

As in his three collaborations with Roger, Bob Sheckley's story is wild, flip, and cynical, packing a fine sarcastic punch.

THE ERYX

ROBERT SHECKLEY

I WOKE UP AND LOOKED AROUND. EVERYTHING WAS JUST about the same.

“Hey, Julie,” I said. “You up yet?”

Julie didn't answer. She couldn't. She was my imagi-nary playmate. Maybe I was crazy, but at least I knew Julie was someone I'd made up.

I got out of bed, showered, dressed. It was all the same as it always was. And yet, I had the feeling something had changed.

I didn't know what annoyed me the most about the setup. I had given up being annoyed. I had one room and a bathroom. Outside of my room was a glassed-in porch. I could walk out on the porch and sun myself. They seemed to have the sun going all day long, every day. I wondered what had happened to the rainy days I'd known back in my youth. Or maybe there were rainy days but I just wasn't seeing them. I had suspected for a long time that my room and its glassed-in enclosure were inside some other sort of a building, a really big building where they controlled the light and the climate, made it just like they wanted it. Evidently the way they wanted it was with hazy sunlight all day long. I couldn't see the sun even when I was outside. Just a white sky and light glaring from it. It could come from klieg lights, for all I knew. They didn't let me see much.

I had spotted the cameras, however. They were little units, Sonys, I suspected, and their tiny black matte heads rotated all of the time, keeping me in sight. There were cameras inside my one room, too, up in the corners, behind steel netting that I couldn't tear away even if I wanted to, which I didn't, and cameras even in my bathroom. I hated that. During my first days here, I'd screamed at the walls, “Hey, what's it with you guys, don't you got any sense of privacy? Can't a guy even take a dump without you watching?” But nobody ever answered me. No one ever talked to me. I'd been here seventy-three days, I made notches on the plastic table to keep count. But sometimes I forgot, and I wouldn't be surprised if it turned out to

be a lot longer than that. They'd allowed me writing materials, too, but no computer. Were they afraid of what I might do with a computer? I didn't have any idea. They gave me reading material, too. Old stuff. *Moll Flanders*. *Idylls of the King*. *The Iliad* and *Odyssey*. Stuff like that. Good stuff, but not exactly up to date. And they never showed themselves.

Why was that? I couldn't figure it out. I didn't even know what they looked like. They'd grabbed me back then, seventy-three days ago. Stuff had still been happen-ing back then. I'd been home. I'd received an urgent fax. Office of the President. "We need you urgently." I'd come. In fact, they'd sent men to bring me to this place. Men who didn't answer any of my questions. I'd tried to find out. What's this all about? They'll tell you more in-side, that's all they'd told me.

And then I'd been inside. They'd given me a suite of rooms, told me to get some rest, there'd be a meeting soon. I'd gone to sleep that first night, and been awakened by sounds of shooting. I'd gone to the door. It was locked. I could hear men shouting, struggling out in the hall. And then there'd been silence. And the silence had gone on and on.

At first I'd thought I was pretty well off. The others had gotten killed, I suspected. Those blank-faced men who'd brought me here. All dead, I was sure of it. I was the only one remaining. But what for? What did they want me for?

I'd heard noises outside my suite of rooms. Sounded like someone was building something. What they were doing was cutting down my mobility. Reducing my three-room suite to a room, a bathroom, and a glassed-in outside area. Why had they done that? What was it all about?

The hell of it was, I had a feeling about what it was all about. I thought I knew. But I didn't want to admit it to myself.

The time of the tests had come. That had been a few weeks ago. They had poked instruments down through the ceiling. Stuff that looked at me, stuff on the end of wires that recorded me. I'd gone a little crazy during that time. I knew they'd gassed me a couple of times. When I came to, I found cuts and injection marks on my body. Bruises. They'd been experimenting with me. Trying to find out something. Using me as a guinea pig. But for what? Just because I'd started the whole mess? That wasn't fair. They'd no right to do that. It hadn't been my fault.

I invented an imaginary playmate after a while. Some-one to talk to. They must have thought I was crazy. But I needed someone to talk to. I just

couldn't go on talking in my head all the time.

“So listen, Julie, the way I figure it, it all began back then when Gomez and I went out to Alquemar. I don't think I ever told you about Alquemar, did I?”

I had, of course. But Julie was always obliging.

“No, you never mentioned it. What's Alquemar?”

“It's this planet. It's quite some distance from Earth. A long way. But I went there. Gomez and I. That's where we found the discovery that changed everything.”

“What did you find?” Julie asked.

