its reasons to me, any more than I need to justify them to you. Central Console has its master plan to keep the world running smoothly — a plan that's beyond our comprehension and often contrary to our wishes. If Central says the Stator must be disassembled and the Autorotor left untouched, then that is what must be; I have no more ability to change it than you do."

The Autorotor was silent for a long moment. "I'm sorry," she whispered at last.

*So am I*, thought the Disassembler, but said nothing aloud. He returned to his customary silence as he began to disassemble the Stator — but he did let the Stator say a final farewell to his partner before disconnecting him completely.

The Stator was an older model and, as he worked, the Disassembler checked his parts carefully. Sure enough, there in the back was an FC-1428 — identical to the piece the Disassembler had seen in the repair dock earlier. There was no one watching now, so he reached in and gingerly lifted out the component for inspection.

The FC-1428 was old and brown around the edges. Even a casual glance told the Disassembler this was one of the pieces that had failed in the Stator, requiring his disassembly. This component would be as useless to the Disassembler as it had been to the poor old Stator. Reluctantly, he placed the piece back in the Stator's chassis for the Reclaimers to salvage.

There *was* something else, though — a DB-18 unit. It looked practically new; the Stator must have had repairs made recently. The Disassembler reached in eagerly and, with a couple of quick snips, severed the DB-18 from its connections. The piece was not as hard to find as an FC-1428, but he could put it to good use nonetheless. Carefully he tucked the component into his chest cabinet behind his regular tools,



straightened up, and left just before the Reclaimers arrived with the parts wagon. They would be puzzled by the absence of the DB-18, but that was not his concern.

He found himself unexpectedly with one of his infrequent periods of relaxation; Central Console had no disassemblies scheduled anywhere in the world for a while. He knew he had to take advantage of such moments while he could, or lose them forever; another period of inactivity might not occur for days, or even weeks. With haste, now, he glided quietly through the corridors of the world, not even bothering to notice the reactions of the machines around him.

It took half an hour to reach his private little niche, a disused storeroom that — he hoped — even Central Console had forgotten. Here there were no other machines, no other sounds but those he produced himself. Here he could think and work in the few moments of privacy that were genuinely his own.

He switched on his headlamp and glided slowly up to the other form in the room. Opening his chest cabinet, he removed the contraband DB-18 unit and connected it painstakingly to the appropriate spot within the structure.

Perhaps it was silly to think that Central Console did not know what he was doing here. Perhaps it was egotistical to think he could accomplish his goal in secret. Central Console monitored all reclaimed parts; it would surely keep track of those that were missing, and it would know what could be built using them. But Central Console had never made a single reference to this project. Perhaps that was merely because it didn't care — or even that it was giving its tacit approval.

The Disassembler neither knew nor cared what Central Console thought about it. It was enough that he could do this work, whether it was secret or not. *It is ironic*, he thought, *that the Disassembler should be both a dissembler and an assembler as well.*

His predecessor had been most generous, for which the Disassembler was grateful. A complete set of plans and programming instructions had been left here; the rest was up to him. All it took was time and scavenged parts.

When he'd begun the project, it looked hopeless. The handful of stolen components had formed a shapeless mass, not really resembling anything. But over the months, the years, the decades that followed, the creation began to assume its own familiar shape. *Soon*, thought the Disassembler. *It's almost ready. There aren't many more pieces to find.* Perhaps, he comforted himself, that Orthocontroller he'd seen in Repair Dock 4 would break down completely and he could steal its FC-1428. At any rate, it would not be long before *his* new Disassembler was ready to be activated. And then ...

The radio call came in, bringing an end to his short recess. As ever, there were machines to be disassembled. His services were required, and he must emerge from this sanctuary into a world of hatred and misunderstanding once more.

Just before he left, though, he glanced up at the sign that had been scrawled above the doorway. The Disassembler did not know who had written it, whether it was his predecessor or someone even older than that. Perhaps, at one time, it had been intended as a warning or threat — but now, in the irony of ironies, it provided him the only hope he had ever known: DISASSEMBLER, THOU TOO SHALT BE DISASSEMBLED.

### **Prelude to a Symphony of Unborn Shouts**

*This first appeared in Future Corruption, 1975.*

*Roger Elwood, of the somewhat notorious reputation, asked me to write a story about birth control. This is what came out.*

AP — The Department of Commerce today released more data from the 1990 census report. The figures show a dramatic resurgence of attendance among the "organized" religions. The National Council of Churches and Synagogues hailed this as a major breakthrough of the century, and a reversal of the

trend away from established faiths.

"People have had their fill of the emotion-oriented cults that sprang up in the seventies and eighties," said Rabbi Benjamin Green, co-chairman of the Council. "But the faith that those cults engendered remained. People are now returning to the basic religions that have stood man in good faith for thousands of years." The statistics released showed gains in attendance by all the established religions, among respondents expressing a preference. Even the percentage of respondents had increased from the census of 1980. The biggest gain of all was registered by the Catholic Church, which showed a whopping 42 percent increase over the last ten years.

When asked to comment on that statistic, Rabbi Green jokingly replied, "Well, what did you expect? They're the ones who don't use birth control."

#"In India, I hear, they're giving away free TV sets to men who volunteer to have vasectomies. That's redundant. Late-night TV is already the best contraceptive method ever invented." Bernie Porter, comedian

#

### **BRIEFLETS IN THE NEWS**

The Australian government announced final victory today in its decades-long battle against rabbits. The main weapon? Superbunnies! "A superbunny," explained Dr. Ronald Smith, "father" of the breed, "is a specially designed genetic strain. No ordinary male rabbit can compete with it sexually, because it exudes a musk that is absolutely irresistible to female rabbits. Along with this is the fact that superbunnies are superpotent and can monopolize the sexual attentions of the females." The kicker? "The superbunnies are sterile. You might say they're long on promises and short on delivery."

#

UPI — The Irish Republican Army took credit for the bombing of a pharmacy in downtown Dublin yesterday. An IRA spokesman announced it was the start of their campaign to keep contraceptives out of Ireland and restore the land to its old virtues ...

#

"I learned about birth control very early at home. My father kept telling me he wished they'd had it when *he* got married!"

Bernie Porter

#

*... And the news from Tehran today is increasingly pessimistic. Spokesmen for the Traditionalists say that their people will continue to riot in the streets of the city until the government repeals the monogamy law. Government officials are maintaining a hard line and a low profile. They repeat their assertion that the law is necessary to check Iran's suddenly burgeoning population, even though it violates the tenets of Islamic faith, and they insist they will maintain order at all costs. The regular army has been called out to take charge after the local police proved incapable of dealing with the violence. So far, more than seventy persons have died in the week-long unrest in the Irani capital...*

#

I think that I shall never see  
A baby lovely as a tree.

A baby feeding at the breast

Is stealing food from all the rest.

And in some future time it may  
Become a parent in its day.

While trees rejuvenate the air,

And shelter Nature's creatures there.

It's man who claims to have a brain,

Yet causes ecologic strain.

Babies are coming constantly;  
Will no man stop to save a tree?  
*(From a pamphlet by the American Conservation Society)*

#

"You know, if they really wanted birth control, they'd simply outlaw aspirin. Then the girls could have as many headaches as they wanted."

Bernie Porter

#

... And on the Hollywood scene, Raymond Inskell announced that she was going to sue her gynecologist for malpractice, claiming that her dnuudl implant did not work properly. The baby's father, director Cesdre ltd.no, was not available for comment.

#

AP — South Africa-Rhodesia may be in for some turmoil before the week is out. According to government spokesmen, rabble-rousers have been at work again on the white reservations, stirring the populace to the point of open rebellion.

"We recognize that there are problems in the biracial atmosphere of our countries/" said one official off-the-record. "That's why we've put the whites in those special reservations, so that we can guard them more efficiently from the sometimes rash acts of the black majority. We have only their own interests at heart, yet they persist in misinterpreting our efforts.

"The latest charge is 'genocide.' They claim that the law forcing contraception and forbidding white couples to have more than one child is an attempt to eliminate their race in our country."

Nothing could be further from the truth, the official went on. The state of the economy in the two aligned countries is blamed as the culprit. "Since the whites are totally dependent on the government for their food and shelter, we have to keep their numbers in hand so that we can afford to handle them all."

Otherwise, he hinted, famine and plague might break out in the reservations.

The government did admit that the white population would gradually be reduced as a side-effect of this policy, but stated that that was merely an unavoidable consequence of sound economic policy.

#

(Handbill)

### ARE YOU A MURDERER?

You are if you don't protest! Each year, the government condemns thousands — perhaps tens of thousands — of people to death ... for committing no greater crime than having been conceived by irresponsible parents who do not want them. We are talking about abortions, which are legal and encouraged in *every state of the Union!* If you can sit silently by and condone these murders, then you are as guilty as Jack the Ripper.

But there is something you can do. The Right-to-Live Movement is staging a one-day conceive-in all across the country. Go with your spouse to your nearest abortion clinic tomorrow, and show them once and for all that conception is a grand and glorious endeavor. The lives of uncounted innocent babies are riding with you. Do *not fail them!*

#

"I know all about the various methods of birth control. Let's see, there's the chemical method, called 'the Pill'; there's the injection method, called 'the Shot'; there's the mechanical, nicknamed 'IUD'; and there's the rhythm method, otherwise known as 'parenthood.'"

Bernie Porter

#

UPI — An extraordinary new method of abortion was presented in a paper today to the American Medical Association's annual conclave being held in Atlantic City. Dr. Imogene Stennis said it is now possible to have the mother's body simply reabsorb the fetus as if it had never existed.

The principle, Dr. Stennis explained, was developed from cats. It has long been known that occasionally a pregnant cat can "lose" her babies by secreting a hormone into her bloodstream that will cause the fetuses to regress in their development and eventually disappear altogether. After a six-year study, Dr. Stennis has isolated the hormone and has been able to apply it to human mothers with results that, she

says, are now satisfactory.

"Soon, any woman wishing to abort a fetus before the seventh week will simply get a prescription for a series of pills from her doctor. We can bypass even the slight amount of surgery needed heretofore, and thereby eliminate some complications and risks."

Dr. Stennis did caution, however, that acceptance will probably be slow in coming. For one thing, the hormone must still be tested to make sure there are no adverse interactions with other systems of the body. And for another, "There are still people who believe that the soul is introduced into the fetus at the moment of conception. To them, this process of reabsorption would be almost akin to cannibalism."

#

*... The Supreme Court today ruled that the Federal government does indeed have the right to demand that women on welfare use birth control procedures. In a 6-3 decision, the Court stated that, since the government is not constitutionally bound to provide welfare relief, such relief is a commodity to be sold and, as such, the government may charge any "price" it wishes. The Court added, however, that the price must apply uniformly to all people on welfare, men as well as women, or risk violating the Equal Rights Amendment to the Constitution.*

#

AP — Chicago's Pastorini rape case took an unusual twist today. After firing his lawyer and being given permission to act in his own defense, Anthony Pastorini admitted the crimes and defended them as a "holy duty."

"If the Pope is right, that every fetus is a potential human soul," he said, "then the same must be true of every ovum. Every time a woman menstruates, she is killing a potential person." He thereby claimed that the raping of eight women was done to prevent his becoming an accomplice in the murder of their children.

The court was recessed until today, when the judge will reconsider Pastorini's competency to conduct his own defense.

#

"My girlfriend uses the cheapest contraceptive of all — it's called 'no.'"

Bernie Porter

#

UPI — The Food Riots that have been ravishing southeast Asia and parts of Africa and South America are now entering their second consecutive year, with no end in sight...

### **Portrait of the Artist as a Young God**

*This first appeared in Ascents of Wonder, 1977.*

*No matter what a being's physical attributes, as long as there's a creative mind there will be Art. Just remember: Those who can, do. Those who can't, teach. And those who can't teach become critics.*

The electrons spun madly, and 227 was having trouble maneuvering them all. No one had ever handled anything as high as astatine before, and there were eighty-five of the little buggers to worry about. He forced himself to slow down and avoid the panic building inside him. *No need to worry*, he told himself. *It's a simple application of Sduvetfinger's Equation in configuration space:*

\*\*\*\*\*

*It's just that there are a lot more of them to deal with, that's all.*

It was the time variable that always bothered him. Space he had mastered easily, but of course the Heisenbergian implications would always be there to trip him up if he wasn't careful. The thought occurred to him that he might obtain better overall effect if he eased up a bit on the tightness of his spatial control. He tried it and achieved immediate success. Two of the troublesome electrons jumped exactly the way he wanted. The edges would be a trifle fuzzy, but he could always claim artistic license. Besides,

the critics would surely make allowances for the material he had limited himself to.

He spent a good deal of time polishing off the rough spots — evening up the timing and straightening out the orbits as well as those two mutual dependencies permitted. He jiggled the three remaining troublesome electrons, nudging them ever so carefully into the orbits he had chosen for them. This was tricky work because the forces of interaction with the other electrons were working against him, and those forces were even more complex because of the size of the atom.

Finally it was finished. He was surprised to find that the whole work had taken but four years. He was really working quickly. He backed off and examined his creation critically. As he had feared, the edges were fuzzy — but then, what of it? All masterpieces were flawed. Hadn't 315, his teacher, even remarked once that critics never even considered a work if it didn't have a mistake in it somewhere? They like to reinforce their own superiority complexes by being able to find some minute point that the artist missed, he'd said.

Well, they'd have a few flaws to pick at, but on the whole the work was a masterpiece. Even considering all the little things wrong with it, he felt immensely satisfied. He began to compose invitations to his showing and made a special note to invite 315.

#

The showing was nothing short of a failure. Half the people he invited did not materialize (and only half of *them* even bothered to send excuses). Of the people who did show up, only one was a major critic — 264. He'd given 227 bad reviews before, and in such a supercilious manner that the young artist had vowed never to invite him again. But he'd felt so good about the way the astatine had turned out that he'd doubted even 264 could find much to quibble over. Now he wasn't so sure.

Sure enough, Fourth was being his usual snobbish self, floating his widely extended body around the atom and scrutinizing the electron tracks with punctilious precision. "The edges are rough' he commented at last, "and the times are not all synchronous."

"That's the nature of the material," 227 hastened to point out. "I had to work within the limitations available. If you would be so kind as to repeal the Uncertainty Principle for me, I'd be delighted to perfect this model. As it is, it's as good as it can possibly be made."

264 threw him an uncommunicative syllable and continued his examination. Everyone else gathered around silently, awaiting his opinion.

"It is a major work," Fourth finally pontificated, "by a minor artist. It has numerous technical excellences that give it an element of class, but it can never rise beyond the limitations of its creator."

227 was beside himself with rage. "But look at that symmetry — " he began.

"Symmetry is the catchword of amateurs," Fourth said.

"He's right," added 1873, a lesser critic who was known to follow in Fourth's school. "While the symmetry here is perhaps as good as could be expected, nevertheless symmetry for its own sake is not art but contrivance. The piece lacks originality."

The tone for the showing had been set. People floated past the creation and made comments, almost unanimously to the effect that the work was derivative but technically splendid. The critical statements shot through 227 like a cosmic ray shower.

When the people had gone, the artist stared at his effort, wondering whether he should just shatter it with a single bolt of energy. There was a sudden magnetic bending of space over to one side, and he realized that not everyone had left. He scanned over in that direction and discovered that his old teacher, 315, had chosen to stay behind.

"Always remember," said the other one slowly, "that those who can, do, and that those who can't, teach. And those who can't teach become critics. That's why there's so many of them."

"It's discouraging," 227 sighed. "It's better than anyone's ever done before. Even 58 never got above bismuth — and that was so unstable that he destroyed it himself rather than let it just decay. I'd like to see Fourth try to call *him* a hack."

"If it's any consolation, I'm sure that art historians of the future will look favorably on it."

"Yeah," 227 said with a bitter laugh. "What was it you called posterity once? 'The poor artist's last recourse.' I'm sorry, but I'd like a little appreciation in the here and now."

"You're a good artist," 315 said gently. "Probably even a great one. And I should know — I've taught enough of them."

"That is comforting, coming from you. I know you don't say things just to be flattering. But Fourth's not exactly dumb; why can't he see it if you can?"

"Because he suffers from a common critic's disease — he's trendy. He's like the fellow who spots a mob heading in one direction and cuts across space to get in front of them and call himself a leader. The only 'trouble' with your work is that you happened to pick a form of expression that was popular fifty thousand years ago. You do it better than the Masters did, but so what? Nowadays, everyone wants to see Macro-Art, not Micro-Art. They're thinking large scale. Sure, eighty-five electrons woven into a stable symmetrical pattern is a great accomplishment. But it wouldn't have mattered if you'd done two hundred. It wasn't what they were looking for. If the esteem of someone like Fourth is what you're really interested in — and personally, I can think of better goals to aim at — then you have to play him at his own game. Find out what he likes and do it better than anyone else."

"Doesn't that violate the principles of artistic integrity that you've drummed into me all these decades?"

"Certainly," 315 agreed. "But popularity and artistic integrity are like laziness and accomplishment — you'll rarely find them together in the same place at the same time. You have to make a choice."

"What do you think I should do?"

"You're not going to trap me that way. I gave up making decisions for other people a long time ago — it gives them too easy a scapegoat. You know my opinion of Fourth and what his approval is worth, but you're the one who has to decide what you want out of life." And without so much as a casual farewell, 315 warped his fields through space and was gone.

227 pondered his problem for some time. *I don't want too much*, he thought. *It's not as if I wanted to be famous. I'd just like a little bit of recognition as something other than a "minor artist."*

*Integrity, after all, isn't an absolute; I can sacrifice a little of it for one work, then go back to doing what I like. I'll find out exactly what thrills 264 and then I'll do him the best one he's ever seen. I'll show him who's a "minor artist."*

#

It didn't take long to pore over 264's public pronouncements and learn what he considered to be the epitome of great modern art. Fourth was an advocate of the spectacular and gaudy. He raved about Macro-Art — the manipulation of planets and stars into intricate geometric patterns, the explosions of novae as dynamic statements, the formation of aesthetic nebulae as artistic expressions. To 227, such art forms were immeasurably crude compared to the finely detailed work he had been doing, but this was what the critics wanted and so this was what he'd give them. He'd produce the finest work of Macro-Art the Universe had ever seen.

He spent a quick decade brushing up on the techniques and equations he would need in order to handle this new medium. He spent another twenty years practicing, sculpting miniature systems out of asteroids, black dwarves and other cosmic junk, adding mass to mass, kindling nuclear reactions on a stellar scale, until he was positive he had the method down pat. He was careful to destroy all his practice pieces after he was done with them. He wanted his masterpiece to appear as though it had come full-blown into creation from the mind of a genius, not as the result of diligent, craftsmanlike effort. He wanted no evidence left to show that it had been preplanned.

As he had been practicing, the project had been building in his mind. It would have to be something so spectacular that 264 could not help but acclaim it. Novae had been done before, and even two supernovae. But he envisioned a chain of novae and supernovae all in close proximity, an enormous fireball of devastation that would dominate the sky for hundreds of billions of parsecs in all directions. A spectacle that would etch his number into the annals of art until heat death overtook the Universe.

The setting would have to be exactly right. He pondered for a long time the possibility of staging his display at the core of a galaxy, where the stars were certainly packed densely enough to make such a chain reaction feasible. But there would be too many variables there, too much dust and gas and extraneous material to interfere with his calculations. What he needed was a compact grouping of stars isolated from as much outside interference as possible. The answer was obvious — one of the globular

clusters that formed a halo around a galaxy. A collection of perhaps three hundred thousand stars, none of them more than a single light-year away from its nearest neighbor and yet all of them removed from the dusty squalor of the galactic plane.

He began examining clusters carefully. That one was a little too small, the effects would not be nearly spectacular enough. This one was too large, it would be hard to generate enough nuclear interaction to keep the chain alive. That one over there was too old, many of its stars had passed their peaks and already novaed; they couldn't be pushed any further without an undue amount of work. This one here was too young, the artificial aging he would have to perform on the stars would be prohibitive.

He scanned thousands of clusters over the course of fifteen years, and discarded them all on one pretext or another. *His* cluster would have to be as perfect as any could be; he was on a mission of revenge and would settle for nothing less. His search took him over three different galaxies, and still the ideal cluster eluded him.

Finally he found it, over the fourth galaxy he examined. The stars were all almost the perfect mass and age for his purposes, the distances between them were precise, the amount of dust and extraneous material was negligible, and the number of stars was perfect for the effect he wanted to give.

Now that he had the ideal cluster, he set about in a businesslike way to make novae. None of the stars individually was ready for that step in its evolution yet, but he had plenty of material to work with. A nova occurs when a star has converted so much of its hydrogen to helium that the inner-core temperatures of the hotter helium conversions simply blow off the outer layers of comparatively cool hydrogen. Normally this process would carry itself along at its own speed, dependent upon the mass of the star and its initial composition. But 227 couldn't afford to leave such details to chance; art, after all, was the imposition of order upon chaos (or, in some cases, the imposition of chaos upon order). He would have to manipulate some of the variables to suit his own needs.

He started working at the center of the cluster where the chain reaction was to start. The stars here were hot, but not quite hot enough, so he took one of them apart and distributed it among three others. The additional mass increased the gravitational forces within those three stars, making them contract and grow hotter until the radiation pressure increased to balance the gravitational pressure and the system returned to equilibrium. They were now burning hotter and faster, plus they had the benefit of extra helium in their cores, bringing them all the nearer to the day of their explosive change of life.

He repeated this process again and again and still more times until the actions became almost mechanical. Aside from having to keep a careful watch to make sure that none of the masses got too high too quickly, the job was frankly boring. 227 yearned for the precision work that was required in Micro-Art. He considered budding himself several times in order to acquire new helpers and speed the task, but that would mean taking time out to train the budding to the job, which could be counterproductive. It would also mean having to share the credit for the piece with his "children." He decided to finish it himself.

He worked his way slowly out from the center, laboring painstakingly on concentric spheres. The end result was to be a smooth flow of explosions spreading from the center to the outer fringes, a continuous wave of violent energy radiating through the cluster. The effect, though transitory, would be recorded and would ensure his reputation from now on.

So carefully was he working that after thirty-five years he was still only one-third of the way out from the center. And then suddenly he found something that stopped him cold. It was an F star, not too unusual as stars go, but the fact that it had planets made it an anomaly here in the cluster. With such a high stellar density, most stray material went into forming stars, not planets. Still, that fact would have attracted no more than passing curiosity were it not for the fact that 227 detected strange forms of radiation being emitted from the fourth planet out. Warping in for a closer inspection, he was shocked to find something for which mankind had searched ever since leaving planet Earth two million years earlier: intelligent life.