“Well, let me bring you back to those faraway days. ...”

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I was hanging out in this bar in Taos when I ran into Gomez over a bowl of hard-boiled eggs. We started to talk, as strangers will on a sleepy morning in a sleepy little town in New Mexico with nothing much to do with the long day ahead but drink a lot of beer and dream a lot of dreams.

Gomez was a short, barrel-chested guy from Santa Fe. A painter. He'd come to Taos to sketch tourists, make a few bucks. He'd taken a degree in art history at the Uni-versity of New Mexico. But his interest was in alien artifacts.

“Is that a fact?” I said. “I'm interested in that stuff myself.”

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You gotta remember how it was back in those days. Exploration of space was brand spanking new. It had begun with the Dykstra Drive, the faster-than-light drive that made space exploration possible. You used the Dyks-tra only between the stars, out in deep space. When you got in close, you used the ion engines for maneuvering. That's where you burned up the fuel. And fuel cost money.

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So the search was on. For intelligent life. Yes, that was the big one. But that

was on a level above the one I was operating on. Or wanted to be operating on. I wanted to make some money in artifacts. It was a big market Especially in the first ten years or so of the rush to space, when everybody was crazy to own some piece of shit from an alien planet. Put it up on the mantel. "See that doo-hickey? It came from Arcturus V. I've got papers to prove it." Humans are crazy about conversation pieces. The fad ran down after a while, but there was still plenty of demand. By the time I got into the racket, collectors had become a whole lot more discriminating. The stuff you brought in had to be of artistic merit, as they phrased it. How do you judge artistic merit? I don't. That's why I had Gomez along. If Gomez, with his credentials, said it was good, dealers were apt to believe him.

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I was qualified. I'd pushed ships for NASA for a couple of years, until a difference of opinion with my superior put me out of work. I was looking for a way to get back in. Gomez was a couple of years younger than me, but he had similar ideas.

Gomez was young, wanted to travel, and he was more than willing to sell his services cheap for the privilege of going out into deep space. An appraiser is important on a scavenging expedition. You need someone who has an idea of the current market, has some idea what dealers will pay for "genuine alien artifacts." You also need a guy to prepare and sign the provenance, the statement that gives whatever is known about the origin of the article. Although he was young, Gomez's reputation in the field was excellent. If Gomez swore it was real alien goods, dealers would know they weren't buying something faked in a factory in Calcutta or Jersey City.

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That was the scavenging aspect. Of course, the main push was to find the folks who had left that stuff. But those guys just didn't seem to be around anymore. What happened to the vanished civilizations of the galaxy? That was a question that interested a lot of people. You know how much interest there is on Earth in vanished peoples. You don't, Julie? Take my word for it. Folks find it romantic.

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Although the first buying spree was over, alien artifacts was still a pretty good racket. Even though there were a lot of people out there working it, the ruins scattered around the galaxy were a long way from being picked over. Just too many planets, too many ruins. And too few spaceships.

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So Gomez and I talked about this stuff, there in the hazy cigarette smoke and beer smell, among Indians and tourists and farmers. After a while Gomez said, "You know, Dalton, we could make a good team. You're a spaceship jockey, and I've got the art-appraisal skills we'd need."

"I agree," I told him. "But we lack just one thing. A ship. And some backers."

Investing in spaceships to go scavenging in was a popular speculation in those days. You'd be surprised how many people were able to get their hands on a spaceship. For a while, every country in the world felt it needed at least one spaceship for national prestige. There was a time when there were more working ships than qualified men to run them. I had the know-how, and I had the right attitude. I mean, I was no pure-science freak. I liked to make a profit.

"I could maybe help us find something," Gomez said. "I know some people, did some art appraising for them last year. They were pleased with the results. I heard them talking about going into deep-space exploration."

"Sounds like a natural to me," I said. "Fifty-fifty between us, OK? Where do we see these guys?"

"Let me make a phone call," Gomez said.

He went away, came back in a few minutes.

"I talked with Mr. Rahman in Houston. He's interested. We've got a meeting with him day after tomorrow."

"Rahman? What kind of name is that? Arab?"

"He's Indonesian."

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Rahman had a suite at the Star of Texas. He was in town doing an oil deal with some Texas wildcatters. He was a little skinny guy, colored a medium brown, a shade darker than Gomez. Little mustache. He didn't wear no native clothes. Italian silk suit, must have cost thousands. He was a Moslem, but there was no silly stuff about not drinking alcohol. He poured

us some Jim Beam Reserve and had one himself.

We talked, casual stuff for a while, and I got the definite impression that this Rahman and his people had a lot of money they didn't really know what to do with. A little birdie told me it might have been drug money. Not that I thought Rahman was a dealer. But he was an advance man for an Indonesian investment group, and their cash flow seemed a little heavy to be accounted for entirely from oil. But what do I know? Just an impression, and his willingness to do business with Gomez and me, a couple of unknowns.

First he went over my credentials. They were pretty good if I do say so myself. I'd worked ships for NASA for a couple of years until I got into a dispute with my superior and found myself out of a job. After that I'd gotten work for a private company pushing a supply ship between Earth and the L-5 colony. That went fine until L-5 went bust and I was out of work again. I had the papers and newspaper clippings to document everything.

"Your credentials look good to me, Mr. Dalton," Rahman said. "I already know Mr. Gomez's work. We'd be willing to make an arrangement with you. Salary plus ten percent of the profits on whatever you find, to be split between you and Mr. Gomez. What do you think?"

"I'd like it a lot better if you could make that ten percent for each of us. It's not a deal-breaker, but it would be nice."

Rahman thought for a while. I guess he was thinking that this from his point of view was mainly a way to sock away some hot money. Profit was secondary. Rahman's group was making theirs right here on Earth.

"I suppose we could accommodate you," Rahman said. "Come to Djakarta with me and take a look at our ship. If you approve, we'll draw up papers. How soon can you begin?"

"We've started right now," I said, looking at Gomez. He nodded.

The *City of Djakarta* was a pretty good ship. German manufacture, Indonesian ownership. The Krauts made pretty good ships back in those days. We signed a contract, loaded supplies, I made a few phone calls, picked up some information, and in a month we were on our way.

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The first planet we checked out, Alquemar IV in Bootes, circled an O-type

star in the Borodin cluster, which is a dense region of a couple thousand stars, two-thirds of them with planets. I paid a lot for the information. I got it from a technician attached to a British star-mapping expedition. He hadn't been against earning a little on the side. There are channels where you can pick up that sort of information. I'm good with a spaceship, but I'm even better at working the channels and making a deal. This info cost a lot, but it looked like it was going to be worth it. My guy said he thought Alquemar IV had ruins, though his group hadn't gotten close enough to be sure. When Gomez and I got there, we agreed at once that we'd struck paydirt. Now was the time to put down and let Gomez do his thing.

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When I checked it out, I found Alquemar IV had enough oxygen for us, and gravity nine-tenths that of Earth. And so we went down hoping for a big strike, like Lefkowitz had when he discovered the Manupta friezes on Elgin XII, and sold them for a bundle direct to the Museum of Modern Art in New York. In fact, I knew this had to be good, or I was in trouble. I was using up a lot of fuel. It's costly to maneuver at sublight speeds in the area of planets.

It was a yellowish-brown planet with some green patches. Those patches showed where there was water and vegetation. We did an aerial recon of the largest patches, and found a section that looked good enough for us to go to the expense of putting the ship down on the ground. It's more economical to put the ship in orbit and go back and forth by orbiter, but it also takes more equipment, to say nothing of the cost of an orbiter. We didn't have one. When something good came up, we wanted the ship right down there with us.

There were ruins, all right. They were spread out over several hundred acres, circular ruins in a jungle. They were surrounded by what had once been a wall. The atmosphere checked out OK, no noxious stuff, so we unpacked our dirt bikes and rode into the area. The first couple days were spent just getting a feel of the place.

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It took us almost a week before we hit on an area that looked worth examining closely. It was deep in the jungle, and it appeared to be the remains of a circular building. A temple, maybe. We'd call it that on the report, anyway. We went in slowly, filming everything, because film of these expeditions is worth some money, too. We were looking for just about anything. Household stuff is always good. Furniture, household items, cups,

bowls, armor, weapons—anything that might look good hanging on a wall or sitting on a table in a museum or some rich guy's house. Trouble is, it's almost impossible to find stuff like that. The disappeared aliens don't leave you much. It's a mystery. Hell, everything's a mystery.

We came across a broken staircase leading down into the ground. This was a very good sign. In most ruins, you don't even find this much. I gave Gomez a wink. "This one's going to make us rich, partner."

Gomez shrugged. "Don't be too sure. Explorers have been disappointed before."

"I got a feeling about this one," I told him.

The steps led down a long ways, and into a big under-ground chamber. It was a spooky place: low, domed ceiling, protruding rocks casting weird shadows. There were some metal objects lying around on the ground. I picked up a couple of them and showed them to Gomez. He shook his head. "That stuff doesn't look alien enough."