#

The philosophical implications were so staggering that 227 ceased his project at once. This was unprecedented. Planets abounded in the Universe, and life forms were so common as to be trivial. But nowhere, despite two million years of searching, had man found an intellectual equal. Finally he had quit looking, devoting his noncorporeal existence to enjoying and explaining the Universe.

227 zeroed in for a closer view. These beings were reptiloid, with slender corporeal bodies that stood erect on two multijointed legs. They built cities, used machines and polluted their environment — all signs of primitive intelligence. Yet they were still trapped on their one planet of origin, which placed the accent on the primitive. 227 observed them for an entire year while he assessed this development.

He had a reputation assured to him now, but what sort would it be? "227 was the first person to discover alien intelligences. He was also an artist." He found that distasteful. He was primarily an artist, and didn't want that fact to be a mere footnote to history.

And yet, if he were to continue on with his project as though nothing had happened, this race of primitive intelligences would be annihilated in his cataclysm. Surely that would not only be the wrong thing to do, it would be inconceivably selfish. He could always abandon this site, with little harm done, and find another for his project; but that would leave the discovery of this race to someone else, and he was loathe to do that, either.

There had to be some way out of the dilemma, some way to salvage his reputation as an artist and, at the same time, take advantage of his momentous discovery. He decided that the problem was too large for him to cope with on his own, and went to see 315.

After swearing his mentor to secrecy, he described his find in general terms. Much to his dismay, 315 did not appear excited by the news.

"I've been too far around the Universe to get excited," the elder explained. "That is not to say I underestimate the importance of this discovery for humanity. But you must realize that all along, man was searching for an intellectual equal. These beings, while intelligent, are no more our equal than insects are theirs. They might be close to the way we were a couple of million years ago, but that's unfortunately in the past."

"But how can I turn this into an artistic endeavor?" 227 wondered.

"Well, what is art?"

"Art is a creation, a rendering, an interpretation of the Universe."

"A rather simplified definition, but adequate for our purposes. Go on."

"Art expresses the artist's feelings about himself, about life and about the conditions around him. Its aim is to communicate these feelings to the observer and arouse feelings in him. It can take a complex situation and condense it down to its essence or it can take a simple thought and expound upon it to any desired complexity. It imposes the creator's will upon an arbitrary reality."

"All right, if that's the case, then how would you apply it to the present circumstance?"

227 faltered. "I ... I would attempt to make it into some kind of statement, I suppose. But how can I do that to something with a reality outside myself?"

"Electrons and stars have reality outside yourself," 315 pointed out. "You've managed nicely with them."

"Yes," the young artist said. He considered his teacher's advice carefully. "But the ethics of the situation"

"Ethics demagnetize my fields," 315 said gruffly. "I think I'm too old for them. I leave them to you younger chaps with time to spare. Whatever you decide I'm sure will be for the best. But in the meantime, I'm due for an appointment with another pupil, and I'm sure he will be as impatient with me as you were at his age." And 315 warped off into electromagnetic limbo.

227 pondered his teacher's words. The more he thought about it, the more his solution was channeled into one direction: use the alien race, mold it into an entirely new form of art. In that way, not only would he get credit for the discovery, but his innovative abilities would also be applauded; he would be considered the inventor of an original mode of artistic expression.

But was it right to use another race that way, a race that at least had a rudimentary intellect? Well, why not? They were still subhumans, a step, perhaps, above some of the smarter animals, but still not close enough to man to matter. He would be saving them from his original design of destruction, wouldn't he? And he would also be imposing order into their chaotic world; since intelligent beings strive for order, they would no doubt be grateful for his intervention.

With that matter settled, he had but to choose which way to mold what he was beginning to think of as his world.

#



Creating a new art form is no easy business. There was no previous experience to draw on, no established procedure awaiting but his touch to set it in motion. He resigned himself to trial and error, secure in the knowledge that the first of anything was of necessity the best, at least until another one came along.

He twenty years doing nothing but observing the system that his world had built up on its own. It was, frankly, less than ideal. There were power structures that were unbalanced, precariously so. There were the grossest of inequities in the distribution of resources and populations. There were evils and goods jumbled haphazardly together, interwoven like vines in an uncultivated jungle. There seemed to be no structure, no pattern to life there at all. That would have to be changed.

He tried at first to work on the major exosystems. Precious metals and fuel supplies were unduly concentrated in one small geographic area; 227 spread them out a little more equitably. But he found that working on such a large scale caused unforeseen problems. The reallocation of materials caused drastic alterations in the war policies of the power groups, which in turn affected economic and social policies.

Those in turn altered population patterns and individual behavior vectors.

The problem was far more intricate than 227 had initially realized, but he loved it. This was the type of art that challenged him with its complexity. Changing the orbit of a single electron involved such a fast array of interacting forces that it required the touch of a true craftsman. But even then, electrons obeyed certain natural laws, and their actions could be predicted within narrow limits. Not so with intelligent beings, who had wills of their own that sometimes ran exactly contrary to reason and common sense. It was work of a scope that surpassed the mere manipulation of stars, and the deeper 227 became involved, the more exhilarated he grew.

He abandoned, for the most part, his idea of ordering the world through gross measures, and narrowed his tuning down to selected individuals. He would follow the course of perhaps fifty key members of each generation, subtly directing their movements by restricting their alternatives. He stopped planning major changes and concentrated, instead, on a series of minor ones that would lead inexorably to his goal of an ordered world. His people were statesmen, social reformers, religious leaders, rabble-rousers, generals — the shapers of his world.

Of course, he did not place all his emphasis on individuals. Sometimes a catastrophe like fire or earthquake would be needed to level a region that he considered aesthetically unpleasing. Battles were constantly being won or lost because of weather conditions, which required pinpoint timing. And, while he resolved to work with what was given him and not try to design "better" beings, he did do a slight amount of genetic engineering to eliminate some troublesome traits.

Slowly but surely, his world took shape. Lines that would have seemed parallel to the ephemeral beings on the planet began inevitably to converge. The courses of action open to the inhabitants narrowed, and even their patterns of thought (determined by the cultural context that 227 had constructed) followed the prescribed channels.

And finally the last piece clicked into shape and the work was finished. It had taken five and a half centuries, but major works of art frequently involve great efforts. 227 looked upon his handiwork and saw that it was not just good, but a masterpiece. His internal fields fluxed with pride at the magnificence of his accomplishment. Serendipity had indeed smiled on him, and he had been brilliant enough to take advantage of it.

Now to arrange for the showing.

#

He enlisted his teacher's aid to ensure that the showing would not be as dismally attended as the last one. 315 was highly respected in artistic circles, and when he told the critics that they were in for a field-warper, they did not take his word lightly. They were told nothing of what to expect, aside from the fact that it would be sensational.

And sensational it was. From the instant they saw the world, they were enthralled. Nothing had prepared them to face such a totally new art form, and they were even at a loss as to how to criticize it. 227 was run ragged with questions, from "How did you accomplish this detail?" to "Why is this here instead of there?" to "What does this item signify?" He answered them all as patiently as he could, but each answer

led in turn to at least three new questions. The critics were as eager as budlings to explore every aspect of this wonder they had been presented.

"Note the symmetry," 227 explained. "See how this evil over here is balanced out by a good over there. Notice how level the birth and death rates are. Watch how even the forces involved in a major catastrophe also work to promote a boon farther along. It's a completely self-contained system."

"But will it keep going?" asked 1112, one of the foremost critics of all. "It would seem to me that systems involving sentient beings would be subject to internal decay without constant supervision."

"Not at all," replied the artist. "All art, or course, is transient; entropy sees to that. Even the hardest of marble sculptures erodes in time, and Micro-Art has a lifespan that is measured in mere decades. Macro-Art can last for billions of years or can be gone in the flash of a supernova. My new form, which I call Culture Sculpture, can range from short term to intermediate. This particular world I have molded for stability<sup>7</sup>. According to me best estimates, the cultural patterns I have established here should last somewhere between 104 and 105 years."

"Admirable!" exclaimed 264, whom 227 had been watching with considerable interest. "At last we see that the artist has finished his apprenticeship and moved on to establish his own talent. I predict that this moment will be remembered by posterity as a turning point in the history of art. I must congratulate you, 227, for fulfilling the promise that we all knew you were capable of."

227 was able to swallow his cynicism long enough to accept the congratulations graciously.

The showing gave no signs of ending, as the critics could not get their fill of this new treasure. After cautioning them all again not to touch the world lest they disturb his balance, 227 went off by himself to calm the systemic hypercharges that success had aroused. After a week or two, 315 sought him out privately.

"I should thank you," the elder said. "A good pupil reflects well upon his teacher. I must admit that even I was amazed at how well you were able to pull this off."

"It's not enough," 227 said curtly.

"What do you mean?"

"You taught it to me yourself — the instant someone is a success, he attracts copyists. You called it the Law of Gravitational Imitation. My place as an innovator is assured, but if I merely rest on my accomplishment I will shortly be eclipsed."

"But how? This find of yours was a unique occurrence ... "

"No. It was unique to find it naturally, but life is not unique. All it will take is for some other artist to find a race that is close to intelligence and alter the genetic structure until they achieve true sentience. And if it can be done, it will be done. I'm sure some of them have even thought of the idea themselves by now."

315 pondered this for a short time. "You're probably right, but what do you intend to do about it?"

"I've got the advantage on them so far, in that I'm the only one with any experience in the field. I know some of the pitfalls and how to avoid them. What I've got to do is go out and create another Culture Sculpture. A more impressive one, at least an order of magnitude greater. But how, that's the problem — how?"

He paused. "You know, I used to think you were full of magnetic discharges when you told me that success was sometimes harder to live with than failure. Now I suspect you may be right."

"Success is autocannibalistic," 315 muttered quietly.

"Whatever the case, success and failure are two entirely different sets of problems. I can't say which is the worse. At the moment I'm stuck with success, so I'll have to bear with that. But I can't go on repeating myself, creating cultures and refining what I've already done. I've got to move on, do something greater. But where can I find — "

227 suddenly pulsed as his internal fields reacted to a thought. "Of course! That's what I'll do. I know what I can sculpt now."

"What?" his teacher asked.

"Us," 227 beamed. And off he went to begin work.

## The Last Ghost

*This first appeared in Protostars, 1971.*

*I recommend a made-for-TV movie called Sole Survivor, starring Vince Edwards and Richard Basehart. I saw it for the first time, and the ending affected me so strongly that I lay in bed for an hour afterwards before saying, "I've got to write a story about this tomorrow." After another half hour of sleeplessness, I said, "To hell with tomorrow, I'll write it now." Within an hour and a half I'd gotten the basic story written.*

*"The Last Ghost" was a finalist on the Nebula Awards ballot that year, placing behind Robert Silverberg's "GoodNews from the Vatican."*

*Eternity is a terrible place to endure alone.*

*He is the last of his kind, if he is a "he." (Gender is an arbitrary difference. All things are eventually the same - and in eternity, eventually equals always.) He must once have had a name, a handle to his soul, but that was back before the eternity/instant when he had existed in corporeal form. He tries to think about things as he had known them, and finds he can't. He tries to think about things as they are, and finds he can't quite manage that, either. The will-be is far beyond his powers of contemplation.*

*He exists (if that's the word) in an everlasting now, as a state of nothingness less substantial than a vacuum, smaller than infinity, larger than thought. Eternity lies as far behind him as it does ahead. He drifts through this lack of anything at infinitely greater than no speed at all. He sees with non-eyes. He hears without ears. He thinks thoughtless thoughts that revolve in circles and make little eddies of emptiness in the not-quite-nothing of his mind.*

*He searches for*

*He wants a*

*He desires some He loves to*

*No objects remain within his mental grasp. The words have been corroded by the gentle acid of time. All that's left is the search; the want; the desire; the love.*

*#*

She began to appear slowly, a flicker at the limits of his nonperception. (Why he considered her a "she" could not be explained. There was just an aspect about her that was complementary to him.) His unthoughts raced in puzzlement. She was a newness in his stale cosmos, where nothing ever changed. He watched her as she took on a form even less substantial than his own. He watched with his crumbling mind at a crossroad, afraid to approach, even more afraid to run away from her in fear. (If, that is, there were anyplace to run in eternity.)

She gained awareness suddenly, and started at the alien strangeness of her new environment. The eerie infinitude produced within her a wave of awe commingled with fear. She could, as yet, perceive only herself and the barren continuum around her.

She spoke. (What came out was not sound, but could be interpreted as communication.) "Where am I?" The action was a simple one. It seemed utterly new to him, but down somewhere among the shards of his memory it was all tantalizingly familiar. He trembled.

She perceived his being, and turned her attention toward him. "What are you? What's happened to me?" He knew the answers — or rather, he had known them. As it had with everything else, infinity had eaten away at these chunks of information too in what was left of his mind. It had all been so important once. So important! That was why he was what he was, and why he wasn't what he wasn't.

"Please!" she begged him. Hysteria edged her voice. "Tell me!"

Through mists that swirled down dust} <sup>7</sup> corridors of memory, the words came out unbidden. "You are dead."

"No! That's impossible! I can't be!"

Loud silence.

"I can't be," she repeated. "Death was conquered more than five thousand years ago. After our minds were transferred into computer banks, we became immortal. Our bodies may fail, but our minds go on.

Nobody dies anymore ..." Her voice trailed off.

"You are dead," he repeated emotionlessly.

"Are ... are you a ghost?" she asked.

Though the meaning of the word had been stolen from him, that shred of identity remained: "Yes." She brooded, and large quantities of non-time elapsed. He waited. He became accustomed to her existence. No longer was she an alien thing, and he accepted her as he had come to accept everything else — without comment.

"I suppose," she said at last, "some sort of equipment failure might have temporarily dislodged my personality pattern from the memory banks. But only temporarily. I'm only half dead so far. As soon as the trouble is fixed, I'll be all right again. I will be all right, won't I?"

He didn't answer. He knew nothing about equipment failures — or had forgotten if he ever had known.

"Equipment failures are supposed to be impossible," she prattled on, trying desperately to convince herself that her comfortable reality would return again. "Still, in thousands of years even a trillion-to-one shot might happen. But they'll fix it soon. They've got to. They must. Won't they? *Won't they?*"

She stared at her impassive companion with non-eyes widened by panic. "Don't just stand there! Help me!"

Help. That word found a niche somewhere in the haunted cavern of his mind. He was supposed to help ... to help ...

The who, or what, or how he was suppose to help eluded him. That is, if he had ever known.

They drifted on through the void together, side by side, ghost and almost-ghost. The unthoughts of the elder spirit were tangled more than usual, owing to the presence of another after such a lonely period of timelessness. But it was not a bad tangle; in fact, it was rather nice to share the universe with someone else again. She was a pleasant aura beside him in an otherwise insensate world.

They had both existed for over five thousand years. He was undoubtedly the older of the pair; but the real difference between them was that, while he had existed alone for so long that solitude had nibbled away at his Swiss cheese mind, she had lived those centuries with other people, other minds — a situation that either cracks one completely or produces near-total stability<sup>7</sup>. The latter was the case with her, and so eventually her initial panic subsided and the clinical attitude she had held for thousands of years returned.

"Well, it appears I'm going to be here for a while, so I might as well get acquainted with this place. And since you're the only thing around, I'll start with you. Who are you?"

"Dead."

"Obviously." Her non-voice managed to handle even sarcasm nicely. "But don't you have some kind of a name?"

"No."

Just for a moment she lost her patience. "That's impossible, Gabby. You must have had a name sometime. What was it?"

"I don't ... I don't ... I don't ..." His broken-record attempt to answer was so pathetic that it touched the maternal instincts that she had thought long-dead within her.

"I'm sorry," she said a bit more tenderly. "Let's talk about something else. Where are we?"

"We are ..."

"Dead," she finished with him. *Oh Lord, help me have patience with him. He's worse than a child.*

"Yes, I know that. But I mean our physical location. Does it have a name?"

"No."

Stymied again. Her companion was obviously not inclined to conversation, but her analytical mind felt an urgent need to talk, to try to hold on to her sanity under such adverse conditions. "All right, then, if you don't want to talk, do you mind if I do?"

"No."

So she did. She told him about her earliest life, when she had had a body, and about the things she had done and the children she had had. She spoke of the mind-transferral breakthrough that had finally enabled Man to conquer Death. She told him about the first thousand years or so she had spent in the

computer bank when, exhilarated by the thrill of immortality, she had occupied animated robot bodies and engaged in "Death-defying" sports and exciting activities. And she related how even this had paled with time, and how she had passed into the current, mature phase of her life, the search for knowledge and wisdom. She told how ships had been built to take these computerized people to the stars, and what strange and wonderful things they had found there.

He listened. Most of it was incomprehensible to him, for the words were either unfamiliar or forgotten. His sievelike mind retained very little of what she said. But he listened, and that was important. He soaked in the experience, the thrill, of another pseudobeing communicating with him.

At last she paused, unable to think of anything else to say. "Would you like to talk now?" she asked. Something burned within him. "Yes."

"Good," she said. "What would you like to talk about?"

He tried hard to think of something, anything, but once again his brain failed him.

She sensed his difficulty. "Tell me something about yourself," she prompted.

"I am dead."

"Yes, I know that. But what else?"

He thought. What was "himself" that he could tell something about?

"I search for

"I want a

"I desire some

"I love to ... "

"What, what, what, what?" she insisted. But there was no answer. Frustrated, she continued. "Let's try something else. Does ... did everyone who died become a ghost like you?"

"Yes."

"Where are they all, then?"

"Gone."

"Gone where?"

"Away."

Almost, she lost her patience again, but her millennia of training saved her. "They *all* went away?"

"Yes."

"All except you?"

"Yes."

"How long has it been?"

"Long."

She hadn't felt closer to crying in nearly five thousand years, both out of sympathy for this pathetic creature and frustration at being unable to solve his riddle. "Why didn't you go with them?"

"I ... I was left behind."

"Why?"

His answer came much more slowly this time, dredged from the silt at the bottom of his pool of consciousness. "To ... to ... to point the way for Those Who Follow."

"You're a guide, then?" she asked incredulously.

"Yes."

"To where?"

"To ... to ... away."

"Can you show me where?"

For the first time, sadness was in his voice. "No."

Slowly, very slowly, using all the powers of patience and logical reasoning she had developed over the centuries, she extracted from him the pieces necessary to complete the puzzle. Long ago (how long was indeterminate; time has no meaning in eternity), the ghosts had discovered a new and higher level of existence. All of them had gone over to this new evolutionary state; all except one. One last ghost to show the way up for all the new ghosts who would be coming along.

Only, the mind-transferral breakthrough had changed all that. Suddenly, there were no new ghosts. And

the last ghost was left alone. Duty confined him to ghostdom, and solitude condemned him to stagnation. Her pity exploded like a pink nova, even while some analytical portion of her mind noted that the maternal instinct does not fade through disuse. She cradled his pathetic non-being deep within her own shadowy self and whispered words of tender concern.

And suddenly he felt warm with a glow he hadn't felt in eons. His null senses tingled deliriously with the nearness of this glorious other. Happily, he nestled himself against her.

A shock ripped through her. And another. And another. "Oh dear. They're repairing the equipment failure. Soon they'll be fixing the memory circuit, and I'll go back to being alive again."

In the sad stillness that followed, he uttered one word. "Don't."

She was startled. This was the first time he had initiated a thought, the first time he had expressed a preference for something. "What did you say?"

"Don't be alive."

"Why not?"

"I need"

"What?" She could feel herself beginning to fade from this non-place.

"I need"

"Yes? Tell me. Tell me what you need."

"I need"

"What?" She was fading quickly. "I don't have much time left here. Please, tell me what!"

"I need"

She disappeared forever from his non-universe, without a trace.

#

*The last ghost wanders. He is a signpost with nowhere to point. He is a guide with no one to lead. So he drifts on with an empty mind and a half-forgotten, unfulfillable purpose. And occasionally:*

I NEED

I NEED

I NEED

*As always, the object eludes him.*

## Haunted Houses

*I normally would not have gone to a John Denver concert. It's not that I dislike his music, it's just that I had other priorities for my money. But these tickets were given to me for free so, in 1989, I attended one of his live performances. It was a pleasant evening ... and then he sang one particular song. I'd never heard it before. I've never heard it since. I don't know the title. It was about the fact that love abides in all the places where it ever existed. It hit me like a lightning bolt. We hear of places haunted by unspeakable horrors and pain, but never places haunted by love. Why not?*

*For the sake of Mr. Denver and his family, I hope he was right.*

There are Great Truths to be learned in haunted houses.

I was twelve years old when I learned my first Great Truth. Twelve is a particularly good age for haunted houses. Much younger than that and you can't really appreciate the depth of what's going on. Much older and you become cynical, jaded by your adolescent omniscience. But at twelve you've become aware of all the rotten things the world can do to you, yet you're still defenseless against most of them. A very good age, twelve.

And of course it was Halloween. Arbor Day doesn't work well for haunted houses. Neither does Memorial Day, even though we're supposed to think about the dead then, too. Somehow I have the impression that any ghosts you met in May would be in their military uniforms, with ribbons on their chests. Impressive, maybe (if they were of high enough rank), but not horrifying.

But Halloween, when the trees have changed and the year is shriveled up and dying, that's a good season

for spooks.

Halloween, age twelve. Hey, throw in nighttime for good measure. Stir well.

Santa Barbara, when I was twelve, was one of those in-betweenish sort of places. It hadn't yet grown into the urban center it is today, but it wasn't exactly Hicksville, either. It had been settled for quite a while, but there were still large areas of wilderness — or at least, a twelve-year-old's idea of wilderness. There was an old Victorian house alone on a hill, deserted. In those days, no one restored Victorian houses. No one painted them pretty colors like the Painted Ladies of San Francisco in the Seventies. If the house was not kept up properly — and most weren't, since that kind of house requires an army of servants for its upkeep — then it was simply old, an eyesore to be shunned by respectable people. So there was this dilapidated old house by itself on a hillside. Its windows were broken, boarded up, or both. It had been owned by people of an older generation, but no one lived there now. It squatted on its lot, weeds growing tall in the yard, the iron grating fence rusting quietly. It made the perfect target for the more sophisticated set — namely those fifteen-year-olds who'd already read some Poe and figured they knew how to scare us younger kids with tales of murders, decapitations, telltale hearts, and people being walled up alive in hidden chambers.

It worked.

So there we were on Halloween night, the three of us — Bobby Maguire, Sally Luff, and me. We'd gotten all the candy our neighborhood had to offer, and were ranging a little further afield when we passed the hill with the Haunted House. (I never did know the name of the family that owned it, though years later, after hearing the Firesign Theater talk about "the old Same place," this was what I thought of.) We'd been grossing one another out all evening, so when we passed the hill and saw the house — we all seemed to look up at the exact same moment — it hit us like divine inspiration. Three Sauls on the same road to Damascus. We'd check out the Haunted House and see if any of those stories were real.