That's a problem in this line of work. People have pretty firm ideas about what they think alien ought to look like. Something alien ought to look like something you couldn't find on Earth. Something that nobody ever thought of making. Something that gave off an air of mystery. And that's asking a lot of a pot or a chair. Just about everything you found on an alien planet was alien only by definition. But the few pots and cups that had been found could just as easily have been made on Earth. Not even a letter stating where and when the object had been found would give them any real value. The stuff people paid cash money for had to look alien, not just be alien. It had to fit people's idea of alien. It presented a challenge.

There was another chamber after the first one. We went into it, our floodlights sweeping the place with white light. And it was there we saw it. The object that came to be called the Eryx.

Now listen, Julie, don't carry this beautiful but dumb act too far. Everyone on Earth has heard of the Eryx. You've got to have heard of it. Maybe in your circle they called it the alien gizmo. Does that ring a bell?

It rested on a piece of shiny cloth with marks on it. It was sitting on a low stone pillar with fluted sides. The object seemed to be shiny metal, though no one has ever discovered what it's made of. It was about the size of a child's head. It was carved or cast or worked into shapes I'd never seen before, nor had Gomez. The shapes looked random and chaotic at

first, but when you sat down and studied them, you could see there was a logic at work there.

The thing glowed. It glistened. Its shapes and angles seemed to be curved. But it was difficult to say whether they were convex curves or concave ones. Sometimes it looked like one thing, sometimes another. Nor were all the planes identical. Optical effect, a triumph of the eye. Staring at it was like staring into a cubistic candle whose surfaces and facets were unfamiliar but fascinating, which held the eye, drawing it ever deeper.

“Man, we’ve got it,” Gomez said. “The big one. This has to be the art find of the century. And the hell of it is, I can’t tell if it was manufactured or grown, or if it’s a natural form.”

We didn’t speak for a long time, Gomez and me. But we were thinking the same thoughts. Or at least I think we were. I was thinking, this is it, the big one, the pot at the end of the rainbow. This is the mother of all alien objects. It doesn’t look like anything anyone has ever seen before, and it’s small enough to fit on the mantel of the richest man in the world. It was the ultimate desirable object. You couldn’t do better than that.

After gawking at it for a while, we went back to the ship and brought back equipment for carrying it to the ship. We didn’t touch it with our hands. We used a neu-tral-surface manipulator to lift it and place it, ever so gently, into a padded container. We didn’t know if this thing was fragile or what. We just knew it was important not to break our egg on the way to market. Gomez even made a joke about it.

“We’re putting all our egg into one basket,” he said, as we got it back to the ship and stowed it away in the cargo hold. It was going to be Gomez’s last joke for a while.

We decided to spend no more time on Alquemar. This one find was going to make our fortunes, and we decided to get right onto it. I cranked up the ship’s engine and that’s where we had our first indication that things weren’t going to be quite as simple as we’d expected.

The engine wouldn’t start.

Now, Julie, take my word for it, when your spaceship engine won’t turn over, it’s not a simple matter of chang-ing spark plugs or adding gas. These engines aren’t meant to be fooled with by the likes of me or Gomez. It takes a full maintenance crew working in a factory facility to do anything with one of those things. All we could do was run the diagnostics. All they told

us was that the thing wasn't working. We knew that ourselves. What we didn't know was why, or what to do about it.

We didn't give up as easily as that. I went through the whole drill. Reran the diagnostics. Ran diagnostics on the diagnostics. Tried to get a signal to the home office back on Earth. That was futile, of course. Modern spaceship travel leaves you in the curious position of being able to reach a place faster than light can do it, and a hell of a lot faster than any form of signal transmission. It looked like we were stuck. And the hell of it was, there wasn't anyone who might come out to see what had gone wrong with us. We were like the pioneers trekking across the Rockies to California. Or like Cortes and his conquistador-es slogging across unknown lands in search of Aztec riches. If a conquistador's horse broke down, Spain didn't send an expedition out to rescue him. They just wrote him off. And that's what would happen with us. No one had asked us to come out here. Our Indonesian sponsors didn't give a damn if we got back or not. Not as long as they kept the insurance paid up.

We didn't panic. Gomez and I had always known this was one of the risks of this deal. We sat around and hoped maybe the engine would come back on line all by itself. It's been known to happen. We played chess, we read books, we ate our supplies, and at last we decided to take the Eryx out of storage and take a look at it again. If we had to go, at least we could go in what Gomez called an aesthetic manner.