(Of course, we didn't do it straightaway. There was the usual preliminary daring and double-daring and calling of cowardly nicknames. But we all knew we were going to do it, and eventually we did.)

The rusting gate squeaked appropriately as we pushed it open. The weeds and tall grass swayed in the cool breeze that came in from the ocean. Clouds scudded across the face of the not-quite-full moon.

Hitchcock couldn't have asked for better.

We walked up the steps of the front porch, the floorboards creaking ominously beneath our feet. Bobby, making a great show at being the bravest of us, marched up to the front door and knocked. "Trick or treat," he said, though it came out more as a mew than a threat.

There was no answer, and after a moment we started to turn away, relieved that there were no spirits here after all — or at least none willing to speak to a trio of impertinent preteens. Then a gust of wind blew the door in with a loud bang.

Faced with an invitation like that, who could refuse? After performing a little more of the double-dare ritual — I wonder if any anthropologists have investigated that as a spell to invoke the protection of the gods — we entered nervously. There was no electricity, of course, but our mothers, steeped in maternal wisdom, had made us bring flashlights with us. We shined them around the rooms as we walked gingerly through.

There was a short vestibule leading to a broad staircase, with a door into a parlor on the right. The carpet, in the harsh glare of our flashlights, was thin and faded. The parlor was not crowded with furniture, but the few pieces there were covered in dropcloths. The breeze from the open door made them shift and billow a little. We were sophisticated enough to know that real ghosts didn't wear sheets, but it looked eerie nonetheless.

We checked all the rooms on the ground floor, finding nothing particularly suspicious, until we'd circled around to the front stairs again. Of course, the second floor held all the bedrooms, and that was where we knew the most grisly deeds had been done. We went through some more of our familiar ritual, and this time I ended up leading the expedition up the stairs.

Each step creaked more loudly than the last. My heart was in my throat, and beating so strongly I thought I'd choke. But my buddies were right behind me, and I couldn't let them think I was chicken, could I?

We reached the top without mishap. The logical approach would have been to split up and search the

place, but none of us was quite that valorous. We went together, room by room, opening a couple of windows to let air into the stuffy place. They were sparsely furnished until we came to the master bedroom, where a broken-down old canopy bed awaited us. It had obviously been too much trouble for anyone to haul away, even as salvage, so it had been left to decay with the rest of the house.

We all sat down in the middle of the bed, laughing with hysterical relief that there was nothing here to be scared of. Then we made our pact. The three of us would spend the entire night here in the Haunted House, and from then on we could lord it over all our contemporaries. We laughed as we assessed the coward quotient of our acquaintances, and how their dearth of intestines would prevent them from daring what we were about to do.

But let's face it: in the face of unforeseen circumstances, twelve-year-olds are no better at keeping their promises than anyone else.

We'd barely settled in for our vigil when we all felt a sudden chill. (Well, the house was drafty, there was a gust<sup>7</sup> breeze, and it was autumn.) We convinced ourselves it was our imaginations.

Then there was a buzzing, rattling noise. It came from another room, and it was intermittent. In the light of morning I discovered it to be a piece of paper caught in just the right place beside a broken window, vibrating strangely. But in the night it was definitely creepy.

Then came a bump from the next room. We'd been all through the house and we knew there wasn't anyone else here. But maybe some other kids had come in after we did. Bobby bravely called out, "Hello," but got no answer. We decided the noise wasn't worth investigating. We were safe where we were.

Then another bump, followed by a crashing of glass. (A curtain, blown by a breeze through a window we'd just opened, had jiggled a small nightstand in the next room the first time. The second time it knocked off an old vase.) That did it. Boasts and pledges dissolved like snowflakes in May. Bobby and Sally bolted from the room, down the stairs, and out the door, clutching their flashlights and shopping bags of candy. No ghost in the world is going to scare a kid into forgetting his Halloween candy.

I stayed where I was in the center of the bed. It's not that I was any braver than Sally or Bobby. Quite literally I was paralyzed with fear. My mind was way ahead of them as they ran out of the Haunted House; it's just my body that wasn't cooperating.

I knelt on that seedy old mattress shivering with fright, my active imagination picturing all too well the sorts of perils about to envelop me. More drafts blew on my skin, the frost<sup>7</sup> breath of the ice demons who'd come to claim my soul. I couldn't even lift my flashlight to shine its reassuring beam around the room. Despite the nighttime chill I was drenched in sweat.

The house was as close to silent as an old house can be, and somehow that was more frightening than all the ghostly howls and clanking chains that Dickens and Poe together could have imagined. Some people are afraid of things that go bump in the night. Let me tell you — far scarier are the things that make no noise at all.

I knelt for what seemed like hours, my muscles turned to jelly, staring ahead into the darkness and positive that every second would be my last, sure that my soul would be damned for all eternity.

And something funny happened: nothing happened. No vampires emerged to suck my life fluid. No ghouls dropped by to initiate me into the ranks of the living dead. No ghosts materialized to drag me back with them to their graves.

Nothing. I was simply alone in a dark, empty, old house.

It was my bladder that finally got me moving again. Amazingly, I'd remained continent through the worst of my fear, but eventually the pressure overwhelmed my more esoteric concerns. I found my legs could move again, though they were all pins-and-needles from being cramped up so long. I staggered out of the bedroom and down the hall to the tiny bathroom we'd discovered earlier. The toilet wouldn't flush, but that didn't stop me from relieving my most immediate problem.

As I made my way back to the bedroom, I formulated my great plan. I would carry out the pledge I'd made earlier. I would spend the entire night in this house. I knew now there was nothing to worry about, and I would be the hero of the sixth grade. Even Bobby and Sally, who'd at least been brave enough to venture into the house with me, could not claim this final victory over the forces of the supernatural.



I sat on the bed, listening to the sounds of the night. I realized that my own home had similar sounds, though not as many or quite as loud, and that there was nothing here out of the ordinary. (There were probably mice and rats somewhere, but they left me alone that night.) I ate my Halloween candy as I sat there. Mounds, Krackels, Kisses, and candy corn sustained me through that hour of my greatest triumph. Even now I keep bowls of Halloween candy on my desk while I work. It's a great comfort food. Somewhere along the line I fell asleep, because I woke up with light streaming into the room onto my face. I staggered home, tired but elated, certain my feat would be inscribed forever in the annals of Santa Barbara history.

It didn't quite happen that way. I was in deep trouble. When I didn't come home, my parents had called the police and a frantic search had been mounted. Bobby and Sally, wanting to stay out of trouble themselves, said nothing about the Haunted House and maintained they didn't know where I was. I received a royal spanking, a two-week total grounding, and a lecture from a very upset police detective about the grief I'd caused so many people.

But none of that mattered. In Cabrillo Elementary, I was *the* celebrity. The other kids sat around and listened to all the stories I told them about the horrifying things that went on in that spooky old house. No one dared call me a liar because no one else wanted to spend a night there to disprove any of it.

From that time on, Sally had a strange expression on her face whenever she looked at me. With maturity and hindsight I can interpret it now. Had we been just a couple of years older we would probably have swapped one another our virginities. But that didn't happen to twelve-year-olds in white, middle-class Santa Barbara in those days. And anyway, we didn't get the chance. Her family moved from Santa Barbara that next summer. I never saw her again.

#

What Great Truth did I learn that night? I gained an insight into the nature of human fear. I saw deep into the heart of darkness and recognized it for the void it was. Not that I'm fearless, mind you. There *are* dangerous things in the world. Censors, the IRS, right-wing Republicans, and anyone with a loaded gun can scare the shit out of me. But I had conquered the fear of those things that lurked in the hidden corners of our imaginations.

And not only had I conquered it, but I learned what it was made of and how to manipulate it to work on other minds. I could harness those dark, primeval horrors and use them to my personal advantage. They had no power over me, for I knew they were without substance, like a Hollywood back lot. I could control *them*, not the other way around.

The tales I told my fellow students were good practice. I started writing horror stories, then graduated to novels. I took my readers to the claustrophobic places and I trapped them there. Gloomy swamps where tree limbs seemed animated, waiting to grab your arm and drag you down into the mire, where mists rose and distorted the shapes around you so that even familiar things looked not quite right, where poisonous snakes slithered silently, dreaming only of the chance to sink their fangs into the leg of some unsuspecting human.

Or the old attic with the burned-out bulb, where you go just at twilight to break open the old trunk, and the red light of sunset is weirdly distorted by the cracked panes of glass and the dust in the still, dry air, and there's a dead rat inside the trunk, right on top, with a hatpin stuck through its right eye, and a chilly breeze hits your neck as you find the packet of old letters and you suddenly realize that *someone* is reading over your shoulder.

Or the elevator that stops between floors late at night when you're the only one in the building, and the emergency phone doesn't work, and you hear an insistent scratching noise on the other side of the little trap door in the ceiling, and as the light in the elevator starts to flicker the scratching becomes a pounding, and you hear a triumphant cackle from just beyond that fragile partition.

Or the car you're driving in down that lonely highway late at night, and the station you've been listening to becomes mostly static, and you think you hear a funny gurgle from the empty seat behind you, and you look in your rear view mirror and can see only the solid blackness of a country road at night.

Oh sure, I never had Stephen King or Dean Koontz looking over their shoulders, but I made a decent living. I aimed my work at the credulous twelve-year-old that I knew lurked inside all my readers,

because I knew where all their fears were buried and exactly how to exhume them.

#

Like haunted houses, love bestows its own Great Truths. My first book had just sold when I was fresh out of college, in the malleable period when I was still shaping my life. I decided to indulge myself in a wild extravagance: I went to a good bookstore and just started buying every book that looked interesting, something I'd never been able to afford before. The attractive young clerk was at first bemused by the project, but then she got into the swing of it by suggesting some of her own favorites. Our tastes overlapped to an astonishing degree; our bibliophilic orgy grew ever more passionate, and our gazes locked with increasing frequency and duration. Our hands would touch as we reached for the same book, and soon the tension level became more than I could bear. I kissed her between her history and biography sections. What else could we do for an encore but get married?

I learned a Great Truth in those first few years of love. I learned that happiness was not simply the absence of unhappiness. Unhappiness normally comes from things beyond your control — physical pain, inadequate money, a crabby boss, dissatisfaction with the condition of the world. Happiness comes from within, independent of everything else around you. You renew it every day, like a rechargeable battery. When you have a special person to help you, the world is full of light and excitement like some global amusement park. Love becomes an anaesthetic that dulls you to life's pain, a high no drug can match. No wonder songwriters spend so much time on the subject; love is both the cheapest and most ruthlessly expensive addiction on the face of our planet.

But if Lois was the Alpha of my love, she was also its Omega. This was the other Great Truth love taught me: if you allow love to slip away from you — either through malice or, worse, inertia — you plunge into a pit of human suffering far more subtle than the Torquemadas and the Hitlers could ever devise. For years I staggered through life with a quiet horror far greater than any I faced in that haunted house — the horror of knowing something beautiful was possible, but that it was always just out of my grasp and, eventually, that it might never come to me again. The horror of Shangri-La lost, never to be regained. The two Great Truths of love, courtesy of Lois: Love is both a sultry seductress and a cold, sadistic bitch.

#

The real estate agent was almost apologetic about the house. I'd always thought brokers were supposed to exude enthusiasm, but either mine had never taken that course or else she really wanted to sell me something else, something more expensive. But this was the year One A.L., and I couldn't afford anything more expensive. The lawyers had seen to that.

I'd tried living in an apartment for a while, but between bratty kids and noisy stereos I found I couldn't concentrate. I needed a place to myself, where I could write in peace without distractions. And I wanted to own it; I wanted something that was *mine*, not some landlord's. I desperately needed to know that something in the world belonged to me.

When most brokers heard what I could offer as a down payment, they gave me the polite treatment that meant they were really laughing at me. Gloria, at least, took it as a challenge. And she found this house. It was an older home, built in the thirties. I wouldn't call it a crackerbox, but it was small and compact. Two bedrooms, one bath (a large tub with a shower added as an afterthought), a living room, small kitchen, and breakfast nook. A small yard in front, a slightly larger one in the back with an old plum tree in its center. Gloria assured me it still bore fruit.

The neighborhood was old and lower middle class. It was constructed in a gentler age when people believed that taking care of their own home was a sacred trust, and for the most part they'd lived up to their obligations. Gloria told me the neighborhood was mostly older, retired folks — few people my age, few children except for grandkids. I thought that was fine. She apologized that the house was so small. I thought it was a perfect size. I didn't have anyone living with me anymore.

The house had been kept up. Everything worked. After we made the complete tour, I asked Gloria, "Okay, what's wrong? Why is it going so cheap?"

"Nothing's wrong," she insisted. "This just isn't the sort of house most people are interested in these days. It's been on the market for a while and the owner just wants to get rid of it quickly."

"Why doesn't the owner live here himself?"

"He already has a house. This belonged to his parents, and now that they're dead he has no further use for it."

The explanation was reasonable. The house was reasonable. The price was reasonable. I decided to be reasonable, too. I took it.

Escrow cleared in near-record time. The owner's late parents were the original owners. There were no encumbrances, no title problems, just minor probate hassles that were settled almost before I knew they existed. If I'd been of that particular bent, I might have said I was fated to own this house.

I moved in. The house had looked small when I was touring it, but once I was in it grew larger. Lois had gotten most of our furniture. I had my office stuff, a new bed, TV and stereo, and a couple of old easy chairs that had belonged to my parents. Everything else I bought secondhand. There seemed to be acres in which I could roam. And there was the silence. Blessed silence. The silence I'd been praying for, that would let me write in peace.

Except I couldn't.

I wrote lots of stuff right after the breakup. Grisly murders, gruesome decapitations, prolonged eviscerations, involuntary mastectomies. All the victims were women, all looked suspiciously alike. The scenes were so graphic I doubt even my usually open-minded publisher would have printed them without reservations. I still think they were well-written and powerful scenes — but a handful of good scenes don't make up a novel. I couldn't connect my thoughts. I couldn't get the story to flow. And now, in this new house, nothing was coming at all.

I could only sit in front of my trusty Macintosh for so long staring at a blank screen before I had to get up and do something else. I took to pacing through the house, taking a slightly different route every time so no one could accuse me of falling into a rut. With the exception of the bedrooms and bathroom, all the rooms had two doorways, and I was nothing if not ingenious about plotting my course among them.

It was during one of these pacings that the first incident occurred. I was standing still for a moment beside the mantel in the living room, turning toward the front window, when I felt... something.

I've described similar moments in my books: a sudden draft, an unexpected chill, shivers down the spine. The Horror Writer's Handbook has a whole catalog of trusty cliches for this occasion.

What I felt was none of them. Instead, it was a warmth, a glow, a feeling of love and contentment that made me smile despite my overwrought state. I looked over, expecting to see someone dear to me sitting on the flower-embroidered sofa under the front window, smiling back at me. Except there *was* no flower-embroidered sofa under the front window, because I'd never owned a flower-embroidered sofa. There was only a two-shelf brick-and-board bookcase that I'd improvised to fit there.

The feeling was gone again in an instant, but the afterglow lingered. I felt good. I felt cherished. I felt like I'd just seen the ending of *Ghost* twelve times in a row. And there was no reason for it. None whatsoever.

I couldn't explain it. I'd stood on that exact same spot before, looking in that same direction, and hadn't felt anything like that. I tried it again, several times, and couldn't repeat the experience. I finally chalked it up to a strange hormonal surge. Maybe I was going through male menopause and having my equivalent of hot flashes.

I put the incident out of my mind. It wasn't hard. I had so much to do. It's amazing how many chores you can find when you're really supposed to be in front of the computer, working.

Every night I set the coffeemaker to have coffee ready for me when I got up. I'd have some toast with the coffee while I read the paper. It can take between one and two hours to read the *L.A. Times* in the morning, if you take it easy. Then there were chores: dusting, vacuuming, washing dishes, preparing my meals, organizing my bookshelves, paying bills. And gardening. I'd never done any gardening before, but it was an amazing time-killer — excuse me, hobby. Why, my life was so full and rich there were some days I never even turned on the Mac at all.

The *feeling* happened several more times. It was never predictable — never in the same place or at the same time of day. I would just be walking through the house when suddenly I'd be momentarily overcome by this wave of warmth and gentle love. Then it was gone, leaving a pleasant but frustrating sensation, as though a plate of delicious food had been passed under my nostrils and then taken away

before I could taste any.

My agent called. "Bad news, I'm afraid," he said. "Ostrich House canceled your contract."

I was stunned. "Why?"

"Well, you are nine months late with the book — "

"Lots of writers are late. Creative work isn't an assembly line process. Editors know that. Andy didn't say anything to me about — "

"I think it's really as much a political thing as anything else. They're being bought up by another company, and they're restructuring their lines. Andy's being promoted sideways. Don't worry, I'm sure I can resell this — and you've still got two other books under contract. You can work on them."

I wasn't as sure as he was. Editors really do talk to one another, and if a writer gets a reputation for unreliability, it's hard to shake.

After I hung up I stood there in the living room for a moment, still stunned. Then, absently, I sat down in the big red chair behind me. Only there was no big red chair behind me. There never had been. I'd never owned a big red chair. I fell hard on the floor and bruised more than my dignity.

I hardly gave that a thought. I was mourning the imminent loss of my career. Another thing to blame on Lois.

I'm not usually a heavy drinker; people prone to kidney stones can't afford to be. I keep a well-stocked cupboard, though. And tonight was a definite exception. I was entitled to get drunk. My life was in the toilet and God Himself was flushing.

I started with a couple of drinks, and went downhill from there. I remember at one point making myself a solemn vow to drink at least two full glasses from every bottle in the cupboard. I don't know whether I made it or not; my mind shut down somewhere into the process.

I awoke in my own bed in my pajamas. I never slept in pajamas, and I'd forgotten I even had any. My head was throbbing, my stomach was convulsing, and the smell of coffee was wafting through the air. I staggered to the bathroom, then followed the smell into the kitchen.

At first I thought I was hallucinating. The kitchen was a shambles. It looked and smelled as though Carry Nation and her temperance mob had paid a call with their axes. Every bottle of booze I had lay smashed on the floor, even the ones I couldn't reach last night because they'd been so far back on the shelves. If it hadn't been for the aroma of good, strong coffee, I would have gagged.

I knew I couldn't have done it. Even in my worst drunken stupor, I had too much reverence for good alcohol. Maybe a slight earthquake had happened in the night, knocking things off the shelves. Except that the other groceries were intact. None of those cans, jars, or bottles had been the slightest bit disturbed.

And the coffeemaker was on, waiting for me. This was an older model that couldn't be programmed more than twelve hours in advance. It required some fairly sophisticated adjustments to get it to work. I didn't remember setting it last night; I doubted I'd have been able to in that condition.

But the coffee sure smelled good.

#

The house transaction had been handled entirely by agencies, so I'd never met the son of the house's former tenants. But his name and address were on the papers. I called him and asked if I could drop by to talk about the house. He was very friendly, and we set up a date.

George worked as an engineer for the phone company. He and his wife Patti had their own house in Encino. They were both in their late forties, and very pleasant. Patti admitted they'd both read and liked my books even before they knew I was buying the old house, and they'd hoped to get the chance to meet me. I said thank you. There's not much else you can say to that.

When the introductory pleasantries were over, I asked George to tell me about the house. "There's not much to tell, really," he said. "Mom and Dad bought it when it was new, and they lived in it all the rest of their lives. I grew up there and lived there all of my life until I went away to college. I even moved back for six months after I graduated until I'd saved enough to get a place of my own. I can remember climbing that big old plum tree in the back yard to get the highest plums every summer. It's a good old house. They always took proper care of it. I hope there haven't been any problems."

"Not particularly/" I said. "Did you ever notice anything peculiar about the house? Did anything strange ever happen there?"

"No, nothing that I — Hey, you're not trying to write one of your horror stories about it, are you?" He gave a big laugh. "That'll be hard to do. It was probably the most boring house in the most boring neighborhood in Los Angeles. No scandals, no murders, no juicy gossip, no bodies buried in the backyard. The most exciting thing that ever happened there was the night my dad got drunk."

"Tell me about it," I said, leaning forward.

"Well, Dad never was an alcoholic, but there was one time when he lost his job and spent several months trying to get another one. He got pretty depressed about it. One night he came home totally soused and very abusive. Mom was the quiet sort who seldom raised her voice. She just stayed out of his way until he passed out, then had me help her carry him to bed and put on his pajamas. Then she calmly went into the kitchen and smashed every bottle of liquor in the place. When Dad staggered out for coffee the next morning, he said the room smelled like a distillery. But from that day on, the only thing Dad ever drank was an occasional glass of wine with a meal."

My mouth suddenly felt dry, and I took a sip of the soda they'd brought me when I sat down. "Do you have any pictures?" I asked.

"They're around somewhere. I could dig them out. It'll take a few minutes."

"Thank you."

George left, leaving me alone with Patti. "Is your wife enjoying the house?" she asked.

I didn't intend my voice to go as cold as it did. "I'm not married."

"But it said in the back of your books that — "

"They don't update those bios as often as they should."

"Oh. I'm sorry."

"Why? You didn't break us up." I shrugged. "Nobody did. It was money."

"Money?"

"Yeah. She cost me four fortunes. She tried running a hobby supply shop, a pet shop, and a high fashion dress shop. All of them went straight into the ground, taking our money with them. When I said no to the restaurant idea, she divorced me and took the rights to all my books."

Patti looked uncomfortable, but was spared having to respond by George's return. "I found them/" he said, waving some old albums. "They were exactly where I thought they'd be."

His father was obviously the photographer of the family, for most of the shots were of his mother, but there were some professional portraits done of the two of them. You could tell at a glance that they fit together perfectly, like a frayed old baseball in a well-oiled mitt.

"What were their names?" I asked. "What were they like?"

"Jack and Marie," he said. "Mom was very much the product of her generation — very quiet, very much the housewife, but always there for both of us with enough love to wrap around us and make us warm. Dad was a rare thing for that era before Phil Donahue — a man who wasn't afraid to show his love for either his wife or me. They were married as teenagers, and it lasted sixty-eight years. And they stayed together because they loved one another, not just because it was harder to get a divorce then. In all those years, I don't think Dad ever seriously looked at another woman. Mom died first, of a stroke. Dad died just three days later — heart attack. He simply had no point in living without her."

"They had me as a fairly late in life baby, when they were just beginning to resign themselves to childlessness. As a result, I got spoiled terribly. They gave me all sorts of — oh there, that's what I mean. That's one of my favorite Christmases. See all those presents. They were all for me — including my first bike."

I studied the photo. It was just what it purported to be. Jack had probably taken it. There were Marie and a preteen George standing in the living room of the house. There was a brightly decorated Christmas tree in one corner, and a bicycle with a green and red bow on it, and enough presents to fill a department store, and a flower-embroidered sofa under the front window and a big red chair in one corner.

#

It was the hardest thing I've ever done in my life, but I called Lois. I don't remember exactly what I said,

but I got her to agree to come over to my new house without her lawyer in tow. If I could get as much imagination into my fiction as I did into that conversation, I'd be on the best-seller lists.

The appointment was set for a Sunday afternoon. I wanted everything to be perfect. The house was all neat and clean, everything was put away, nothing was amiss. I had her favorite cookies out on a little plate. I shaved, dressed up nice, wore the cologne she liked so much.

Then, Sunday morning, I got an attack of kidney stones.

Those of you who've never had kidney stones, count your blessings. Those of you who've had them will instantly sympathize. They're like an ice pick stuck in your back, and every once in a while, just for fun, the sadist holding it will twist it a little. I've heard it's the worst pain a man can feel, comparable to labor in a woman. But it doesn't completely compare to labor, because stones will occur at random intervals, and you didn't even do anything pleasant nine months ago to bring them about.

The right side of my body was in pain and I was feverish, but I resolved not to show it. I couldn't show weakness. Not to Lois. Not today.

She set the tone of the meeting with her opening remark. I opened the door and smiled at her. She marched in, looking around disapprovingly, and I could hear Bette Davis's line echoing in her thoughts: "What a dump!" She didn't say it, though. Instead, she said, "Okay, what the hell is this all about, anyway?"

*Hello, it's nice to see you, too.* "Actually, it's about this house."

She looked around again, but her estimation had hardly risen in the past few seconds. "What about it?"

If I hadn't been in pain from the kidney stones, I probably wouldn't have been so blunt. "Lois, this was a house of love."

"A whorehouse?"

"Not sex, love. This is a house haunted by love."

"What the hell are you talking about?"

So I sat her down and told her about Jack and Marie, living and loving in this house for decades, and about the strange things that had happened to me since I moved in. "The poets always talk about love that conquers death, about everlasting love. Why can't the love that Jack and Marie felt for one another linger in this place, and why can't we draw on their reserves to make ourselves better, more loving people?"

"I see," she said slowly. "You're trying to recapture that haunted house feeling from when you were twelve, aren't you?"

I ignored the brusqueness and stared straight into her face. "Lois, you were my first real love. I never felt more alive, more on top of the world, than those first few years we were together."

Her jaw set in that way she had. "We've been through all this before."

I rushed along anyway. "When the end came for us it was another turning point, a shattering of love. I was sure I could never love again. But this house has been revitalizing me, and I thought —"

"We've been through this before," she repeated, closing her eyes and shaking her head. "It's not a question of loving or not loving. It's a question of personhood, of individuality. You had your writing, your novels, to define who you were. I went to college too, but what did I have to show for it? Just a 'Mrs.' in front of my name. I needed something for myself."

"You had your businesses —"

"Oh yes, you *let* me have my little hobbies, like some men buy their wives furs or jewels."

"I was afraid to say no to you because I was afraid you'd leave me. And when I finally did say no, you did leave me."

"It's not that simple, and you — oh hell, why do I even bother? It was a mistake to come here. It won't happen again."

She stood up to leave. I stood up, too. Or at least, I tried. I winced in pain as the stones sent a shot of pain through my back, and I collapsed back into my chair.

Her face softened. "Not the stones again."

"Yeah, 'fraid so."

"Have you taken anything?"

"I take my allopurinol every day, and I took some ibuprofen for the fever, but the only thing that really does any good is to lie down and wait for the damn thing to pass."

"Then let's get you lying down." She put my arm around her shoulder and helped me walk to the bedroom. I eased myself down onto the mattress, while she stood at the foot, looking at me. "Is there anything I can get you?"

"New kidneys?" I asked hopefully.

"They were all out at the market, last I looked."

"Really, I'm fine. Well, not fine, but as good as can be expected. I'll cope."

She continued looking at me. "Love really had nothing to do with it," she said. "I didn't stop loving you. I just couldn't live that way anymore."

"Well, I hope you're successful and happy."

"I'm doing all right for myself, I think. Now remember, plenty of water, plenty of cranberry juice."

"Yes, Mommy."

She smiled, turned, and left.

I lay on the bed in agony, uncaring. This might feel like labor, but at least when the kidney stones passed out of my body I wouldn't have to raise them, diaper them, and take care of them for eighteen years. I clung to that thought desperately, but it was very small consolation.

It grew dark. My fever got worse. When the light was dim enough and my fever high enough, I saw Jack and Marie standing at the foot of my bed.

"Get out of here/" I said to them. "You guys betrayed me."

Jack look puzzled. "What did we do?"

"It's what you didn't do. She didn't feel it. She didn't feel the love you left behind in here. You didn't make her fall in love with me again."

"All we did was love each other/" Jack said defensively. "We didn't have any secret formulas. We didn't have any magic wands. Just love. If it infected anyone, so much the better, but some people will always be immune."

Marie spoke up. "Do you remember her tone when she walked in, and her tone when she left? I think sometimes people get so eager to see the big miracles that they miss the littler ones."

I think the conversation went on longer, but I don't remember any more of it. Eventually I passed out from a combination of the pain and the fever.

When I woke in the morning, the stones had passed. The fever was gone. So were Jack and Marie. I knew they'd all be back eventually. I just couldn't predict when.

#

My agent was a bit nonplussed when I first explained my plans. "I think I've got just enough in savings to buy back my outstanding contracts," I told him. "I just don't want to write horror any more."

"Well, if you really *want* to write romances, I can sell them for you too," he said dubiously. "I don't think you'll get as much money for them, but —"

"Not romances," I insisted. "Not the way the genre's set up. They're just a big tease. No, what I want to write is love stories."

He gave in. We'd been together long enough that he knew I could write salable copy, whatever I turned my attention to.

The way I look at it, we writers are partly to blame. We fill our stories with hatred and violence, with the dead being so scornfully treated that they have to return to wreak vengeance on the living. We fill the world with nightmares, with sick murderers in goalie masks, with chainsaw killers, with Stallones and Schwarzeneggers spraying rooms with automatic weapons — and the world responds the way we program it. Every day it grows a little colder, a little less human, until one day we'll all look around and start envying the dead their peace and quiet.

I don't expect to change the world. I've learned not to expect that big a miracle. But this haunted house has taught me another Great Truth: miracles are possible, even if they're only little ones. With love, some miracles *are* possible.

Hatred and violence have had their shot. I'm going to give love a chance.

# The Angel in Black

## For Services Rendered

*This first appeared in Magazine of Horror, February 1970.*

It was in Suva that a man came into the Shop. He was conventionally dressed in a conservative suit, but his black skin revealed him as one of the local Melanesian islanders.

"May I help you?" I asked politely.

He seemed unsure of himself. "I, uh, understand that you perform rather special services." It was more a question than anything else. He spoke in a crisp, British English.

"I have been known to help people out of unusual circumstances. What seems to be your problem?"

"It's not me, it's my father. He's about to die."

"I'm afraid there's nothing I can do about that. I never interfere in matters of Death."

The man shook his head. "I wasn't going to ask that. But my father is about to die a natural death, which means he'll be prey for Miru's oven. Are you acquainted with Miru?"

"Not personally," I replied, "although I am familiar with her legend. She's the local hunger demon, is she not, who devours the living souls of those who have died."

"Mostly those who die a natural death," the man amended. "My father is the chief of Kanagea island. It is customary for the chief to lead us in our wars, but since the British have come our wars have dwindled until today there are no wars. My father is thus cheated of the opportunity to die in battle and attain the house of the brave. He has ruled our people for over seventy years, and he is a proud old man; I don't think he fears the heat of Miru's oven as much as he fears the disgrace it would bring our island that he not dwell in the house of the brave. He is virtually paralyzed, or he would kill himself. He has begged me to kill him, but I have been exposed to civilization too long. Nor can I allow any of our other people to do it."

"You want me to kill him, then?" I interposed.

"No, even then Miru might be able to claim him. I want you to accompany my father's spirit, even to thwart Miru, so that he achieves his place in the house of the brave. Do you think you can do that?"

I thought a moment. I have had enough experience with demons to know that they are not easily thwarted. By the same token, I've managed to learn a few things myself, and knowledge is power. "I can always try," I said. "Dignity is one of the few things a man should be able to carry with him, even in death."

"About your fee — " the other began, but I stopped him.

"In a business like mine," I told him, "it is foolish to discuss payment until after the job is done. You wouldn't be here unless you were prepared to pay anything I asked. I assure you that my fee is always reasonable, though what I ask for may seem to you a bit odd."

"Very well. But we'll have to leave at once," he said. "My father was on the verge of death when I left him, and it is a three-hour journey by boat to Kanagea."

"I will just be a moment. I'll have to have some weapons if I am to fight properly." I scanned the shelves and located a vial of the antidote to the *kaoa* draught Miru was reported to give to her victims. And after a moment's consideration, I also took down my flute and tied it, with a special red string, around my waist. "All right," I said at length. "Let's go."

#

The island of Kanagea is a small one, even for the Fiji group. On the west, a cliff rose five hundred feet above the sea. We approached the island from this direction, then swung around to the south. I caught sight of swaying palms and lush vegetation beyond a broad, sandy beach. We docked at a small wooden pier, and I was escorted along the path to the hut where the chief lay dying. I gathered many curious stares from the children that we passed, but I have developed an immunity to curious stares over the years and thought nothing of them.



We approached a large, old-fashioned *bure* that stood apart in the center of a clearing. It did not take much intuition to guess that this was the house of the old chief, since most of the natives have given up the old beehive-shaped, thatched homes in favor of the more civilized rectangular dwellings.

We went in. The interior of the *bure* was quite dim, and the musty-sweet odor of death was so pervasive in the air that I nearly choked on it. We had arrived scarcely a moment too soon. The chief's body lay in the center of the floor. The local shaman was half-heartedly speaking his spells and shaking his sticks over the old man's body, but he was clearly fighting in a losing cause. When he saw me, he moved respectfully away from the body and let me kneel beside the chief.

I clipped a hair from the old man's head and a hair from my own, and skillfully twined the two together. "What's that for?" the chief's son asked.

"You might say it gives me your father's spiritual scent," I replied, "in case we should become separated from one another in Avaiki." I took from around my neck the pendant I always wear. It was carved for me in Renaissance style long ago by a sculptor I once performed a service for. The statuette is in the shape of an Angel in Black, with flowing gauze robes and trumpet held high. I affixed the twined hairs to the Angel and put it back around my neck. "This pendant is not to be off my body while I am in the nether world Avaiki with your father. Is that understood?" The son nodded.

I lay down beside the chief and prepared my spirit to leave my body. I closed my eyes and took long, deep breaths. My pulse slowed. The Angel in Black on my chest warmed perceptibly for a moment, giving me sign that the old man's soul had just departed. I quietly muttered the phrases that would separate my body and spirit. There was the familiar wrenching of mind and soul, and I was free.

Where the inside of the hut had been dim before, it now glowed brightly with the white light of the second sphere, and I involuntarily paused, as I always do, to look around me. I was standing naked except for the flute bound to my waist by the red string. I had the vial of *kava* antidote gripped firmly in my hand. Four blurred figures in the *bure* were the bodies of the son, the shaman, the chief, and myself.

I went outside and saw the spirit of the chief walking off toward the west. I followed after him at a leisurely rate. The path got steeper as we approached the western cliffs, however, and I was forced to quicken my stride to avoid falling behind.

The chief stopped at the top of the cliffs and, as I reached him, I got my first good look at him. In life, he had seemed just a very tired old man about to die. Now I saw him as he really was. He walked straight, his penetrating eyes regally surveying the landscape before him. His demeanor was the quintessence of poise, his carriage that of sedate dignity. I have not often met his like, and I was impressed.

There were other spirits standing there on the cliff with us, and still more arrived after we did. We stood calmly, passionlessly, bathed in the breathtaking hues of the golden sunset. Nobody spoke, nobody moved. The silence about us was complete. Time passed, an indeterminate amount, because Time is a phenomenon with no frame of reference in the second sphere which the spirits inhabit.

There was a movement from the rocks at the base of the cliff. I stood at the edge and looked down. Before my eyes, a giant *bua* tree sprang up from the ocean and grew rapidly to the top of the cliff. It shimmered in the sunset with a mystical aura; it had rainbow blossoms of every imaginable hue, dazzling the eyes with their seemingly phosphorescent glow. The limbs were slumber cradles, the twigs eager fingers enticing us to rest among their boughs. From the flowers issued a perfume tempting beyond words, and the scent drew us, like so many butterflies, to the blossoms. I don't know if I could have resisted that fragrance; I didn't try. For this was the tree that was rooted in Avaiki, the realm of the demon Miru; this tree was her lure for snagging the spirits of the Fijians. To deal with Miru, I had first to find her.

The far-reaching branches of the *bua* tree soon covered with spirits. The tree shuddered, and we started to descend, slowly at first, then more rapidly until our descent was more a dizzy fall. Arms and legs pawed frantically at the air all about me in futile attempts to halt our now giddy plunge. The former brightness around us faded, but did not extinguish entirely. The heat became more noticeable, and increased until it was almost unbearable. Yet, even still there was no sound.

We hit water. This was not the Pacific Ocean, for the water was fresh and hot. According to legend, we had fallen into an Avaiki lake, its heat being generated from the fires of Miru's oven. The water closed

over my head as my terrific momentum carried me down through the boiling liquid. Just as I thought my lungs would burst, my fall ended and I swam frantically back to the surface.

I had time for only a short breath, as my legs were yanked from under me by strands of twisted fibers. I, and all the other spirits, had been caught in the net of Akaanga, the slave of the fearful Miru, and from here there was supposedly no escape. At this realization, a woeful wail arose from the multitude of ghosts. The wail started low, raised in pitch, and then sank again like a chorus of ailing sirens. I gritted my teeth to shut the sound from my ears, for nothing is half so painful to hear as the moaning of souls in torment.

But the moaning stopped abruptly as our captor, Akaanga, grasped the net firmly and began swilling it through the water. I submerged, surfaced, and was ducked again before I could even think. I choked and coughed as the scalding water entered my mouth and nostrils. Panic arose in the spirits around me. They clawed at the net, at their neighbors, at anything around them in their animal urge to escape, but to no avail. I fought the panic within myself, and tried to conserve my energy for the ordeal that was to follow. I clutched my vial tightly in one hand, held my flute to my side with the other. The water swirled over and around me, buffeted me from side to side, and I at last lost consciousness.

#

I was lying face down in sand so hot it burned into my flesh. I still clutched the vial in my fist, and the flute was at my waist. A hot breeze whipped itself across my bare back. I opened my eyes and allowed the dull red glow of the Avaiki nether world to enter.

A lean foot kicked at my ribs and a scrawny hand yanked me to my feet. The air scalded my lungs as I took my first deep breath in an eternity. One of Miru's attendants stood beside me. He was nearly eight feet tall and scrawny as a stick of wood. He seemed a nightmare version of a child's stick-man drawing. His skin was a vivid orange. His face was extremely thin, and his chin came to a sharp point.

I was pushed into a line with the other spirits, who were again bemoaning their fate in a low sob. I could sense that the spirit of the chief was somewhere in the line behind me, but I did not bother to turn to look for him. The line had started to move ahead of me. I took this opportunity to swallow half the contents of the vial, saving the other half for the chief. Then I moved on as we were escorted into the presence of Miru herself.

Miru was fat, doubtless the only one in Avaiki with such a distinction. She was nearly thirty feet in height, and not an inch of beauty anywhere. Her skin was mottled with alternate light and dark splotches; her hair fell haphazardly to her waist in ugly nonarrangement; her face was bloated and warty, her cheeks aglow with the ever-present heat of her oven. It was this latter feature that had caused the islanders to sing of her as "Miru-the-ruddy."

I turned my head to absorb other details. The ground all about was cluttered with untold millions of human bones, all sizes, all shapes, and all were picked completely clean of meat. Akaanga, the fisherman-slave of Avaiki, stood behind his mistress. He was nearly as tall as she, but had that "lean and hungry look" that Mr. Shakespeare so immortalized. On Miru's left sat her four daughters. These were more of human size and shape than their mother, being but six feet tall. They were all exceedingly lovely. A hundred yards away, I could see the famed oven. It was roughly a large dome of iron with an open door, through which could be seen red tongues flaring briskly.

A sudden movement caught my eye back to the right. A tall, sleek form was gracefully dancing its way to Miru's side. This, I decided, must be the demoness's son. He was about the same size as his sisters but, whereas they were clad in nondescript clothes, his garments contained a fantastic assortment of hues and colors. As he whirled in his exquisite ballet, green, red, yellow, violet, and orange whisked themselves across his body in a nearly hypnotic display. I watched with fascination his entrance, each move rhythmically choreographed and stylishly executed. My hand moved to my waist and patted the flute as he came to a stop before his mother.

Miru spoke to her son. Her voice was a booming bass. "Which one do you like?" she asked him. Before he could answer, I stepped forward and bowed gravely. I have always been an exponent of direct action. There is usually little point in trying to bargain with hunger demons such as Miru, as their appetites are constant and their desires inflexible; nevertheless, a straightforward agreement would save

everyone a lot of trouble, and failure to get one would do no harm. "O mighty Miru," I said humbly, "I come before you to beg a minor favor on behalf of the people of the island of Kanagea."

She looked at me with surprise and scorn. "How dare you address yourself to me?"

I ignored her remark and continued. "The chief of the island of Kanagea is a noble chief. He has led his people wisely and well for many years. His only misfortune was in being unable to die a warrior's death in battle. I ask that you relinquish your claim to him, that he may take his rightful place in the house of the brave."

"Which one is the chief of Kanagea?" Miru asked, surveying the line of spirits.

The chief stepped forward proudly, and I walked over to him. While my back was still turned to Miru, I slipped the vial into his hand and made a slight drinking motion with my hand to my mouth. The chief looked at the bottle and smiled understanding. I turned back to Miru.

Miru's son spoke up. "Mother, that is the one I want — the chief. He is one of the best-looking ones I've seen."

"That's no fair!" one of the daughters protested to Miru. "You always let brother have the pick of the lot."

"Silence!" roared Miru, then turned back to me. "What could you offer in exchange for this favor?"

This was my weak point. In former times, I might have offered her the spirits of several dozen of the chief's slaves — but there are no slaves in Fiji now. I had no spirits at my disposal with which I could bargain.

"I would return to the people of Kanagea," I said, "and direct them to build for you a huge temple adorned with gold, with an altar that contains an eternal flame —"

"What need have I for temples and altars?" Miru asked haughtily. "I need food to subsist."

"There is great honor in a temple," I pointed out.

"Honor never filled a belly, Insolent One. Now step back and let this ritual proceed." She turned to her son. "You shall have the one you request."

The boy spun on his toes and pirouetted gracefully into the air in sign of grateful acknowledgment.

I moved back in line next to the chief. He had taken the opportunity, while I was talking to Miru, to drink the rest of the potion in the vial. I pointed to my chest in a gesture meaning that he should follow my lead. Again he nodded with comprehension.

The first soul in line was brought by two of the attendants before Miru. One of the demoness's daughters held out to it one of the human skulls that Miru used as drinking cups. It was filled with a dark draught made from the *kava* root. The spirit took it reluctantly and drank its contents. Within seconds, he fell into a deep, sleep-like trance. The skull slipped from his hands and smashed on the ground, and he collapsed into the arms of one of the attendants, who hoisted him on his shoulders and carried him off toward the oven to be cooked. It seems to me that Miru's giving her victims an anesthetic before they go to the flames is at least more humane than some practices followed in slaughterhouses in the mortal world.

One by one the spirits repeated this procedure, until it came my turn to drink Miru's brew. I stepped forward boldly, accepted the cup, and drank without hesitation. The draught was warm in my mouth, and the bittersweet taste it left on the tongue was not altogether unpleasant. Having taken the antidote beforehand, I was not affected by the drink's powers, but I pretended to fall faint as the others had before me.

An attendant lifted me on his skinny shoulder and started carrying me to the oven. With each step he took, the heat seemed to increase a hundredfold. I braced myself against the heat and waited until he was almost to the oven, out of the direct range of Miru's own powers. Then, with one quick motion, I brought my hands up to his throat and broke his neck. He fell silently to the ground, a foul-smelling green liquid oozing from his mouth, and I scrambled to my feet not ten feet away from the door to Miru's notorious oven.

I picked up one of the numerous bones that lay scattered about and ran over to the servant carrying the Kanagea chieftain. He screamed with fear as I raised the bone to bring down upon his head. The sound still rings in my ears. The attendant crumpled from my blow, and the chief got up and stood beside me. Together we awaited the onslaught of Miru's dreadful forces.

Nor were they long in coming. Upon hearing her servant's dying scream, she looked up, purpled with

rage. "Seize them!" she commanded her legion. "Throw them into the oven and let them roast forever!" Her followers rushed to obey. Swarms of the tall, thin stick-men seemed to appear from nowhere, and bore down upon us with a fiendish fervor. I grabbed the body of one of the already dead servants, whirled him three times around my head and flung him at the mass of our attackers. Seven were knocked down, the rest kept coming.

The chief and I stood back to back, each with a bone in our hands, swinging them at our foes as though they were clubs. We seemed to stand there for ages fighting Miru's awful army. With every swing I took, a stick-man fell; yet, such was their number that they continued to assail us, pushing their dead compatriots out of the way and scrambling over one another in their attempts to reach us. As they attacked, they emitted horrendous war cries, calculated to drive nearly any man from his sanity; but the chief and I were doing some pretty fierce screaming of our own, which seemed to lessen the demons' din. The bone I was using splintered and broke after some time, but I had no chance to pick up a new one. I kicked one attacker in the stomach and he went flying into two of his fellows. I delivered one a karate blow in the side; he snapped like a dry twig. I tore the eyes out of another.

And suddenly, the area before me seemed miraculously clear of attackers. Miru stood on her throne, trembling with fury at the defeat of her army. "Akaanga!" she screamed to her huge slave.

The big fisherman moved ponderously forward. I left the chief to deal with **the** few remaining stick-men. Fighting Akaanga was properly my concern.

I threw a large skull at the giant to ensure his attacking me rather than the chief, then raced to the shore of the lake we had fallen into when we first arrived in Avaiki. Akaanga's net was laid out to dry on the hot sand. I grabbed the edge of the net and tried to lift it, **but** it was impossibly heavy. Akaanga was drawing nearer.

There is a spell I know to give one fantastic strength. It has serious consequences for the user if invoked too often and the strength it gives lasts but a second, but this was a moment to use it. I recited the three lines calmly and felt power surge through my body. I threw the net over Akaanga and pulled down hard. The slave, tangled and confused, tumbled into the lake. I jumped in after him.