I guess I haven't told you why we called it the Eryx. It was because of what we found on that piece of cloth the thing had been sitting on. That cloth was covered with marks and doodles. We thought it was just a design. But it turned out to be the first bit of alien writing anyone had discovered. And it was the only one until a year or so later. Clayton Ross came across the inscribed rock that they called the Space Age Rosetta Stone during his expedition to Ophiuchus II. One part was in an ancient variation of Sanskrit, the rest in three alien languages, one of which corresponded to the writing on the Eryx cloth. Gomez and I had come up with the first writing ever discovered in an alien language.

But we didn't know that at the time. It took experts to point out that what we had thought was just a decorative pattern was in fact language. As for why we named the gizmo Eryx—follow me on this, Julie. At the top of the cloth, or what we figured was the top, there were four marks larger than the others in what turned out to be the text. We couldn't read them, of course. But the four largest characters looked like the English letters E-R-Y-X. So we called our gizmo the Eryx. The name caught on. Every-body called it that, right from the start.

As you've doubt surmised, being the clever little lady you are, we didn't die on Alquemar. We got off. What happened, you see, is that we brought the Eryx out of the hold and into the main cabin. So we could look at what might be costing us our lives. This put it not only close to us, but also to the engines. When we tried to start up again, something happened. We never did figure out what or why. But suddenly everything was in the green and our engine was working again.

Coincidence? We thought it might have been. But we weren't so filled with the spirit of scientific experimentation that we were ready to move the Eryx back to the hold just to see if the engine died again. That would be carrying the spirit of experimentation too far. We got the hell out of Alquemar while we could. Got back to Earth.

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Rahman met us in the Disneyland Hotel in Jogjakarta. He thought the Eryx was pretty. But you could tell he wasn't impressed. Or maybe it was because he had a lot of other stuff on his mind. I only learned later that the CIA and local narcotics feds had become very interested in Rahman and his partners. I guess Rahman saw trouble coming. Because he said, "I'm sure we could sell this and realize a fine profit. But I have a better idea. I've consulted with my partners. We're going to give this object to a big American research company, to hold in the public trust, to study for the benefit of all mankind."

"That's very civic-minded of you," I said. "But why would you want to do that?"

"We'd like to stay on the good side of the Americans," Rahman said. "It could be useful later."

"But you won't make any money this way."

"Sometimes goodwill is more important than money."

"Not to us it isn't!"

Rahman smiled and muttered something in the local dialect. The local equivalent of "tough shit," no doubt.

I wasn't quite ready to give up. "But we'd agreed to sell any artifacts we found and split the profits!"

“That is not correct,” Rahman said, rather coldly. “If you read your contract, you’ll see that you participate in the sale of artifacts only if we do in fact decide to sell. But the decision is entirely up to us.”

He was right about the wording of the contract. But who could have guessed that they wouldn’t sell?

I realized the wisdom of Rahman’s move—from his point of view—about a year later, after the CIA, working with the Indonesian authorities, busted him for the international dope trafficking. The fix must have been in. He got off with a fine.

Gomez and I followed orders and brought the Eryx to Microsoft-IBM in Seattle, the biggest private research facility in the States. We told them about the engine, said that if our inference was correct, this thing had indeed influenced its operation.

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Well, at Microsoft-IBM, the guys in white coats ran tests from here to hell and back on the thing, and the more they saw the more excited they got, and they called in bigshot scientists from universities all around the world, and Microsoft-IBM was glad to pay for it because it gave them publicity like you couldn’t believe, and besides, soon enough the government began funding it.

Gomez and I were superfluous. After taking our statement, nobody needed anything else from us. The Indonesian group went out of the spaceship business; it was save your ass time, and they were going to be busy for a long time. They gave us a pretty good bonus, however. I was already negotiating for new backers and a new ship and a better deal, and between us we had just enough money to swing it.

And then Gomez got himself killed in a traffic accident in Gallup, New Mexico, of all places, and his family were his heirs and I was in legal stuff up to the giggie. The court never believed that Gomez had verbally deeded his share to me, and it cost me a fortune in lawyers to finally not be able to prove it and have half of what was supposed to be our seed money go to some uncle Gomez had never even met down in Oaxaca, Mexico.

So I was on my own, and in what they call straitened circumstances. I managed to make a deal with some South African diamond people and took a new ship, the *Witwatersrand*, back to Alquemar to look for more

stuff. That was when Stebbins, the company man the South Africans had forced on me, got killed in a cave collapse, and I got blamed. It was really unfair. I'd been sitting in the ship playing solitaire when he went out without authorization to the site, trying to make something on the side for him-self, I doubt not. But they trumped up a case of negligence against me in Johannesburg and I lost my license.