The giant was struggling frantically to lift his head out of the water, but the heavy net hindered him. The magical strength had left me by the time I reached him, but I grabbed the net tightly around his neck and pulled with all the normal strength I had. He thrashed wildly, flailing his arms in a mad desire to rid himself of the net and me. After a few moments, the thrashing subsided. I paused for an instant to inhale some of the burning air of Avaiki, then swam back to the shore.

Miru was in a frenzy. Both her army and her giant slave had been beaten, yet even now she was not prepared to yield to me. I decided to play my final card.

I climbed up on top of the oven. The fiery hot metal seared into my flesh like a million torches as I climbed the sides, yet I went on. When I reached the top, I stood with my feet firmly apart on the burning metal and faced the mistress of the invisible world.

"Miru!" I shouted in commanding tones, pointing a warning finger straight at her face. "Hear me, Demon of Avaiki! Unless you immediately grant the chief of Kanagea and myself free passage to the house of the brave, I shall draw your only son into the flaming death of your own oven."

Miru was visibly shocked, half by my impudence, half by my threat. "You dare not," she snarled back. "You cannot."

My only response was a smile as I took the flute from my waist and put it to my mouth. At my very first note, the boy's ears pricked attentively. The tune I played was high and gay, the notes bright and seductive to one who loved to dance as much as Miru's son. The colors of his clothes whirled like a kaleidoscope as the boy began dancing to my tune — hesitantly at first, then with more speed as the song surrounded him, bombarded him, compelled him to join in its mad, gay rhythm. Now he was a rainbow weaving to my music. He seemed to take his life from the melody, bending low when the music lulled, leaping ecstatically when the song went high. He swayed as the rhythm seemed to wind around him and control his movements. As I played, he flickered and danced like a candle flame in a slight draft. And each moment drew him irresistibly closer to the oven atop which I was standing.

Miru watched, frightened. At first she was silent, then begged him to come back to her, and finally

commanded his return. It was all in vain. He was deaf to all but my melody. The heated air carried the tune to his ears, the ground conveyed the rhythm to his feet. He danced closer to the flames.

"Stop that playing at once/" Miru raged at me. I continued my tune. The boy was now a mere five feet from the oven door. I quickened the pace.

The words came hard to Mini's tongue. "You win/" she said at last, her voice a near-whisper. "You and the chief may have safe passage to the house of the brave."

I stopped playing and bowed low to her. "You are most gracious, noble Miru," I said gently.

"Leave," she said to me as her son ran back to her, crying. "The stairway you seek is behind my throne. Leave me to mend my wounds."

The chief and I silently ascended the golden staircase, and at length came to the house of the brave.

There we perceived many warriors gathered around in a circle, performing their eternal war-dance. "My job is over now/" I told him.

He looked at me with grateful eyes. "My people thank you."

I nodded and turned to go. "You may stay if you wish/" he called to me. "One such as yourself who has vanquished Miru's forces deserves a place honored among the honored."

"Thank you, but I cannot," I said softly. "There are for me sights yet unseen and duties yet undone back in the mortal world." I refrained from mentioning, also, that performing in an endless war-dance is not my own concept of a pleasant way to spend eternity.

I made my way leisurely back to my own body. The reunion of spirit and body was accomplished with the same feeling of loss of freedom I always feel upon my returns from the second sphere. I sat up.

The chief's son gasped. "You startled me," he said. "It's been five hours since you and my father ... left. Did everything work out all right?"

"I wouldn't be here if it hadn't. Now, as for my fee, I would like to have your father's skull. I assure you that your father has safely attained the house of the brave, and can no longer be affected by what happens to his mortal remains." The son looked at me quizzically, but gave me what I requested. I estimate that the powder ground from the skull of one who has evaded a hunger demon such as Miru should prove an excellent famine cure, should I ever need one.

### **Bride of the Wind**

*This first appeared in Magazine of Horror, October 1970.*

It was in Bielefeld that a girl came into the Shop. She was tall and lean, blonde, and very pale. I doubted whether she could have been more than eighteen years old.

"May I help you?" I asked politely.

She bit her lower lip, and looked at me with her blue eyes widened. Her hands were shaking nervously.

"I ... I think so. That is, I'm not sure ... " She spoke German with a provincial flavor.

"Don't be afraid of me," I told her. "I won't harm you if you give me no reason. Just tell me why you've come."

"I... I didn't want to."

"Nonsense! You wouldn't have walked through that door unless something were seriously bothering you. I'd like to help you solve your problem, but I can't if you don't tell me what it is."

The girl thought that over. "It's ... you see, I have these dreams."

I looked her over again in reappraisal: Young, shy, probably quite romantic by nature; she could very well be a Dreamer. "What do you dream about?" I asked.

"It's awful. I'm riding on a horse in a storm, and I'm being chased by all kinds of dragons and snakes. I keep crying for help, but nobody hears me."

"Many people have nightmares," I said. "Why did you come to me?"

"I ... I've had this dream now every night for the past two weeks. Then, last night, I felt a message, a compulsion that I had to come here to see you. I don't know why, or who told me, but somehow I just had to come. What does this all mean?"

I was beginning to see the picture. This girl herself wasn't a true Dreamer, although she probably had a potential for it. She was, instead, in touch with someone else, someone who couldn't get in touch with me directly and had to work through an intermediary. I told the girl as much. "What do we do now?" she asked.

"Now I have to get into direct contact with whomever is sending you these dreams to find out what they want." I searched the shelves that lined the walls of the Shop until I found the container I wanted. "Drink this," I told her, handing her the bottle.

"Wh-what is it?"

"Something to make you sleep." The liquid was actually a trance-inducing drug, but "sleep" has better connotations, and I didn't want her to panic. "If the only way we can talk to this person is through your dreams, you'll have to be asleep."

She took the bottle hesitantly, still a flicker of fear in her eyes. "Go ahead," I coaxed. "It won't hurt you. You want to be rid of these nightmares, don't you?"

She drank, and moments later slumped to the floor. I knelt beside her. Her breathing was deep at first, stopped suddenly, then continued at an accelerated rate. "Help me!" she cried. Her voice was no longer girlish, but carried the tones of a much more mature woman.

"Tell me who you are," I commanded.

"I am the bride of the Wind," the woman's voice moaned.

I'd thought the girl's description of her nightmare sounded familiar. Now I recalled where I'd heard it. Long ago, there was in Germany a lady who was a very fine huntress and horsewoman. She would ride to her hunts, trampling over any farms, fields and gardens that lay in her path. When she died, the Wind chose her as a wife, and now she was the hunted, chased by serpents and dragons.

"What do you want of me?" I asked.

"Help!" the voice screeched hoarsely.

"How should I help you?"

"Release me from this horror. Let me rest my soul in peace."

I considered it. Her plea seemed genuine, and I never refuse a cry for help. But I would need the Wind's consent for such an undertaking, something I had little likelihood of receiving. The Wind could be a difficult adversary, but I relished the challenge.

"Very well," I said. "I shall try."

#

I went into the back room of the Shop and took down my sword and scabbard. Neither looks very imposing. The blade is about two and a half feet long and keen-edged, but unpolished. There are no jewels encrusted on the hilt or scabbard — I despise ostentation. My blade is strictly for fighting, and I have found it to perform quite well that way.

I rubbed liniment all over my body, for dragon-slaying is a tiresome business at best, and lay down on the cold floor. My breathing deepened, my heart slowed. There was the familiar body-tearing wrench, and my spirit separated from my body. I blinked in the bright light of the second sphere, stood up, and involuntarily took stock, as I always do, of my new surroundings. Objects in the real world always look indistinct when seen from the second sphere. I was surrounded by dusky shadows and intangible walls that made up the Shop.

I walked back out into the front room. I could make out the body of the girl, still in a trance, as a misty figure on the floor. I bent over her and, taking the pendant of the Angel in Black from around my neck, waved it over her body. The pendant captured the excess spiritual aura that was hovering over her and transferred it to me. I put the pendant back around my neck and set off to track down the bride of the Wind.

It was an indefinite time later that I came to the Garden where I supposed she would be. It was not a very appealing place. The scent of decay hung heavily around it, the reek of dead things and the musty odor of unclean living ones assailed my nostrils, forcing me to cough. My cough seemed to be a signal for the Garden's inhabitants to begin their cacophonous symphony. Cackles, screeches, growls and groans of every description echoed from the tangle of gray-green foliage before me. Now a shriek like a taut

violin string reached my ears; now the half-laughing, half-sobbing wail of some fiendish hyena split the air; now the ferocious growl of some fearful predator warned of its hunt; and always, the sharp, hideous hissing of countless numbers of snakes, slithering through the slimy underbrush, tasting the air with their darting forked tongues.

I entered the Garden. The plants and high grass brushed roughly against my thighs, seeming to grab at me as though either push me back or draw me farther in. Small, unseen animals skittered about under my very feet. I paid them no heed. The way ahead grew darker as the giant ferns seemed to spring up around me, grabbing selfishly for the sunlight. My sword hung easily at my side as I walked.

There was a warning hiss behind me. I whirled, sword drawn, and sliced the head off the muddy-brown serpent that had been coiled there, ready to strike. Blood gushed from its body, the tongue still flickered from the severed head. The Garden grew deathly quiet all around. A challenge had been hurled and accepted. The battle, I could feel, would soon begin.

There was the ringing in my ears that you only hear when there is a complete absence of sound. I stood with my knees slightly crouched, ready to leap in any direction. My hand tightened on the hilt of my sword. Then, with a whinny, a fleeting form burst into view.

I could not have guessed at the woman's age. Her body was full, her face was handsome. Her long yellow hair streamed wildly behind her as she rode. Her eyes were wide with fear, her red lips parted. Her chest heaved massively as she struggled to breathe against the paralyzing terror she felt.

Her mount, also, was quite exceptional. The horse was totally black except for his eyes, which stood out like two glowing coals in a darkened fireplace. His shoulder was more than twenty hands high, and his long legs looked built for speed. His short mane fairly flew behind him as he knifed through the night.

I had but the barest moment to observe such details, for they were gone almost before they had come. I raised my sword now, preparatory to fighting, for the dragon who must be chasing them could not be far behind.

Then came a bellow, the likes of which have frozen hearts the world over, as the dragon came into view. Over fifty feet long, its reptilian body flew on misleadingly small wings. Its eyes were golden dinner plates, its nostrils twin furnaces, capable of melting even the most stolid of foes. Its legs were thick and grotesque, hanging awkwardly from its huge and bulky body. Its pointed tail whipped viciously from side to side as it flew, slicing through a palm tree as though it were a willow-wand. And its mouth was like a monstrous cavern, lined with rows of calcium stalagmites and stalactites like scimitars, waiting to grind into digestible scraps whatever insignificant morsels of meat should chance to fall within the grasp of its claws.

The dragon saw me and, knowing at once that I was its enemy, came straight for me. I dodged a stream of flame and moved up near the soft underbelly. I lunged forward, sword held high. The monster backed off just in time to avoid being stabbed, simultaneously swinging its sharp tail. The pointed edge missed me, but I was struck on the side by part of the flattened blade, and I staggered to regain my balance. The dragon snarled and reached for me with one crooked claw. My sword zipped through the air at it. I was lucky — the edge of my blade cut into the dragon's palm. The beast roared like thunder in an angry storm. I smiled as I saw some blood from the cut dripping out onto my cold steel blade, for I knew that a sword smeared with dragon's blood becomes an almost invincible weapon.

But the battle was far from over. The monster shot more fire, burning me this time on the right side. I winced as the flame seared into my flesh. I whipped around and sliced my sword into its nose, and the reinforced steel again drew blood. Once more the anguished shrieks shook the earth. The dragon lanced its tail at me again; it hit me savagely behind my left knee and I rolled to the ground, the tendons cut in that leg.

The dragon, sensing victory, scooped me up in one scaly claw. I was powerless to resist. I was lifted up to the foul-smelling mouth with its rows of razor-sharp teeth. The lizard tongue darted out at me. With a single motion of the wrist, I swept my sword through it, severing the tongue completely.

Blood gushed forth, so much that it nearly drowned me. I was quickly covered from head to foot with the tepid, salty liquid. The dragon dropped me in its pain, and I fell hard some fifteen feet back to the ground. I landed on my left leg, which sent a ball of white-hot fire coursing through my body as it buckled beneath

me. My temples were pulsing; my leg felt as though a team of welders were trying to melt it with their torches; my eardrums were virtually split from the dragon's screams, and my head was spinning so violently that it was impossible to maintain any sense of direction.

I rose unsteadily, leaning heavily on my right leg. The dragon, if anything, looked in worse shape than I was. It was evidently weakening from its loss of blood, which was still spurting profusely from its mouth. Its tail, rather than lashing, was twitching spasmodically, and its head weaved drunkenly as though trying, like myself, to regain some of its equilibrium. Its wings beat feebly in a vain attempt to get it off the ground again, possibly to flee.

I hopped over to it. The dragon swung its head and snapped at me, but I lunged forward and avoided the monstrous and still dangerous teeth. I jabbed my sword up to the hilt into the soft region at the underpart of the dragon's neck. This was the death blow. Blood flowed from this wound like a river to the sea, forming little lakes and puddles all about the body. The dragon let out its dying scream, a sound unequalled in ferocity or strength even in the second sphere, where horror and ferocity are the keywords. I hobbled away as fast as I could, so as **not to** be crushed by the tremendous weight as the dragon collapsed for the last time. Even so, the impact of that gigantic body hitting the ground set up vibrations and shock waves that rocked the entire Garden and knocked my one good leg out from under me. Then silence again. I picked myself up and limped back to the dead dragon, its green hulk lying very still in the high vegetation. A yellow butterfly came out of the tall grass and alighted gently on the side of that once-mighty creature. I retrieved my sword and put it back in my scabbard. I stood ankle deep in a pool of the dragon's blood, wishing with some part of my mind that I'd had containers with me to collect some of that precious fluid.

It was some time before any other noises rivaled in strength the beating of my heart.

#

A horse snorted behind me, and I turned slowly to face the Wind's bride. She looked at my wounds and said all she could say. "Thank you."

"You're not free yet," I reminded her. "You are still bound to the Wind, unless I can persuade him to release you. Such a task is likely to be more difficult than slaying any dragons."

At that, I heard the Wind. His voice materialized all about me, tauntingly soft and humming. "Why do you wish to steal my wife from me?" he whispered.

I was not deceived by his gentleness. "You are obviously holding this poor spirit against her will," I said. "You have tortured her beyond anything she may have deserved. True, she was once a scourge to the farmers of her land, riding carelessly over their fields, but any anguish she has caused, she has gained with interest. It is time, I believe, that you should let her rest."

"And you have come here to liberate her. Do you really think you can?"

"Yes," I said, trying to project the confidence I didn't completely feel.

The Wind howled. "Then we shall fight for her. The winner does with her what he will."

"That sounds fair. If I defeat you, she goes free. I have your Word on that?"

"Of course. Only you will not defeat me. Instead, I shall destroy you completely. Then I shall deal with my wife for bringing you into this private affair."

"And I may use whatever weapons I choose?" I persisted.

"Naturally," laughed my opponent. "All weapons are equally useless against my supreme power."

I unstrapped my sword from my side and placed it on a nearby rock, for I knew that steel, no matter how well tempered, could not even scratch my foe. In fact, I know of only one weapon that could defeat the Wind — or at least, I hoped it could.

"I am ready," I said.

At that, the Wind rose into battle. I was lifted off the ground as a toy is lifted by a playful child. I spun rapidly as the Wind whirled me around. Then, in an attempt to end our duel quickly, the Wind tried to dash me against the ground. I transformed myself into a bird and glided lightly to earth.

My opponent was not dismayed by my opening defense. Instead, he increased in strength, and I was again lifted into the face of so strong a gale that not even an eagle could fly accurately. I was whirled at a dizzying rate. The Garden seemed to spin wildly beneath me. A strong, sudden gust appeared from



nowhere to drive me against a tree. Before I hit, I transformed myself again, this time to a soft leaf, and gripped the tree as I came to it.

Harder yet the Wind blew, and cold. Now it was an Arctic wind, that chills one just to hear it. No longer playful, it was a wind that could lose men mercilessly in some swirling snow, numb their skins to the point of death, then freeze the blood in their very veins. It was an angry wind that blew in the cold fury of indignation at the thought that so small a challenger as myself would dare oppose it.

Back and forth I was blown, almost as the Wind could not decide which way to best destroy me. Back, forth, around, up, down. And all the while a pitiless shriek cut into my very being, setting up painful vibrations right through my soul.

Below me now was a rocky shore. The Wind, spying a razor-sharp crag, hurled me against it, hoping to rip my leaf-transformation to shreds. Then I made my third, and most difficult, transformation: a pebble. I bounced, unharmed, off the rock.

There seemed no end to the Wind's rage now. High into the sky was I raised, and down almost to the ground was I dashed. I whirled through cyclones, I sped through jet streams. Balmy tropical breezes tried to softly seduce me to false security, then frozen gales battered me all but senseless. I was hurled at rocks, buildings, waterfalls as the Wind tried every trick he knew to shatter me. Around the world I was swept at lightning speeds; over fields and mountains, seas and streams, deserts and cities, jungles and tundra. The Wind was combing the globe, looking desperately for a way to rid itself of me.

But even the Wind, mighty though he may be, does not possess infinite endurance. At first, the change was not evident, but eventually it became clearer that my adversary was exhausting his powers. Cyclones reduced themselves to whirlwinds which, in turn, devolved to harmless eddies. Gales became breezes, then feeble gusts. At length, I was dropped almost gently back amid the high grass of the Garden.

"I cannot destroy you," the Wind confessed. "Now you may try whatever tricks you think you have to destroy me."

"I cannot destroy you," I admitted, returning to my own shape as I spoke.

"Then we are at a stalemate," cried the Wind triumphantly. "Since no one has won or lost, things must remain as they were. My wife shall stay with me."

"On the contrary," I said quietly. "I have won."

The Wind roared, anger plainly evident in his tones. "What trickery is this?"

"No trickery. You boastfully claimed you would destroy me. Yet you have just admitted failure."

"But you, in turn, did not destroy me. How can you then claim victory?"

"I did not say I would destroy you," I replied. "I said I would *defeat* you. By preventing my own destruction, I have thwarted your avowed aims, thereby *defeating* you."

An anguished wail arose as the Wind saw my meaning. "You cheated me!"

"Not at all. You said that I could use any weapons I wanted. I chose the greatest weapon of all — the power of words." As my opponent was already in an aggrieved state, I kept to myself a pun about fighting the Wind with wind.

"Very well," the Wind conceded bitterly. "You have won this time. But I shall never forget your duplicity. Someday, perhaps, I shall have the chance to avenge myself. Do you hear me?"

I totally ignored his threat and turned, instead, to his now-freed bride. "You may go now," I said, "and do with yourself as you will."

"It seems I must always be thanking you," she said, her eyes brightened by diamond tears. "What payment do you require?"

I looked again at her steed. The embers of his eyes seemed to explode out of the ebony of his body. I could sense within him a spirit with exceptional fire.

"I should like your horse for my breeding stock," I told her. "You should no longer be having need of him anyway."

She agreed to my price, and we parted company. I led the horse to the stable beneath the Shop and made a mental note to tend to him at my earliest opportunity. Then, with great reluctance, I went back to rejoin my body, which was lying, as I had left it, on the cold floor of the back room.

#

The reuniting of body and spirit was accomplished with the same loss of freedom I always feel at such times. Then I stood up and went out into the Shop. The girl was still on the floor in her trance. Her facial expression as she slept was enough to dispel any doubts I might have had as to her potential as a Dreamer. I woke her and told her I had settled her problem.

"Do I owe you anything?" she asked hesitantly.

"No. As it really wasn't you who had the problem, and as I've already been paid, you don't owe me anything."

She muttered a hast} *danke shon* and started out of the Shop.

"But you do owe something to yourself," I continued.

She stopped. "What do you mean?"

"You have a potential," I explained, "for a gift which many I know would give all they have to possess. It could remain only a potential, or it may develop of its own accord. You yourself can help bring it out.

There is a training procedure that I can teach you. It is not easy, but the benefits are enormous."

She instinctively felt the truth in my words. "Y-yes," she stammered, "I would like to be trained."

I smiled and nodded. The human race can always use another Dreamer.

## The Chenoo

*This first appeared in Magazine of Horror, February 1971.*

It was in Halifax that a man came into the Shop. I use the word "man" advisedly, for he was actually on the threshold from boyhood. I guessed him to be between eighteen and twenty. He had straight black hair that fell over his forehead into his eyes. His skin had a reddish cast to it, indicating that he was of Indian origin. His nose was straight, his body lean and well-muscled, but his eyes were still those of immaturity.

"May I help you?" I asked politely.

"They ... they told me to come to you/" he said. He spoke English with a weird Algonquian accent that immediately placed him as a member of the Micmac tribe.

"Who are 'they'?"

"The tribal elders. They say it's all my fault, but I didn't know any better, honest. How could they expect me to really believe — "

"Perhaps you should start at the beginning. I'm scarcely omniscient, you know."

"Sorry." He paused for a moment to regain his breath after his hysterical outburst. "I come from a village outside of Pictou. A long time ago, one of my ancestors was the medicine man for our tribe. At that time there was a Chenoo who was marauding our village, killing women and solitary hunters in the woods. But my ancestor was apparently a man of pretty strong magic. He couldn't kill the Chenoo, but he did have enough power to imprison it within a small pot, which he lidded and said spells over so that the Chenoo could not escape. That pot has been kept by my family ever since as a sort of trust. Until me. I didn't believe in the demons that the elders spoke of. I said it was mystical rubbish. And just to prove my point, I took down this old pot and threw it on the ground, shattering it."

I winced at what I knew would be the inevitable result of freeing a demon so long imprisoned.

"There was a whirlwind of air, as if a hurricane had struck," he continued. "My ... my baby sister got in its way and it... it killed her. Then it took off into the forest, leaving a trail of debris behind it."

"I assume, then, that you want me to find it and destroy it."

"Yes, please. I'll pay anything you ask. They all say it's my fault, that I'm to blame. But how was I to know? It all sounded so unbelievable — "

He went on with his protestations of innocence, but I paid him little attention. I was too busy considering strategy. The Chenoo is one of the most dangerous of demons, for it can kill in a variety of unpleasant ways. It is also fast, and a single hunter, unaided, will never be able to catch it. I would need help in this job, but I felt I knew where I could get it.

"You say you will pay whatever I ask," I interrupted my client. "I knew this already, for otherwise you would not have been able to walk through the door. I assure you my fees are always fair, though they often seem odd to the uninitiated. Be warned."

I turned and considered the shelves that line the walls of the Shop, looking for equipment that would prove useful to me in the coming venture. My short-sword came immediately to hand, and I tucked it neatly away inside my belt for the time being. Next, I chose a pair of specially prepared earplugs and a small vial of salamander oil. After another moment's thought, I took down a small black pot and tied the handle to my waist with a special red string.

"All right," I told my client, "I'm ready. Let's go."

#

There followed a train ride of several hours, for Pictou is about a hundred and sixty kilometers from Halifax. At Pictou, we found a couple of horses waiting for us, and we rode straight into the Indian village.

It was a small settlement of scarcely a hundred people who seemed to cling as much as possible to the old tribal ways despite the inroads made by the modern world. Conical wigwams were the rule, though wooden huts could be seen scattered about. I suspected that the people still caught most of their own food — the Micmacs were always expert hunters and canoe-men, and several handmade canoes showed signs of recent usage.

As we rode it, we attracted many stares of polite curiosity — or at least, I did. I always do. Children, in particular, find me fascinating. I've learned to ignore the attention.

We went directly to the wigwam of the medicine man. Inside, the tribal elders awaited us, seated in a circle on the floor. There was the sour taste of tension in the air, as well as hostility. But the anger was directed at the boy, not at me. I could understand, in part, the reason. It had been he who had brought all this trouble into the village by scorning the elders' advice on supernatural matters; indirectly, he was responsible for the death of his sister. And, too, there was the usual hatred of youth by the aged, jealousy for possession of something lost to them beyond redemption.

I ignored these emotional undercurrents. A place had been readied for me. I sat down on the smoothed earth in the center of the circle of elders and made my preparation to leave my body and journey into the second sphere. I gripped the earplugs firmly in my right hand, and checked to be sure that the short-sword, pot, and the vial of salamander oil were strapped to my waist. I fingered the Angel in Black that hung about my neck. "Under no circumstances," I said, "is this pendant to leave my body while I am in the second sphere. Is that understood?"

The elders nodded silently.

I lay back and relaxed all the muscles of my body. At first my breaths were deep, then they became shallower as my body demanded less oxygen. I turned my mind inward and concentrated on the familiar silent ritual for the parting of soul and body.

There was a tremendous wrenching of my mind, and I was free. Free of the cumbersome weight and limitations of my earthly parts. No matter how often I perform this act, it is new each time. I must take a moment to look around me and assuage the frightened part of my mind that all is as it should be.

I shielded my eyes, for a moment, from the bright white light of the second sphere. When my pupils had adapted to the new illumination, I looked around. Dim shapes moved around me, the elders and my client — their bodies threw obscure shadows into the second sphere. My own body, too, lay on the ground, but I was not concerned with it at present. I stood up and walked out of the tent.

The Chenoo's scent was still upon the air in the village, faint but unmistakable. The breeze wafted it from the woods that lay to the north and west of the village, and I knew it was there that my hunt would lead me. Resolutely, I walked toward the trees.

I walked through the woods. The trees were mostly balsam and fir, with a few red spruce daring to intrude here and there among their cousins. I caught fleeting glimpses of the shadows cast by mortal animals that dwelt here — deer shyly running from me, sniffing my presence even through the curtain that separates the first and second spheres. Raccoons lumbered by, and red squirrels raced up and down the tree sides with almost careless abandon. I thought I spied a moose once, but it is difficult to tell with the

shadowy forms the way they were.

I arrived at a clearing and sat down, cross-legged, on a spot of bare ground. I put my palms downward on the ground and closed my eyes. I began to chant.

*Come to me, O Wigguladum-moochkik,  
Very little people, hear my call.  
Come to a traveler who needs your aid.  
I wish a conference with you; come.*

When I opened my eyes, I was surrounded by pixies. They averaged about three feet in height, and they all wore clothing of green and brown, the earth colors. All had white beards of varying lengths, and had little brown caps upon their heads. One of them stepped forward, probably the leader, for his beard was the longest in the group.

"Why did you summon us?" he demanded.

"I have come to request the assistance of the very little people in a hazardous undertaking," I replied somberly.

"We do not perform services for all who ask."

"I know that. I am prepared to pay for your help."

"What do you offer us?"

"What do you need?"

The leader pondered this a moment, then turned back to his compatriots. There was a long conference among the Wigguladum-moochkik, quiet but emphatic. They were having trouble making up their minds. At last the leader turned back to me. "We are currently having problems with the dragon Cheepichealm, who has taken a fancy, of late, to swooping down on any of us who are out late at night and devouring them."

"How is Cheepichealm able to find you at night?" I asked. "Dragons are not known for their sharp-sightedness."

"Nor for their sense of smell," the leader agreed. "Cheepichealm detects us by the sounds we make: our talk, our footsteps, our very breathing. Can you work a spell that would rob him of his hearing, at least in part, so that we might be able to come and go in peace?"

It was my turn to ponder. I know of several spells that can produce deafness in an enemy. The only problem was that I had no ingredients at hand to work with. I tried to recall whether I had the proper materials back at the Shop, but I couldn't be certain — the inventory of the Shop varies quite considerably from moment to moment. "I'm not sure," I said. "I know the spells, but I lack the ingredients at present. Would you be willing to perform your work for me now in return for my help later?"

Another conference. "While we do not wish to doubt your word, our need is urgent. We must find security from these constant attacks."

Stalemate.

"All right," I said. "I will help you against Cheepichealm. I might not be able to produce deafness, but I will incapacitate him in some way."

"That is not an easy matter," the leader warned me. "He is immortal, you know, so that no physical force will avail you. Otherwise, we would have handled the problem ourselves."

"I know this," I said. "But I have many means at my disposal other than purely physical. I have traveled widely among the spheres, and I have gained much knowledge in my wanderings. Something, I am sure, will come to mind. But you must promise me that you will help me first, before I help you."

"No. Our need is more pressing."

I hate to haggle; it's such a waste of valuable time. "My own task," I said, "is the elimination of a Chenoo that has been loosed after many years' captivity. He is even now wandering these woods in search of food and vengeance. Is this not of more concern than the occasional maraudings of a dragon?"

Once again the Wigguladum-moochkik conferred among themselves. I have noticed, over the years, that pixies have a group mentality; they are loath to act without the approval of their fellows. Nothing is quite

so lonely as a pixie cut off from his brethren. They are a lively breed when taken all together, but rather dull when considered as individuals. "You are right," was their final decision. "An angered Chenoo is a far greater threat than Cheepicheim at present. We will help you now, on the condition that you help us with our problem as soon as your task is completed."

"Agreed," I said. "Now here is what I want you to do ... "

#

I was moving again through the woods. My bare feet touched lightly on the thin layer of snow that had fallen. I moved north and west, only partially concentrating on the way ahead of me. Among the silent, stately trees, I could not help but reflect on Mr. Frost's poem. I do indeed have many miles to go before I sleep — many miles, and ugly. Every moment of peaceful beauty I find, therefore, I grab and cherish within me.

A shadow moved where none should have been. It was not the Chenoo, or I would have sensed it before this. Nevertheless, the second sphere abounds in dangers for the unwary. My muscles tensed. "Make yourself known, whoever you are!" I called, my hand resting loosely on the hilt of my short-sword. It was my client who stepped out of hiding. He carried a bow, and had a quiver filled with arrows strapped to his back. His young face was blanketed in bewilderment and fear.

"What are you doing here?" I asked him angrily. It is not right for mortals to go blundering into the second sphere when they have no knowledge of it, and this boy was as ignorant as a child in that department.

"Don't you know how dangerous it is here?"

"They ... that is, the medicine man and the elders ... they thought you might need some help, and ... and since it was my fault — "

"They sent you along to help me," I finished for him. More than likely, they sent him along to teach him a lesson. Tribal elders are a stern group, wherever in the world you find them. They are firm believers in making the punishment fit the crime, no matter how severe the punishment. They would drown an infant that wet its breeches once too often.

He nodded. "Do they know how to get you back?" I asked next. There are various ways of entering the second sphere. Death is the way most people find. There are others, less obvious. But far harder than getting there is the problem of returning.

This time he only shrugged. "I don't know. They rushed me into it pretty quickly."

So here I was, with a boy ignorant of magical skills and frightened nearly out of his wits, in a place that was treacherous at best, hunting a prey that was currently as desperate as it was dangerous. I had no way of knowing whether I would be able to extricate the lad from the second sphere once the task was done — assuming, of course, that he would be in any condition for revival. These "well-meaning" elders had complicated my job immeasurably, and I intended to have a goodly number of harsh words with them when I returned.

But for the moment I had more practical matters to consider. "Do you know how to use that thing?" I asked, indicating the bow.

"I have passed my tests of manhood!" he said proudly, "and I have never returned from a hunt empty-handed."

Well, that was something. The bow could be quite a handy addition to the hunt, used properly. "Give me your quiver," I said.

He did so, puzzled. I spread his arrows out on the ground and muttered a short spell over them.

"Ordinary arrows will never be able to penetrate a Chenoo's skin," I explained. "The spells I have used will strengthen these." And I gave them back to him.

The next problem was much harder, and much more serious. The boy needed protection from the Chenoo before we could continue with the hunt. I had the Angel in Black and the earplugs to protect me; he had no charms at all. Quickly, I listed some ingredients that I wanted him to find, without telling him what they were for. While he went off looking for them, I took the pot from off my waist, filled it with water, and built a fire under it. It was bubbling well by the time he got back.

"Some of those things were awfully hard to find in this snow," he said. "I couldn't get as much as you wanted." I looked at what he had gotten — it would be enough to prepare one earplug, but not two.

Again I muttered a few silent curses against those elders. But one earplug would be better than none at all, and perhaps even that would not be necessary.

I dropped a pebble of about the right size into the pot, then, one by one, I added the necessary ingredients. During the entire procedure, I kept up a mystic chant in a language so old that all meanings of its words have been lost; one can only repeat the words and hope for the best. But the spell always works, for the words are Words of Power.

When I was done, I gave the pebble to my unwanted companion. "Which ear do you hear best with?" I asked him.

"My right," he replied with some hesitation.

"Then put this in your right ear." He did so. I put my face close to the right side of his head and yelled as loud as I could.

"It deafens that whole ear," he said with wonder. "I couldn't hear a thing on that side."

"You really should have a set of them," I told him. "When we come close to the Chenoo, put that in your right ear and secure it tightly. And hope that it's not necessary at all." And we set out again on the trail of the Chenoo.

#

After a timeless interval — for time is irrelevant in the second sphere — we picked up the demon's spoor. The Chenoo, in his angry flight from the village, had cut a path ten feet wide through the foliage, invisible in the normal world but plain enough in this sphere: tree branches quick-frozen by mere proximity to the cold demon's body; the souls of animals frosted over in the wake of the monster's passage; and everywhere along the path was a silence so loud it made our heads throb.

The boy beside me was trembling as we walked the trail, but not once did he utter a word of fear. We moved quietly, without speaking, watching for some sign of our quarry. The pot thumped evenly against my thigh from the rhythm of my walking. My right hand stayed close to my short-sword as I marched along.

Things began happening almost at once. The stillness lay thicker than a winter blanket. Nothing moved. I sensed a presence ... and a large shape moved quickly through the trees ahead of us. "There!" I shouted to my companion and pointed at the fleeing figure.

We took after it at top speed. Crashing sounds reached our ears as the Chenoo raced through the underbrush making no attempt to disguise his path. He was naturally faster than we were, and he started pulling ahead. I made a guess at his thought processes. Since he was faster, he could choose where the chase would run. A crowded forest was to our advantage rather than his, since the trees would hinder the movement of his much larger body. Consequently, he would try to lead us to a place where his size could be used to greater advantage — a clearing of some sort. Once there, he would turn and fight his two would-be destroyers.

Through the forest we sped in pursuit of the ice demon. The boy matched me stride for stride — not an easy feat. He was puffing and tired, but determined to go through it all with me. I began to think of him a little more as a man. But semantic distinctions are for times of leisure, not times of action, and we had work to do.

The Chenoo was waiting for us when we reached the predicted clearing. He was gigantic, over thirty feet tall. His leathery skin was pure white, and he had red eyes glaring with hatred for lesser species. He smelled of frost and cold. When he moved, it was usually in a stooped-over position, as though on all fours, but he could straighten up and stand on two legs to fight. It was in this posture that he met us. In his right hand he carried his weapon — a dragon's horn, which he could hurl with fearsome velocity. My companion, just as he had told me, was an accomplished and experienced hunter. He had an arrow nocked in his bow before he'd had time to stop running and plant his feet for a shot. He fired on the run, then slowed down as he pulled another arrow from his quiver. Meanwhile I ran on, hoping that his arrows would keep the ice demon occupied long enough to let me get into closer quarters for my own brand of fighting.

The Chenoo, moving with deceptive speed for such a large creature, dodged his first arrow easily and moved into a defensive crouch. As I came racing up, he swiped at me with one huge hand. I moved to

evade the blow, but his sharp claws raked my side and caused me to lose my balance. I fell forward and rolled over, thus managing to regain my feet in a minimal amount of time. I spun on my left foot and faced him once more.

He was dodging the second arrow as I charged him again. My object was to cripple him, so I did not stand to fight. Instead, I ran by him, slashing at his left leg with my short-sword as I went. The wound I made was not deep, but it would slow him down and make him more of a match for us.

But now I was in a dangerous position — traveling at top speed with my back toward the Chenoo. I could feel those red eyes fixed on my back as he lifted his dragon's horn to take aim.

I turned around just in time to see the boy's third arrow hit the demon's right arm at the same moment he released the horn. The projectile came at my chest with unbelievable velocity and struck me with an impact that drove me back against the ground. But it did not pierce my skin; the protective magic of the Angel in Black was still as strong as ever.

I lay on the ground for nearly a minute, dazed by the force of the blow. In the meantime, my Micmac friend had managed to place another bolt in the Chenoo, who had been attempting to pry loose the first. This new arrow stuck in at the base of his neck, just above the collarbone. He slapped at it, and the shaft broke off just above the point, leaving a fragment embedded within his skin. The Indian nocked another arrow.

The Chenoo was beginning to realize that this was not his battle, and that the safest course lay in withdrawal. My senses were just now starting to function again. I made a waving motion to the right. The boy saw it and correctly interpreted it as a sign to herd the demon in that direction. He didn't know what I had planned, but he was prepared to trust my judgment. He let fly his arrow just past the Chenoo's right ear. Having no other recourse, our quarry turned to his left and fled once more through the trees.

The lad came over to me and helped me to my feet. He tried to ask if I was all right, but I waved his question aside. We had to keep moving, keep the Chenoo on the run. And we had to keep him going in a certain direction. Short of breath though I was, I explained how I wanted the creature pursued and, as an afterthought, told him that now was the time to put the earplug in his right ear. He obeyed me, and I put my own earplugs in, also. Total silence enveloped me, and I kept running.

It was an eerie feeling, moving at top speed through this ghostly forest with no sounds at all. The earlier portion of the hunt had been silent, true, but it had been a natural silence, a hushed stillness of expectation. This was totally different, an absence of all sound, and it gave the chase a dreamlike quality that took the edge of reality off it.

The Chenoo moved through the woods and we followed, flanking it on either side and guiding its motion. The wounds we had inflicted were enough to slow it down to our speed, and my companion was accurate enough with his arrows to keep it moving in the desired direction.

There was a flurry of motion ahead, and as I reached the spot I had been heading for I looked the scene over and nodded. The Wigguladum-moochkik had done their job well. They had prepared an ambush for the Chenoo, and had snared their prey perfectly as he moved past their trap. Strong ropes of magical strength bound him about the neck, waist and limbs. The other ends of the ropes were tied securely to trees or boulders. The Chenoo strained against his bonds with all the fantastic strength at his command, but still could not loosen them. Several of the very little people darted around his feet, checking the fastenings and making double sure they were right.

The Chenoo screamed.

The earth itself seemed ready to split from the sound. The ground trembled, and leaves flew from the trees. All of nature was shaking, and the vibrations made themselves felt along my backbone. The sound hit like a shock wave, making ripples in the air that blurred the vision and made my eyes water. The sound was so intense I could even smell it, and it had a harsh, metallic-acid taste on my tongue. It seemed to rip through my eardrums as though there were no plugs there at all. My head felt ready to explode.

But I survived. Over to my left, I saw my comrade fall helplessly to the ground, clutching desperately at his head, trying, somehow, to keep out that sound from his half-vulnerable ears. This is what I had been fearing most; the scream of the Chenoo is fatal to the hearer (with the exception of the

Wigguladum-moochkik and a few other magical creatures with special immunity). Even my earplugs, with their strong charms, had been unable to shield me from the total effect of the yell. But I had only been able to make one earplug for the boy.

I ran to the fallen Indian. I picked up the bow he had dropped and pulled an arrow from the quiver. With one shot, I put the bolt into the demon's throat; it would not kill him, but it would make screaming difficult for him in the future. Then I knelt beside the boy and looked him over.

He was still alive. My one earplug had at least managed to do that for him. His breathing was very shallow, and all the color was drained from his face, but he was alive. His left ear — the unprotected one — was swollen and cracked; the skin there felt dead to the touch. He would be deaf in that ear permanently. His right ear appeared unscathed; it would probably remain serviceable.

Having satisfied myself as to the boy's condition, I turned back to the Chenoo. There is only one way to kill one of those creatures and it is a messy task. But I had to do it.

I untied the pot from around my waist and placed it on the ground. Then, short-sword in hand, I climbed up the Chenoo's tree-like leg until I reached his chest. It was like climbing a mountain of ice. The cold of his skin bit into me, numbing my fingers and toes almost instantly and making it difficult to use them. The demon writhed and twisted as I climbed, trying to shake me off him, but the ropes held him fast and he could not make me fall.

My position was precarious and hard to maintain. With my left arm holding tightly around his neck, I thrust my sword into his chest. The Chenoo jerked even harder now; I nearly fell, and I was afraid for just a moment that even the strong ropes of the pixies would not be able to contain him. But they did, and I continued my incision. I hacked and hewed a hole in his chest; haste, not surgical precision, was the guiding factor. A cold, gooey, greenish-white liquid oozed out of the wound, and wherever it touched me its coldness burned like acid.

Then I had his chest opened. I reached in and pulled out his heart. It was a block of ice, colder than cold, and my hand lost whatever feeling had remained the instant it touched it. I dropped to the ground, holding it now in both hands. The numbness was spreading rapidly up my arms. I had to work quickly. Running over to where I had placed the pot, I dropped the heart into it. Then I blew on my hands for a little bit, trying to bring some semblance of life back to them.

The instant that feeling returned to my digits, I took the vial of salamander oil I had brought and unstopped the top. Immediately upon contact with the air, the red liquid began frothing and bubbling. I poured the valuable fluid over the ice-heart in the pot, then stood back.

The salamander is a fire elemental, and salamander oil has magical warming properties. The moment it touched the Chenoo's heart a cloud of steam arose, obscuring my view of what was happening. I could plainly hear, though, the crackling and sizzling as the utter frigidity of the heart gave way to the heat of the oil. The heart was melting. Slowly at first, then at a greater rate, the block of ice that had served as the demon's vital organ turned to water. More water, and more, and more, began to appear in the bottom of the pot. As the pot filled it also grew, and the amount of water seemed to grow with it. Now it was the size of a large dog. Now it was the size of a horse. Now a house. And a barn.

There is only one way to kill a Chenoo — melt its heart completely. But this is not as simple as it sounds, for a Chenoo's heart is the quintessence of iciness, and holds within it a veritable flood of water. Many would-be Chenoo killers had been drowned by not taking the proper precautions before melting the heart.

Finally the pot stopped growing in size, indicating that the heart was completely melted. At this same instant, a gigantic spasm hit the Chenoo, like some galvanizing shock being passed through a corpse. Then all life escaped him. The ropes that held him would not let his body fall, and so the lifeless demon just hung there in the clearing, limp and loose.

Still the properties of the salamander oil were not exhausted. The water in the pot began to boil, and steam began to bellow forth. Within a minute, the Canadian forest seemed as hot and humid as a Brazilian jungle. And as more and more steam dissipated into the air, the pot began to shrink once again. And eventually, it returned to its original small size.

I looked inside it, hoping there might still be some of the salamander oil unused, for that is a difficult



commodity to come by. But the pot was completely empty. So I shrugged my shoulders and tied the pot back around my waist. Then I went over to the still-inert figure of the Indian lad. I hoisted him up over my shoulder easily and started back toward the village.

Back inside the hut that had been my original departure point, I laid the boy's spirit down beside his body, which was lying on the ground next to mine. Then I settled down to my own body. I took a deep breath, dreading the feeling that I knew would be coming. Then I re-entered my body, and I felt confined, once more, to the most mundane of worlds. It's a feeling that lasts only a moment, fortunately, that loss of freedom. I do not really despise our sphere, for it is the gateway that makes all other worlds possible. But, for that one instant of returning, it always seems the most suffocating of prisons.

I sat up.

The wigwam was still crowded with the tribal elders. I gave them one sweeping, contemptuous glance, then turned my attentions to the boy who lay stretched out on the hard ground, lifeless and unmoving. Carefully, I took the Angel in Black pendant from around my neck and put it around his. Holding the Angel cupped in my left hand, I jabbed my right forefinger at the boy's chest, just above the heart. His body jerked. I did it again and got the same reaction. Once more. The boy groaned, and his eyelids flickered. I grabbed his wrist. There was a pulse there, weak right now but gaining in strength. I sighed and put the pendant back around my own neck. Then I stood up and addressed the elders.

"This lad tampered with the forces of the supernatural, forces he did not understand, and in doing so brought havoc unwittingly upon your village. It was just and proper that you should send him to hire me, for he will have to pay my price and it will be a high one. But you were not content with this punishment. You consigned his spirit to the second sphere, supposedly to help me. In doing this, you placed him in jeopardy far beyond anything he might have deserved. You, too, have tampered with powers beyond your comprehension, and your crime is far worse than his — for he acted out of ignorance, while you acted from willful maliciousness.

"I therefore charge you thusly: that this lad shall be your next chief, upon the death of your present chief, and that you shall respect him as you would one of your great warriors. For I have fought at his side against a mighty Chenoo, and he bespoke well for himself indeed. He is, perhaps, more of a man than you deserve to be led by, but I am an optimist by nature and inclined to generosity."

The boy began stirring, and his eyes were opened. I turned back to him and knelt at his side. "How do you feel?" I asked.

His throat was hoarse, and his voice barely audible. "The whole left side of my head is numb."

I nodded slowly. "It is the effect of the Chenoo's yell. You will be deaf on that side, beyond any power to heal." I saw no reason to lie to him, and he took the blow in stride. He winced slightly, but accepted it.

"What is your price?" he asked after a moment.

"Your left ear," I replied. "I can remove it painlessly, and with no harm to the rest of your body. It is of no further use to you, and of great importance to me." He bit his lip and there was a tear in his eye. No man likes the idea of disfigurement, even of a totally useless organ. But he knew instinctively the truth in what I said, and again accepted.