So I came up empty on that one and suddenly people didn't want to hire me anymore for anything. So what with one thing and another I wasn't around when the white coats were making some of their most important discover-ies about the Eryx. During that period I was doing six months in Lunaville on a trumped-up charge of embezzle-ment. So I had my hands full with my own problems when Guillot at the Sorbonne, working with Clayton Ross's New Rosetta stone, came up with a translation of the writing on the Eryx paper. And got promptly suppressed by court injunction while the Microsoft-IBM people sought corrob-orating evidence before releasing it. I heard about it while I was in jail. Everybody on Earth heard about it. (Except for you, my adorable Julie, caught up in your larcenous dreams.)

I got out on good behavior (I'm no troublemaker) and drifted around Luna City for a while, working as a dish-washer. My spaceship piloting career seemed to be dead. No license, and no one would have hired me if I'd had one.

But you can't keep a good man down. A change of administration on Luna gave me the opportunity to regain a pilot's license restricted to the inner solar system. This was accomplished by my employer at the time, Edgar Duarte, the owner of Luna Tours, who thought to use my fame or notoriety to enhance his tourist business. And so I got a job taking day trippers out to the asteroid belt, a far fall indeed for one who had discovered the Eryx.

I took it with equanimity, however: I've long known that fortune's a whore and life itself a kind of stupid mud-dle. I am not a religious man. Far from it. I hold, if anything, a belief which I believe was once ascribed to the Gnostics: that Satan won out over God, not the other way around, and the Dark Prince runs things in the dismal and disastrous way that suits his nature. I knew that every-thing was just chance and bad luck, in a universe in which things were stacked against us and even our ruling deity hated us.

But since it's all chance, good things happen from time to time, and, lo and behold, my time seemed to come around. I was running my tourists out to these stupid aster-oids, sleeping in a flophouse since Duarte paid me next to nothing, bored out of my mind, when one day I got a letter from

Earth.

This letter was written on genuine paper, not this insubstantial e-mail stuff, but on stiff parchmentlike paper. It was from something that proclaimed itself "The First Church of the Eryx, Universal Pontifex of Everything and All."

The letter was not humor, as I had at first supposed, but a serious message from a group that had formed a church for the worship of the Eryx.

The Eryx was a suprahuman principle, they wrote me, which had revealed itself to those who could see as di-vinely alien in form and in essence, and this coming had been prophesied long ago because of the self-evident nature of man's fallen soul.

In the letter they pointed out how the Eryx was now in a citadel in the Seattle Space Needle which had been acquired for it by Microsoft-IBM. Thousands of people passed in front of it daily, looking for cures to what ailed them. And the Eryx helped many of them. The Eryx had literally thousands of miracles to its credit. Not only could and would it cure any and all human ailments, everything went better in the presence of the Eryx, from machinery (which I had been the first to observe) to the workings of the human mind (of which the writer of the letter was an example, I suppose).

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After quite a bit more of this, the writer, a Mr. Charles Ehrenzweig, got to the point. It had recently come to the Church's attention (he didn't say how) that I was the person who had discovered the Body of the Deity and brought it to mankind. For this I was to be honored. It had been some years since I had had any contact with the Source. I had been denied my rightful fame, ignored where I ought to have been praised (my feelings exactly), and forced to live meanly far from Earth, whereas by rights I should take my place as The Discoverer of the Eryx. The letter also implied that there was something holy about me by association and by primogeniture.

Ehrenzweig closed by saying that they had bought a ticket for me, a passage to Earth. It was waiting in American Express in Luna City. They would be very pleased if I would come to Seattle as their guest, all expenses paid. They promised to reimburse me handsomely if I would come and talk to them about the circumstances of my expedition to Alquemar, my discovery of the Eryx, my feelings during my time of association with it, and so on and so forth.

Would I come? You bet I would. Luna City had been a drag for quite a while, and I'd had enough of tourists and asteroids to last me a very long time. With great pleasure I told Duarte where he could stick his job, and shortly after that I was on my way to the home planet.

A few weeks later, I was there.

Julie, I won't bore you with my impressions of Earth after an absence of almost ten years. All of that and a lot more is part of my standard lecture. It's available now both as a book and a CD. If you want, you can look it up for yourself. (But I know you, my darling. Not interested in anyone but yourself, are you?)

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"Dalton! How good that you could come!" That was Ehrenzveig, a big, corpulent man, greeting me literally with open arms. He had a couple of other guys with him. They were all dressed in white. That was one of the marks of the cult, I later found out.

I was brought by limousine to Eryx House, their own church and residence on a private island in Puget Sound. I was wined and dined. They made much of me. It was very pleasant. Except that there was a strange undertone to everything Ehrenzveig and the others said. What the psych people might call a subtext. They knew something that I and the rest of the human race didn't know, and they felt very smug about that.

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The next day they brought me to the Space Needle for the Viewing, as they called it. The way it worked for the peasants, they got a ticket (free from the Eryx foundation, but you had to have one), then were searched for weapons, then were allowed to form on the line that went all the way up to the viewing room, which they called the Citadel. I didn't have to do this. But Ehrenzveig thought I might like to see how it was done.

I was more than a little surprised at the numbers of sick and crippled people on that line. There were blind folks, people with cancer, and just about everything else. They were all hoping for a miracle cure. A lot of them, Ehrenz-veig assured me, were going to get it.

I must have looked skeptical, because Ehrenzveig said, "Oh, it's real enough. It's not a matter of faith; it simply works. The other religions don't

know what to do with us. The Eryx—actually performs miracles. All of the time. Every day. This is a stage that our prophets have written about. We call it the Grace of the Last Days.”

“The Last Days? What’s that supposed to mean?” I asked him.

He looked sly. “I’m afraid I can’t discuss the inner doctrine with you.”

“Why not? I thought you considered me a founder.”

“A founder, yes, but not a member of our religion. You discovered the Eryx, Mr. Dalton, and for that we will always honor you. But you do not believe in its supernatural message. And because of that, we will not open our hearts and minds to you.”

I shrugged. What are you going to say when a guy lays a rap like that on you? And anyhow, I didn’t tell that to Ehrenzweig. The guy was my meal ticket, and I didn’t want to get him sore at me. Not yet. Not until I had something going for myself.

You see, Julie, and I’m sure you’ll appreciate this point, I had gotten a free trip to Earth and I was being put up in what amounted to a fancy resort hotel. But there’s been no talk of money. Scratch. The mojo. The stuff that makes it all go around.

I didn’t bring this up, however. Not at that time. I was kinda sure Ehrenzweig and his people were going to make me an offer of some kind. After all, without me they wouldn’t have had a religion.

I spent quite some time in the little room viewing the Eryx through glass. They had it on the cylinder of stone I’d found it on. I hadn’t bothered to bring the cylinder back. They’d made a special expedition to Alquemar to fetch it. The room was designed to look just like the cave in which Gomez and I had made our discovery. Even the lighting was the same. And they’d replaced the cloth the Eryx had rested on. The Eryx was sitting on it again, looking pretty as a picture, the very last word in high-class alien artifacts.

“I thought somebody was studying that cloth,” I remarked.

“Guillot, yes. But our foundation was able to suppress his translation and reclaim the cloth. It belongs with the Eryx, you understand. It is part of its substance.”

“Do you know what the thing says?”

“We have our surmises.”

“So?”

“If you think I am going to tell you, Mr. Dalton, you are very mistaken. That knowledge will be made public when the time is right.”

“And when will that be?”

“The Eryx itself will give us the indication.”

So we stood around for a while watching guys throw away their crutches, and other guys shout, “I can see!” and all the rest of the bullshit. And then they took me back to Eryx House for a really first-rate banquet in my honor. It was after that dinner that Ehrenzveig made the proposition I’d been expecting.

We were sitting with cigars and brandy in this superluxurious sitting room down the hall from the main dining room. At first it was a bunch of us, me and Ehrenzveig and about ten others who were pretty obviously bigwigs in the organization. Then the others left as if on signal, and Ehrenzveig said, “You’re probably wondering by now what this could possibly have to do with you, Mr. Dalton.”

“The question did cross my mind,” I said.

“If I have not read your character amiss,” Ehrenzveig said, “I believe, you would like money. Quite a large amount of money. Or am I being too direct?”

“Not at all. I’m all for plain speaking and high living.”

“Excellent. We can give you both.”

“High living,” I mused. “Does that translate into actual cash of the realm, or do I get paid in religious points in the organization?”

Ehrenzveig smiled. “We are well aware that you are not a believer. That’s fine. You’re not required to be. Would it make you uncomfortable to know that we’d like to use you as a shill?”

“Not if there’s any money in it.”

“Excellent! I appreciate your candor.”

“You don’t mind, then, that I think your religion of the Eryx is a lot of bullshit, to put it bluntly?”