A deaf ear. The key ingredient I had been lacking for the spell I could use to rob the dragon Cheepichealm of his hearing and thus fulfill my bargain with the Wigguladum-moochkik.

I do not always take my payment with pleasure.

### **The Masai Witch**

*This first appeared in Whispers, October 1983.*

It was in Nairobi that a woman came into the Shop. She was black, of course, and her simple clothing showed that she was not from the city. She was somewhat unattractive, being dumpy and round-faced, with sagging breasts and a tired expression. Her eyes, lined by hardship, wanted to cry, but pride held back the tears. She was probably only in her middle thirties, but that can be quite old for a tribal wife.

"May I help you?" I asked politely.

"It's about my husband," she said. She spoke Swahili, but with a strong Kikuyu accent. "He has fallen under a witch's enchantment, and not even our *mundumugu* can break the spell. Unless you help him, he will die."

I faced a minor ethical question here. I do not, of course, interfere in matters of Death, and so saving her husband's life would be technically out of my jurisdiction. On the other hand, breaking magical spells is part of my business. If, in the process of breaking this spell, the man's life were saved, I would still be acting within my limitations and everybody would be satisfied.

"How did he come under this spell?" I asked.

"That is a long story," the woman replied. "Our tribe is Kikuyu. We have never been able to get along with the neighboring Masai tribes. We are farmers and they are warriors, and they have always been trying to claim parts of our lands. There had been no fighting, though, for a number of years, and we thought that maybe peace had come at last.

"Six days ago, my husband was out in our cornfield when a *moron*, a Masai tribesman, approached. He told my husband that he was claiming a corner section of our field for his own. My husband quickly called in some of our neighbors, and the group of them drove off the Masai warrior. As he left, though, he vowed to have vengeance upon my husband.

"The next day my husband fell sick. Nothing the *mundumugu* could do was of any help. Finally we consulted the oracle, which told us that the Masai man who had been in our field was a powerful witch, and had placed a strong spell of sickness upon my husband. The witch doctor then suggested that I come to you. He said that you would help me."

"Yes," I said. "I will."

I scanned the shelves. A silver lasso caught my eye, and I took it down. Then I grabbed an ivory knife and a specially treated bowl of clay. Since I was to be opposing a powerful witch, I also slung my utility pouch around my shoulder. I considered taking some of the normal medicines that were lying about, but thought better of it — if the local *mundumugu*, or witch doctor, had been unable to break the spell on his own, then the spell was probably too strong for the more commonplace remedies.

"I am ready," I said at last.

#

There was a train ride of several hours, and then a walk through open flatlands for three more. The woman and I hardly said more than a dozen words to each other during the entire trip; she was no doubt worried about her husband, and I had other things to occupy my mind.

It was late afternoon when we reached our destination. The village was typical of the primitive tribes in the region. Groupings of thatched huts were spaced randomly about, standing maybe half a meter above the ground on wooden stilts. Very little grass grew between the huts, as the ground was beaten flat by the walking of many feet. It was the dry season; rain hadn't fallen in months, and the dust blew free in whatever breeze chanced to puff through the village. There was a well near the center of the village, and a small knot of people had congregated around it.

I drew a number of curious stares as I entered the village, mostly from the children. The adults had learned to control their curiosity better, and tried hard to pretend that they considered me a part of their normal environment. I am quite used to both reactions, and ignored them.

The woman took me to her hut and we entered. Her husband was lying on his back on a bed of straw, covered with a red woolen blanket. Despite the covering, he was shivering violently, his teeth clicking rapidly as they chattered. Sweat was beaded all over his face. He moaned ever so slightly and turned over. He curled into a fetal position. The shivering continued.

I knelt beside him. Taking the Angel in Black pendant from around my neck, I passed it over his body. It glowed slightly and grew warm. Yes, there was a spell on this man, quite probably a very strong one.

I do not specialize in any one field of the paranormal, most particularly an enormous field such as medicine. I have picked up a great deal of knowledge in my years of work, but it is scattered over a wide range of subjects and is far from being all-inclusive. I did not have any specific knowledge of what spell it was that held this man, and even if I had, I might not have known the particular remedy that was called for. I could have used the trial-and-error method and eventually hit upon the correct solution, but I am

more an exponent of direct action. I generally find it faster and more effective to go to the source for my information.

I asked the woman for information on how to reach the Masai village. She wasn't sure — tribal women are not encouraged to be founts of knowledge — so she took me to see the *mundumugu*.

"Why do you wish to know this?" he asked me. "Why can you not cure this man from here?"

"I do not specialize in medicine," I told him. "Therefore, I plan to capture this witch and force him to remove the spell himself."

"You would dare oppose a witch so powerful?"

"I've fought worse/" I shrugged. The witch doctor shook his head a little, but gave me the directions I needed.

I set out across the fields to the *manyatta*, the Masai village. Aside from being dry, the weather was quite pleasant. The dry spell had caught the corn half-grown, with the green stalks scarcely more than a meter and a half high and not yet fully developed. The sun shone down, warming the scene, and eventually a breeze picked up at my back, accompanying me on my trek. Occasionally I could spot some Kikuyu villagers in the fields, but they generally ignored me and I did **not** try to engage in any conversations. I had business to conduct.

Past the last field, there was a small forest to the west and scrubland, untended, to the east. I headed into the scrubland, for the *manyatta* was located three or four kilometers past it, in a small meadowed area.

It was there that the Masai grazed their small herds of sheep.

As I walked, the atmosphere began to change. It became quieter, more subdued. **I felt** a presence watching me. The witch, then was growing aware of me, was preparing action against me. Somehow, nature sensed this and anticipated. Animals scattered away from my vicinity and the incessant humming of insects dimmed perceptibly. I walked on.

Suddenly, a wall of flames sprang up around me, and I stopped. I was in the center of a circle of fire perhaps five meters in diameter. The tongues of flame reached up over my head, flickering their red heat and making the atmosphere waver in front of my eyes. I calmly stood my ground and recited a short rain spell I knew. Abruptly, a downpour commenced and the water quickly doused the fire. I spoke the next two lines of my spell, and the rain ceased.

Thrust and parry. I continued on.

A short distance further along, I found my way blocked by a trench filled with wriggling black serpents. Poisonous ones, no doubt, by the looks of them. The trench was too wide to leap across. I sat down on the edge and pondered for a few moments the best way to pass this obstacle.

I reached into my utility bag and pulled out a stake. I drove it deep into the ground at the edge of the trench so that it would be able to support my weight. I tied the silver lasso into a special knot around the stake, then I hurled the ivory knife across the chasm, and it dug itself tightly into the ground on the other side. With the free end of the line, I lassoed the knife and pulled the rope taut. I now had a tightrope. Very carefully I inched my way across it. I have had no specific training as an acrobat and I found the crossing a bit unnerving, with the thought of those serpents waiting below me if I should slip. **But** I didn't. When I reached the other side, I gave the rope a sharp tug. The knot untied itself from the stake and I reeled in the line. I pulled the knife out of the ground, wiped the dirt off it, and continued on.

Then the whole world went white. Sky and land merged together in one featureless brightness that was near to blinding. The phenomenon is known to arctic explorers as "white-out," and is a naturally occurring feature of the polar regions. Here, on a plain in Kenya, it was no natural phenomenon, but a powerful magical hallucination conjured up to prevent my reaching the Masai village.

I paused again. The first test had been a minor skirmish of magic versus magic, and the second had called for little more than physical dexterity. But I knew of no spells to counter this white-out, nor did I dare wander about aimlessly through the uniform brightness. Therefore, some wits were needed.

I reasoned things out. The spell was intended to keep me from reaching the village, and was therefore aimed solely at me. The witch could conceivably have changed the nature of the entire landscape around me, but I doubted it, since that would have been inordinately difficult. The easier way was to alter the way I saw things. In other words, everything around me was normal but I was seeing it as a white-out. In

order to overcome this obstacle, I had to find some way of seeing things as they really were. I reached into the utility pouch at my side and pulled out a small silvered mirror. Holding it up to my face I could see that, in the glass, the ground behind me was plainly visible. As I had suspected, magic had no effect upon the silvered mirror. Therefore, I turned around and held the mirror in front of me, so that it reflected the direction in which I wished to go. Walking backwards, I proceeded towards the village. After I had gone about a hundred meters in this manner, the white-out ended as abruptly as it had begun. I walked on without further incident, until I reached the Masai village.

#

This *manyatta* had a much less permanent look about it than had the Kikuyu village. A brisk wind would have blown down most of the huts, which were arranged around one another in a haphazard fashion. A couple of naked children played in the dust. Not many adults were visible, at first, but as I walked into the center of the village they came to the doors of the huts and stared at me in silence.

When I had reached the approximate center, I stopped and addressed the assembled throng. "One among you is a witch," I said. "Where is he?"

No response. The people continued to stare.

"Deliver him to me and I will see that no harm comes to you."

Again, no reaction. I could understand the people's reluctance to speak out. Nobody wanted to make an enemy of a witch, particularly a powerful one. They knew the strength of his powers, and they knew that to betray him would bring his revenge down upon their heads. My own powers were unknown to them, and they were not at all sure I would be able to protect them as I had promised. Silence, they reckoned, was their wisest course.

I took the Angel in Black pendant from around my neck. "Very well," I said. "I shall find him for myself." Holding it in my hand like a pointer I turned slowly around in a circle, clockwise. I had gone almost three-quarters of the way around when the pendant began to tingle in my hand. I took two steps in the direction I was facing, and the tingling grew stronger.

Then a man stepped forward out of the shadows of his hut. He was tall, well-built, muscular. His handsome face was painted with witch markings, and his erect body was bare except for a loincloth.

White teeth flashed as he spoke. "Why do you seek me?"

"I have come to tell you to remove the sickness spell you have placed on the farmer of the neighboring Kikuyu village."

The witch laughed. "And if I refuse?"

"Then I shall force you to tell me the cure."

"This I do not think you can do," he said. His smile was taut but confident.

I had replaced the pendant around my neck by this time, and had begun calmly fingering my lariat. The other inhabitants of the village had withdrawn inside their huts, watching cautiously through the doors. I was reminded of a shoot-out in a Western. "We shall see whether I can or not. Do you then refuse to do as I ask?"

"Yes," he said; but before he could even finish the syllable, my lasso was flashing out, silver glittering like a snake in the sunlight. The loop dropped over him before he had a chance to react, and I yanked it tight about his waist. I began pulling him toward me.

And then it was not a man that my rope held tightly, but an enormous enraged water buffalo, one thousand kilograms of ferocious beast. He came charging at me head down and horns pointed. I leaped aside, still keeping hold of the silver rope, for to let go would be to lose everything. He continued past me and dragged me for several meters along the ground before stopping and turning on me once again.

This time as he came at me I stood my ground until the last possible moment, then tried to grab one of his horns as I jumped slightly out of his path. His momentum almost tore my arm off, and I had to let go.

He took a bit longer in turning around this time to make another pass, either because he was tiring or because he now thought he held the upper hand. I used the extra moment to fashion the other end of the lasso into a loop. When he charged this time, I dodged him easily, flung the lasso around his two hind legs and tightened it. One hard tug, and my opponent had lost his balance and fallen to the ground.

I leaped on him. He thrashed around madly trying to rise again and twisted his head in all directions in an

attempt to gore me with one of those incredible horns. I don't know how I remained on top of him or kept him from getting up. I had the Angel in Black off from around my neck again, and somehow managed to slip it over his neck without being gored in the process.

The instant the pendant was around his neck, he was transformed back to his true man-shape, and was much more easily handled. My left hand was tightly around his throat, pinning his head back against the ground and choking off his air supply. I did not relax my grip until he had lost consciousness. Then I quickly bound him with the silver rope about the legs, hands and throat, so that any attempt to get out of his bonds would strangle him. Not until I had done this did I take the Angel in Black from around his neck and place it back around my own.

The villagers were still peering silently out of their huts, afraid to believe their own luck. I doubt whether they had been very happy having the witch in their village. A man like that who knew his own powers must have been a formidable despot. They would not have helped me eliminate him from their midst, but they were just as glad, afterwards, that I had.

I paid them little attention, for the witch was my major concern. I clipped three hairs from his head, then drew a circle around the spot where he lay on the ground, meanwhile muttering a short spell under my breath. I sensed his return to awareness just as I finished. He kept his eyes closed, though, feigning unconsciousness.

"It does you no good to fake," I said patiently. "I know that you are awake and capable of answering." He opened his eyes and stared at me with what he was no doubt hoping was unnerving calm. I have faced worse before, and was not impressed. "Tell me why you wanted the land of the Kikuyu farmer." He continued his stare in silence.

"Very well, let us see if we can make you more cooperative."

I got out the special clay I had brought along specifically for this eventuality. Unhurriedly, I fashioned it into the shape of a man. As I worked, the witch watched me with a look of concerned interest. He knew what I was doing.

Then I stuck the three hairs I had taken from his head into the clay image and recited

*Let this image be the witch And their destinies intertwine. His spirit is locked herein; May they be evermore inseparable.*

I then took out my ivory knife and held it above the clay figure. "Do you now wish to answer my question?" I asked the witch.

He grimaced as he replied. "Very well. That particular section of ground that I wanted is one on which several generations of my ancestors, all witches, lie buried. I needed possession of that magical ground in order to perform a particular spell."

That sounded reasonable. If the bones of several witches really were interred there, the ground would be strongly imbued with the latent powers of their magic. A place of power on which to stand and cast spells of even greater strength than he was now capable of.

"Now," I said, "tell me the spell of sickness that you inflicted upon the Kikuyu farmer, and also its antidote."

"Never," he said with vehemence. "Never shall I show mercy for my enemies."

I brought my knife closer to the clay image. "Are you sure?"

He was clearly frightened by the threat. But he was proud, too. It was written in his soul and mirrored in his eyes. "You may kill me," he said, "but I shall triumph anyway."

I could not let him call the bluff; there was too much at stake. I raised my arm high, all the while not taking my eyes from his face. He showed all the defiance of a martyr. Regretfully, I brought my arm down quickly, plunging the knife into the heart of the clay figure. At the same moment, the Masai witch jerked, then lay still. He was very, very dead.

My bluff had failed.

#

I sat there beside the body for a very long time, trying to think of something else to do. I did not berate myself for the tactics I had chosen that led me into failure; such recriminations are a waste of time. I prefer positive action.

At last I stood up. I gathered my equipment together and left instructions with the Masai tribesmen to burn the body of the dead witch. Then I left the village and walked west.

After passing through the same scrubland I had traversed in coming to the village (and stopping to retrieve my stake along the way), I reached a small forest of pencil cedars. By now, the shadows of dusk were on the air. I walked a short way into the woods, stopped and cleared a small area of ground. I put my gear down beside a tree and lay flat on the ground.

I willed all the muscles of my body to relax. My breathing deepened at first, then became more shallow. The Angel in Black glowed warmly on my chest. Then, with a terrific wrenching of body and spirit, I entered the second sphere. Temporarily blinded by the harsh white light, I stood up and looked around. My body lay on the ground beside me, casting its shadowy form into the second sphere. Around me, too, was the ghostly presence of the trees. Physical objects of the first sphere can intrude into the second, but usually only as insubstantial wraiths.

I left my body where it was and walked perhaps a hundred meters farther into the forest. Then I stopped. The quiet of the second sphere surrounded me. I broke the silence with a yell. "Chiruwi!" I called. "Come. I wish to contest with you." Then I waited.

It was not long before a chiruwi appeared. He was a half-man spirit, having but one eye, one arm, and one leg of flesh; the left side of his body was made of stone, hard and cold. His one eye sparkled, and his stone hand clenched and unclenched with anticipation. "Did I hear something about a contest?" he asked in a powerful, deep voice. The slowness of his speech was intended to imply a similar slowness in wit, but I was not fooled. Chiruwis are more than just the simple creatures they appear.

"Yes," I replied. "For the usual stakes."

He approached slowly, then, with deceptive speed, he lunged at me. His stone hand grabbed my right arm in a crushing grip, and his flesh hand was not much weaker in going for my neck. I tried to duck under him, but he would not loosen his hold on my arm and I only managed to twist myself into a painful position. He bent even more at my right arm, with a strength that threatened to snap it off entirely. With my left hand, I aimed a karate chop at his ribs. The chiruwi grunted, but my blow was slightly off and did not disable him. Still gripping my right arm, he used his powerful strength to whirl me around his body two or three times. I was dizzy and grabbed for the first thing I could to stop the spinning. Fortunately, it was his neck. My thumb dug into the flesh part of his throat. The chiruwi began choking. He stopped whirling me and tried to pull my hand away from his neck. In doing so, he let go of my right arm.

This was what I had been waiting for. With my left hand still at his throat, I reached my right arm down and around his left thigh, then pulled up with all the strength I had. The chiruwi left his feet and went crashing down to the earth with a resounding boom. I fell on top of him. Quickly, I pressed my knee to his throat. "Yield?" I asked.

"Yield," he agreed. "What is it you wish to know?"

The chiruwis are repositories of all medicinal knowledge in this part of Africa. If one can throw a chiruwi down in a fair wrestling match, as I had just done, he is bound to reveal to the victor whatever magical cure is asked of him. I described the farmer's illness to the half-man and, when I had finished, the chiruwi nodded wisely. He then told me the spells I would need to say and the ingredients I would need to collect in order to cure the farmer.

Only then did I let the chiruwi up off the ground. Without a word, he turned his back on me and walked off into the forest. Chiruwis are not very sociable creatures, generally preferring to remain by themselves. Their only social contact is through wrestling matches, for which they have an inordinate passion.

I walked back to my body and lay down on top of it. The rejoining of body and spirit was accompanied by the usual feeling of loss of freedom, of being confined to a prison of corporeal form. Fortunately, this feeling lasts for only an instant, and then I am able to continue living in the first sphere without undue regret.

I spent the rest of the night gathering together all the ingredients that the chiruwi had said I needed. By the time I returned to the Kikuyu village, dawn was warming the eastern sky.

The wife and the *mundumugu* were beside the farmer's body as I entered. The witch doctor was surprised to see me. Apparently, he had given me little chance of defeating the Masai witch. They both

stood up and gave me room to work.

I spread the ingredients out before me. I laid some roots on the man's chest and rubbed the juice from several berries on his forehead. I bit a couple of other roots and chewed them for awhile inside my mouth, ignoring the bitter taste on my tongue. When they were thoroughly masticated, I took them out of my mouth and laid them on the man's throat. I repeated the spell the chiruwi had taught me. When it was finished, the farmer was lying still. He no longer moaned or shivered, and his convulsions had stopped. His breathing became more regular as he passed into a normal sleep.

I straightened up, stretching the muscles of my body. "He will be all right, now," I told the onlookers. "Also, you will no longer be bothered by that Masai witch."

The witch doctor looked relieved, the woman grateful. "What must I pay you?" she asked.

"On the land that the Masai witch tried to take from you are buried some bones. I wish your permission to exhume them and keep them."

The woman seemed a bit startled that that was all I asked, a seemingly small price to pay for her husband's life. But I knew the value of those bones, and I knew that I could use them in the future to lend incredible power to certain spells of mine.

### **In the Land of Angra Mainyu**

*This first appeared in Nameless Places, 1975.*

It was in Tehran that the simurgh came into the Shop. I had not seen him for quite a long time, but he still looked as magnificent as ever. His golden feathers sleeked majestically down his body, the two powerful wings folded neatly at his sides. His beak curved sharply and his eyes were darting and alert. I started to greet him as one would an old friend, but something in his demeanor warned me that he had come to the Shop on business rather than pleasure, so I resorted to my standard welcoming line.

"May I help you?" I asked.

Saena did not waste his time with words. "Zohak is loose."

That was a startling pronouncement. "But the Time has not yet come — " I started to protest.

"That, at the moment, is incidental. He is loose."

"How did it happen?" My professionalism overcame my surprise, and my mind became analytical almost at once.

If the simurgh had had shoulders, he would have shrugged them. Instead, he turned his head quickly from side to side in his gesture of uncertainty. "It has been a long time since he was chained. Many things could have happened. Spells lose their powers, water eats through chains, insects nibble at bonds. Who can say how he escaped? But he is out and must be recaptured before he can work his harm on the world."

"How long since he escaped?"

"Three days."

"Three days! Why did you wait so long to tell me?"

The simurgh hesitated here. The question clearly embarrassed him. "I thought I had taken care of the matter by myself. As you know, I sometimes involve myself in the affairs of men, particularly heroes.

There was one man in a small mountain tribe that I had been watching for years, in whom I thought I saw the potentials of heroism. When I first heard of Zohak's escape, I instructed this man to recapture him. He went off to Mount Demavand in a properly aggressive spirit, and I thought that would be that.

"But I hadn't reckoned on Zohak's being able to get in touch with his old allies so quickly. A Druj in the guise of a beautiful woman sidetracked my man, and is now holding him under a spell in the land of Angra Mainyu." The simurgh sighed. "Heroes just don't seem to have the power of self-denial nowadays."

"No," I said abstractedly, meanwhile planning strategy. "I suppose the first order of business will be to free your man so that he may help me in the fight. For I've no doubt that Zohak will not be fighting alone by the time we reach him."

"Probably not," Saena agreed. And when I was silent for some time, he continued, "I suppose you will require the usual payment."

I shrugged my shoulders. "I didn't make the rules," I said apologetically.

"I know."

I scanned the walls of the Shop, searching the shelves for something that might aid me in my upcoming job. A vial of *haoma* juice was one of the first things I spied; that usually comes in handy. My iron staff, yes, definitely. A special type of thread for binding Zohak once we'd recaptured him. And the Cloak of Lies would serve a double purpose. It would keep me warm in the frigid land of Angra Mainyu — but warmth was the least of its advantages.

I fingered the Angel in Black that hung about my neck. The pendant was given to me in payment long ago by a grateful sculptor. My fingers stroked the flowing gauzy robes and the upheld trumpet of the figure, and I felt the usual soothing effect. I was ready.

"Let's go," I said.

#

Mount Demavand is less than a hundred kilometers northeast of Tehran. I gathered up all my paraphernalia and climbed on the simurgh's back. We went out the back door of the Shop (oh yes, it does have a back door, though few have ever seen it) and he took off. His powerful wings now showed their true strength, for he carried even my weight without a trace of effort. On we flew at great speed, for there was no time to waste. We quickly left the city behind us and were flying over open country. At first, the land below was relatively flat, but it quickly became more hilly and rolling as we approached the Mazanderan Mountains. Mount Demavand was soon towering before us, an imposing rocky giant reaching defiantly for the sky. But up was not the direction that concerned me, for I would not have to scale this peak. Rather, my search would take me down to the subterranean depths beneath the mountain, into the land of Angra Mainyu.

The simurgh landed beside the mouth of the secret cave whose existence is known only to a few. Inside, I would find the path that would take me where I had to go. As I alit from his back, I asked, "Will you be coming with me?"

"I think not. My home is in the skies, not beneath the earth. I may be needed more above ground than below it."

I nodded at Saena's words. I had not really expected him to accompany me, and I am quite used to traveling alone. It would have been nice to have had his company along with me on the difficult journey ahead, but I would manage without him.

The simurgh flew off as I entered the cave. Even just a few steps inside the interior was the blackest of darks. The darkness was a thick, clammy sponge that greedily soaked up every ray of light that penetrated that far. Fortunately, I would not have to make my journey under such terrible conditions. I put the thread and the vial of *haoma* juice in the interior of the Cloak of Lies and fastened the cloak tightly around me. I gripped the iron staff firmly in my hand. Then I lay down on the hard ground and relaxed all my muscles, preparatory to leaving my body. I breathed deeply at first, then more shallowly as my body required less oxygen. I could feel my pulse slowing, and the Angel in Black on my chest began to glow faintly. Then, with the familiar-but-awesome wrenching of mind and spirit, I broke free of my earthly form and entered into the foreboding area of the second sphere. And, as always, there was the familiar disorientation that accompanies the intersphere transition. So I stood up to take stock of the situation.

Normally, the first thing about the second sphere that hits me is the bright white light that pervades the atmosphere. It was still present here in the cave, but the awful darkness of the cavern managed to affect even that — the light was dimmed to such an extent that I scarcely had to blink. But there was still enough to see by. I could make out the dim shadow on the ground that was my body's projection into the second sphere, hazy and insubstantial. Stalactites glistened overhead and dripped little drops of water on the cold stone floor. A sudden breeze blew through the cave, and I pulled the Cloak of Lies about me for warmth. A little further into the cave, the downward path began.

I started out. At first, the path was easy to travel, being broad and smooth and moving downward at a modest incline. But it very shortly grew more difficult. There was dust on the ground, looking as though it had been lying there undisturbed for centuries. I began to find small fragments of rock in the path, then



larger ones. The road started narrowing as the walls of the cave squeezed together in an almost willful attempt to crush the hapless wayfarer. The ceiling got lower, and I was forced to stoop as I walked. Without warning, the tunnel ended and the path became a ledge. To my right, an enormous circular shaft twenty meters in diameter plummeted down into the depths of the earth, seemingly bottomless. A chilly breeze blew up from the shaft, and I pulled the cloak a little tighter around me. On my left was the wall of rock. The path continued spiraling down around the shaft keeping the mountain always on the left. I continued on. The path became more and more difficult to negotiate. Large boulders were now in the way which had to be squeezed around or else climbed over entirely. In places, the path was a mere fifteen centimeters wide and threatened to crumble beneath my feet. Of necessity, I went slowly. Occasionally I would come to gaps that had to be leapt, but since the distance was less than a meter each time it presented no serious obstacle.

Around, around, down and down and down. I descended for eight millennia, or perhaps it was only seven seconds; time has no frame of reference in the second sphere. As I descended, the air grew colder, a frigid, biting cold that tweaked one's digits in a cruelly playful manner. The wind grew stronger and whistled past my ears, at times so loudly that it drowned out the omnipresent echo of my footsteps. At last I came to the bottom. One wall contained a niche. I went over to examine it. Inside lay the shackles that had, until recently, bound the demon Zohak. I bent down and studied them carefully. It was difficult to tell why they had failed, whether through natural erosion or just shoddy craftsmanship in their manufacture. But I could not blame the artisans very much; the bonds had held for several thousand years against the strainings of a strong and furious demon. Probably the spells initially placed on them were not the strongest and had eventually given out.

At the opposite wall was a tunnel. I went through it. It was level and went only for a few dozen meters, then suddenly opened up into an immense cavern, so huge that I could not see the top. A chill breeze was my only welcome to this silent world of despair and desolation. Three hundred meters away, I could see a tent that I suspected of being the abode of the Druj who had enchanted the simurgh's hero.

I had reached the land of Angra Mainyu.

#

I approached the tent. It was of moderate size, and could easily have accommodated a small group of people. The material bespoke its unnatural origin. It was made of a shimmering cloth of rainbow hue that, whenever one thought of it as being one color, instantly became another, thus displaying an ever-changing appearance. It stood out as a thing of incredible beauty<sup>7</sup> in this place of total decrepitude. I had to keep my eyes off it forcibly as I approached, for the tent had been made hypnotic for a purpose. I stopped about three meters from the tent and called out a greeting. "Ho! Who is dwelling here?" After a moment, a man's voice answered, "Who are you? What do you want?"

"I am but a poor wayfarer suffering under the curse of a Yatu. The evil sorcerer bade me wander this land of death until cats fly and fish walk. I ask only a moment's respite within the shade of your marvelous tent and whatever hospitality you may choose to offer me."

There was a pause, and I could hear voices conversing in low tones. Then the flap of the tent opened.

"Enter, traveler, and enjoy what rest you can before your doom takes you away again." I pulled the Cloak of Lies tightly around me and went in.

Inside, the tent was sensuously lavish. Gauzy veils were draped everywhere, brushing the skin with a light, seductive touch. The ground abounded with satin cushions so that it was impossible to plant one's feet on bare earth. Incense burned from small braziers scattered about, giving the atmosphere a heady and soporific aroma.

Through the veils, I could see a male figure propped up on one elbow looking at me. I knew instantly that this must be the simurgh's hero. He was cast in the heroic mold as surely as ever a hero was. Broad, muscular shoulders, dark features, tall body — the form has been described so often before that I hesitate to do it again. And beside him was a woman of incredible loveliness, magnificently proportioned, her skin smooth and white as fresh cream, her hair long and vibrant, and black as a desert night.

They were both looking at me, but I was not worried. The Cloak of Lies was all the concealment I needed. They would see in me exactly what I suggested to their minds, be it dwarf or giant or troll or

man. Such is the power of that cloak; it is one of my most highly valued assets in the entire Shop.

"Come in, stranger," the hero repeated. "How long have you been wandering?"

"How long do the stars shine? I have forgotten time, Sir. I know only walking and desolation and despair."

"And you have been alone all this time?"

"Indeed, without so much as the sight of another creature for eons until I spotted your magnificent tent standing like a beacon in this wilderness. Tell me, Sir, to whom do I owe thanks for this hospitality?"

A puzzled look clouded the man's face. Just as Saena had suspected, he was under enchantment here.

The past and future were alike unknown to him, and he dwelt here in an everlasting present. He turned to the Druj for help, but she just pressed her hand gently to his lips and the troublesome question vanished from his mind. When he turned back to me, his expression was again serene. "No thanks are necessary," he explained.

I moved a step nearer. "If I may be so bold, Sir, I would like to ask another favor of you."

"What is it?"

"I am an old man, and I have been wandering long and lonely without sight of a woman for ages. May I look directly upon the face of your wife for just a moment?"

I was playing with fire here, and I knew it. Throughout most of the Middle East, what I had just asked would be a severe affront. But the Druj was not legally the man's wife, nor was she in any way inferior to him, so his possessiveness would probably not extend to her. Also, the Cloak of Lies would still be helping me. Both of them would be seeing me only as a weary, desiccated old man, incapable of doing any harm.

"You become rude, old man," the hero chided me.

"The solitude has driven social amenities out of my head," I replied. "But I am old and tired. I mean no harm."

"Very well." He parted the gauzy veil, and I could look directly upon them.

I took a few steps nearer, as though to get a better view. Then, as quickly as I could, I threw off the cloak and sprang at the Druj. I bent my left arm tightly around her throat and stepped behind her, choking her as I did so. I grabbed the Angel in Black from around my own neck and slipped its chain over her head.

The transformation was sudden and startling. Where there before had been a beautiful woman was now a hateful, spitting monster. It was six feet tall, covered all over with coarse, greasy hair. Its eyes had no pupils, its nose was flat and pressed tightly against its face. Fangs protruded from its upper jaw over its lower lip. Its expression was of unadulterated hate.

When I had leapt, the hero, his reflexes as good as a hero's should be, moved toward me to stop what looked like an insane act. But as soon as the Druj had been revealed to him in its true form, he froze, unbelieving. He stood paralyzed for several seconds, unwilling to accept that the hideous creature I now held had been his love of just a few moments before.

The Druj, meanwhile, was struggling with all the strength of a liar who has been found out. The greasy hair of its body made holding onto it difficult. "Help me!" I commanded the hero. "It mustn't be allowed to escape."

My words roused him to action. He picked up his sword, which had lain neglected in a corner, and with one slice cut off the Druj's head. The body convulsed in my arms, and the Druj's thick, yellow blood spurted from its neck. I flung the lifeless body away from me in disgust and redonned my pendant. That," I said, "was a Druj, one of the worst creatures of deceit that the second sphere has ever spawned. The simurgh sent me to rescue you from it and to help you recapture Zohak. The Druj knew it could never overpower you, so it delayed you in other ways. At some later time, it might have killed you through treachery."

"Thank you," he said meekly. He was feeling very embarrassed about how he, a specially chosen hero, could fall victim to such a hideous creature.

"Just try, in the future, to be a little more careful whom you dally with," I grumbled. Then both of us had to scramble suddenly towards the exit as the magical tent began to collapse. The spell that had created it

died very shortly after its maker. I quickly grabbed my cloak and staff as I left. We stood outside and watched the tent shrivel up into a small packet on the ground, then melt into a puddle of gooey white liquid that soaked itself into the earth.

At last, I broke us out of our contemplative trance. I shrugged my shoulders and said, "Let's go."

Together we trudged off though the land of Angra Mainyu in search of Zohak.

#

Around us stretched wasteland, bleak and lonely. Angra Mainyu, lord of darkness and falsehood, had created this world in antithesis to the world of life. All here was death, silent and grim. The air had the chill of a morgue. Winter in this land was ten months long, months so cold that the ground was perpetually frozen over. Even in the summer, the biting cold seeped out of the earth to infect the world of Angra Mainyu with its evil iciness. The land was generally flat. A few hardy plants struggled to survive amid the desolation, but they were scrawny excuses for life. The ground actually creaked as I walked over it. The smell of rust infiltrated my nostrils.

We walked in silence; the desolation of the landscape had a dampening effect on our emotions. Zohak's trail was straight and easy to follow. I guessed where he would be heading: Sinvat, the bridge between the land of the living and that of the dead. When the trail confirmed my suspicions beyond any doubt, I said, "We will never be able to overtake Zohak by following the trail he has made, for he can move as quickly as we can. But I know where he is heading, and I know a shorter way of getting there."

"Let's take it, then."

"It is a very dangerous route," I warned. "It takes us right through the cave inhabited by all the great Daevas. If they should spot us, we would stand little chance against their collective onslaught."

"I am not afraid of physical combat," my companion said. "Trickery and deceit may claim me prisoner, but never will I surrender or shrink from a contest of strengths."

We turned from the path and I led us along a way that would hopefully allow us to gain some time on our quarry. The prospect of danger seemed to lift my companion's spirits, for he was now in quite a talkative mood. He told me about his tribe, and about life in the mountains, about his women and about his prowess with a sword. I listened politely, not really caring; I had heard too much of the same type story before for it to really interest me.

Finally he asked me, "Who *is* Zohak?"

That stopped me. "Don't you know?"

"No. The simurgh was in a hurry. All he told me is that Zohak is a demon king with snakes growing from his shoulders who must be prevented from returning to the realm of men before he can cause trouble.

Then he whisked me off here, where I followed after Zohak until I met the Druj."

I sighed as I began walking again, reminding myself that my companion was from a small mountain tribe and could not be expected to know everything. "Zohak," I explained, "was once a mortal and a king back in the Days of the Heroes. But he had weaknesses, and Angra Mainyu himself preyed upon them. Disguising himself as a chef, Angra Mainyu worked his way into the king's favor by preparing meals of such exquisite dishes that Zohak was soon at his bidding. When he asked his chef if there were any favor that he, the king, could bestow, Angra Mainyu replied that he only wished to be able to kiss the shoulders of the king. Immediately upon doing so, two large snakes grew from the spots of the kisses, and Angra Mainyu departed. Zohak soon learned that, in order to stay alive, he would have to feed each serpent daily with the brains of a man.

"Zohak ruled for a thousand years, growing more and more hated by his people, who had to make daily sacrifices so that this monster could live. Finally, the hero Feridun overthrew him, and would have killed him if he had been allowed. Instead, he was bidden to chain Zohak beneath Mount Demavand where the demon would stay until the Final War. Unfortunately, Zohak has managed to escape a little earlier than anticipated, so it is our duty to put him back where he belongs. The world has troubles enough without having to cope with a monster like Zohak."

And now we came to the foot of the hills we had to climb. Talking ceased, since our energies were better directed in helping us scale the almost sheer wall of stone ahead. Here there was no neatly laid-out trail. Every step had to be earned, every foothold tested. The rocks were sharp and cold. I began to wish I'd

brought some mountaineering equipment, but I couldn't think about it for too long. I am a realist, and all the wishing I cared to do would not help me find my next handhold. I concentrated on climbing. Slowly, tortuously, we inched our way up the side of the cliffs. My fingers were bleeding from a million little cuts and scratches, and my companion's were no better. We rested every thirty or so meters, taking in huge lungfuls of air and giving our sorely overused muscles a brief chance to relax. For once, the coldness of the land of Angra Mainyu was useful — it helped invigorate us. When our all-too-brief rests were up, we could move again, refreshed if not rested.

We came at length to the opening of a cave: the cave of the dreaded Daevas, any one of whom would be a powerful match for our combined talents. The route I had chosen called for us to move along one wall through the cave to a small passageway on the other side. We would have to do this without allowing the Daevas to become aware of our presence.

I indicated to my comrade that utter silence was essential, and he nodded comprehension. We moved almost as one body, hugging the cave wall tightly and clinging to shadows that could hide us. Our pace was slow, for we had to watch the scene that was taking place inside the cave for any sign that our presence had been detected.

Throughout the center of the cave sprouted tongues of cold flame. Its glow was pale and ghostly, and had the opposite effect from normal fire — it fed on heat, drawing it out of any and all who got too near, until all but the strongest around it were frozen. Around this fire congregated the Daevas themselves — proud Naonhaithya, a sneer perpetually embossed on his rebellious features; decadent Taurvi and Zairisha, sharing mutual delight in their degradations and perversions; wild Sauru, powerful and firm-willed; fierce Aeshma, ever angry, ever dangerous; and leading the group was the "Spirit of Evil," Ako-Mano, responsible to none but Angra Mainyu himself. An impressive lot of power gathered together in one place for unclean purposes. It impressed even me, and I have seen a good deal among the spheres. My companion was awestruck by the assemblage, but he found the courage to keep moving. I cannot fault him that.

We were maybe two-thirds of the way across the cave when my foot accidentally kicked a pebble and sent it clattering noisily along the ground. Instantly, both of us froze, and I whipped the Cloak of Lies around the two of us. It was barely big enough, not being made for two people.

It was the fiery-tempered Aeshma who turned around to look at what might have caused the sound. He peered intently for a long time — or at least it seemed so subjectively. The Cloak of Lies worked its spell to blend us invisibly into the wall. The cold light from the deathflames flickered about us. And at last, Aeshma turned back to the business in which he had been engaged before — torturing souls, most likely, though I never did get a clear view of it.

We still waited, not daring to move, lest one of the other Daevas look our way. But it soon became clear that the sound I had made had not attracted much attention, though it had sounded loud to us, and again we started edging across the cavern. We reached the other side without further incident, and breathed considerably easier.

#

From here on, the path was well marked and not too difficult to traverse. It led steadily upward, of course, but it was all smoothed out and there was no need to search for footholds. We ran, now, trying to make up for lost time in our pursuit of Zohak. As we moved farther from the land of Angra Mainyu the temperature began rising again, taking some of the chill out of us. The wind began to increase, blowing at our backs and pushing us along. Up, up, up, a direction that began to seem endless. But our legs were moving and we dared not stop, for fear that we might not be able to start again.

We reached the top and found ourselves moving on level ground once more. It was such a welcome change that we actually started running faster despite our weariness. And, without any warning, we turned a corner and there before us lay our objective.

Sinvat, the bridge that spanned the gulf between the living and the dead. Made of solid rock, arching the fifteen-meter distance between two mountains. Below it was an abyss so deep it defied imagination. The bottom was invisible, but it reached down at least to the land of Angra Mainyu, if not further. Clouds obscured our vision, and only the wind played and moaned through that pass. There was a mist that

covered the area, making the ground slightly slippery underfoot and reducing visibility sharply. But through the mist, we could still see the snake-shouldered figure that could only be Zohak. We had arrived in time to meet him and, hopefully, stop him here. Immediately upon seeing our quarry my companion rushed forward yelling his battle cry. I followed behind a bit more carefully, knowing that Zohak was not the only danger we faced on Sinvat.

At the sound of the hero's yell, Zohak looked up. His face was hatred twisted by surprise. Thick brows arched over angry eyes, and a thin, straight nose overhung lips that were cruel and bloodless. His arms were powerfully muscled, and from his shoulders sprang the snakes, each at least a dozen centimeters in diameter. Their tongues tasted the air with quick flicks, and their pinpoint eyes watched the oncoming charge with cold passion.

Then, from the right side, came the danger I had been expecting — Indra, the Daeva who guards Sinvat, ready to hurl unsuspecting or weak souls into the hellish abyss below. He was nearly two and a half meters tall and in superb condition, muscles bulging on his arms and legs. He loomed above the scene, calmly surveying the situation before deciding what action to take.

I took off the Cloak of Lies and tossed it to the ground beside me. The time for subterfuge had passed, and I did not want it to get damaged in the fighting that would soon be taking place. The only weapon I had was my iron staff, which was not entirely appropriate — I had taken it to fight Zohak, not Indra. But I would have to make the best of it. Gripping the staff firmly in both hands, I charged at the Daeva of Sinvat.

I was lucky enough to catch him partially unawares, for he had been devoting most of his attention to Zohak and my comrade and didn't see me until I was almost upon him. I rammed one end of the staff into his stomach, then swung around and caught him below the kneecap. He howled with pain, but he was not severely crippled and was still very dangerous. My only chance to best him would be to press my initial advantage, move quickly, and stay in close. The staff is an in-fighter's weapon, and Indra could out-reach me if I moved too far away.

I stayed around his feet, moving between and around his legs. I got in one good blow to the groin that would have sent a man to his knees, but Daevas are built along slightly different lines and he was not so desperately hurt. My blows were mostly to minor points of his body in an effort to wear him down more than destroy him. I dared not aim a blow at his head — his reflexes were too quick, and he might be able to grab the staff from me if I were to extend myself that much. So I played hit and run and mentally prepared myself for a long, exhausting duel.

My foot slipped on the mist-soaked rock. As I automatically reached out to balance myself, the rod went sailing from my hands and landed on the bridge about three meters away. I hit the ground with a jarring force, too stunned to move. Indra came toward me, seeing his chance at last to rid himself of this pest. But suddenly all the action on the bridge stopped as a loud screeching filled the air. Looking up, I saw a beautiful and awesome sight. Down plummeted Saena the simurgh, talons extended and ready for battle. With him, also, were the other great birds — Verethragna, the jet-black raven; Camrosh, the gatherer; and Karshiptar, who once preached within the enclosure of Yima. All of them were in fighting posture, all had murder in their eyes.

Saena led the squadron. Just before they reached the bridge they split into two groups — Camrosh and Karshiptar headed for Zohak, while Verethragna and the simurgh tackled Indra. The raven dug his claws deep into the Daeva's back and raked a bloody trail across his flesh. Saena went straight for the eyes. Indra raised his arms to protect his face. As soon as this happened, Verethragna gouged his beak into Indra's neck. While the Daeva was thus occupied, I recovered my staff and began attacking with renewed energy. Saena hovered above Indra, beating at the Daeva's hands with his wings, not letting him drop his guard for a moment. My blows started driving him back, back to the edge of the bridge. Then one final blow. Indra lost his balance and tumbled from Sinvat — a fitting penalty, since he had caused so many souls to do the same. I paused to watch his body drifting down with almost dream-like slowness into the abyss. My breathing was deep and labored as I turned back to view the results of the fight with Zohak.

The snake-shouldered demon was lying on the ground, defeated. The hero stood over him, sword lifted

to deliver the final killing blow. "No!" I cried. "Zohak must not be killed yet. He must be bound and returned to his cave until the Final War." I went slowly over to where I had dropped the Cloak of Lies and took out the special thread that I had carried along for the purpose. Very special, and difficult to obtain, it was made of the beards of women, the breath of fish, the noise of cat's footfall, sinew of bears, spittle of birds, and roots of stones. I put great faith in this particular formula, so fine that it is virtually invisible to the normal human eye, because I know that it has worked so well in previous instances. I took the thread over to the fallen demon and proceeded to tie him up as tightly as I could.

It was not until after I had done this that I noticed the bird Karshiptar moaning on the ground. Holy Karshiptar, normally the gentlest of creatures, who had probably been roused to battle against Zohak only with the greatest reluctance. "What happened?" I asked.

"One of the snakes from Zohak's shoulders managed to bite him," the simurgh said sadly. "The venom is killing him."

Again I went to the pocket of the Cloak of Lies and brought out the vial of *haoma* juice. This is a liquor known for its healing properties, sweet to the tongue and hot to the soul. I poured the juice down Karshiptar's throat, then stood back. We all gathered around and waited in silence.

Karshiptar's head jerked. His eyes opened and blinked a couple of times. His wings twitched spasmodically. And finally he pulled himself up weakly to his feet. "I think I will be all right now," he said. Then he looked at me. "Thank you." He flew off without waiting for a reply. The other birds, except for the simurgh, flew after him.

"Well, Saena," I said, "the time has come for payment." He nodded his head slowly, then turned his beak around towards his back and proceeded to pluck out one of his feathers. I accepted it from him graciously. A feather from the simurgh has strong magical properties. Saena gave me a friendly farewell wink, then flew off after his fellows.

Just Zohak, the hero, and I were left on the bridge now. "You must take Zohak back to his cavern by yourself. Do you think you can manage it without getting seduced along the way?" I asked the hero.

He winced a little at my reminder of his weakness, but nodded. "What of you?" he asked in return.

"I shall go rejoin my body and then return to the Shop until somebody else needs me," I told him. "What do you want to do after you are finished with this task?"

"Lie down someplace and rest," was his immediate response.

Then I knew for certain that he was destined to be a hero, for that is the hero's constant wish — and one which is, sadly, never fulfilled. To be able to rest from heroism seems the greatest joy in the world, but somehow there is just never the time.

I wished him luck, nevertheless, and we went our separate ways.