“I don’t mind at all. These are modern times, Mr. Dalton, and the test of a modern religion resides in how it performs, not in what it promises. And in a religion such as ours, there’s certainly no moral or ethical code. Such matters have nothing to do with a diety such as ours. The Eryx, whom some call the Great Satan, couldn’t care less about right or wrong, good or bad. He’s here for one thing and one thing only.”

“And that thing is?”

“It will be plain to you in good time,” Ehrenzveig said. “I predict that you will become a believer. And that’ll be a pity, because we’ll have lost ourselves a jovial and cynical rogue.”

“Flattery will get you nowhere,” I said, “unless you accompany it with large sums of money. Don’t worry about supplying me with dancing girls. I’ll take care of details like that myself.”

“The money, yes,” Ehrenzveig said. “How admirably direct you are. But I came prepared for you.”

Ehrenzveig took a billfold out of an inner pocket and counted out ten thousand-dollar bills. He riffled them and handed them to me.

“Is this what I’m being paid?”

“Certainly not. This is just a little walking-around money. We’re going to pay you a lot more than this, Mr. Dalton.”

“And what am I supposed to do for it?”

“Just talk to people.”

“You mean, give lectures?”

“Whatever you want to call them.”

“What do you want me to tell them?”

“Whatever you wish. You might talk about how you discovered the

Eryx. But you need not confine yourself to that. Tell them about yourself. Your life. Your opinions.”

“Why should anyone be interested in my life?”

“Whatever you care to say will be of interest. In our religion, Mr. Dalton, you hold a very significant place.”

“I told you I’m not religious.”

“Important figures in religion frequently are not. Religious people come afterwards. They were the interpreters. But the original cast, the ones who were there in the beginning, they are not necessarily religious. Often they are quite the contrary.”

“I’ve got a place in your religion? Like Judas, maybe?”

“Equal in importance, but nothing like him. We refer to you, Mr. Dalton, as the Last Adam.”

Talking has never been any problem for me, and I didn’t care if they called me the Last Adam or the First Charley. Or the Sixteenth Llewellyn, for that matter. A name is just another container for the wailing pile of shit that is a man. If you’ll pardon my French. But you’ve heard language like this all your life, haven’t you, Julie? It’s the way your father talked, and your mother, and all your friends. They all were a bunch of blasphemers, weren’t they, doll? And you knew right from the start, right from the get-go, that the only thing to do in this world was to look out for number one, live high and leave a good-looking corpse. You and I are so alike, Julie. That’s why you love me so.

I guess, as I went on giving my talks in Seattle, I started talking more about you, Julie girl. People started asking me, who is this Julie you’re always raving about? And I’d always tell them, she’s my dream girl, and she knows the way things really are. I told that to the ladies who kept me company during this time. There were a lot of them. I was famous, you see. I was Dalton, the guy who had found the Eryx.

Thanks to Ehrenzweig and his people, others began to see how important I was. They paid me a lot. They gave me respect.

“We’re going to fulfill your dreams of avarice, John,” Ehrenzweig said one day. It was a joke, I think, but he made it true. He kept on piling money on me, and I kept on buying things, and people, and more things. I had me

a time, let me tell you. It was going so good for me that I didn't even notice for quite a while that a lot of people were dying.

When you're going good, like I was, you sort of over-look what other people are up to. I mean, let's face it, who gives a damn about other people when there's number one to be fed and pleased? And as good as things might get, there's always room for improvement, right? So I took little notice of the bad stuff that was going on. The die-off, I mean. It was all very tragic. But I couldn't help thinking that it was for the best, in a weird sort of way, because it freed up a lot of real estate. And of course I wasn't very interested in why it was happening.

A lot of people were blaming it on the Eryx. That's people for you. Always ready to blame something. There were even scientists around eager to get their names in the papers, saying that the Eryx was a living organism, of a type never before seen. Long dormant. Now coming into activity. According to those guys, the Eryx had been releasing viruses since the day I found it. These viruses had traveled around the world, lodging in people's bodies, not doing any harm, not calling any attention to them-selves, the sly little buggers. But this wasn't out of good nature. This was because this Eryx virus was waiting, waiting until it had spread to the whole Earth, infected everyone. Then it took off like a timed-release capsule.

It got pretty bad, this die-off thing. And I guess I went out of my way not to notice it. Because if you're going to die anyway, why depress yourself in advance with bad news? And anyhow, I figured some of those scientists they got out there would do something about it. And if not, not. It was Ehrenzveig who finally clued me in to what was going on. To where it was all leading. He came to visit me one morning. Frankly, he looked like hell—red-eyed, and his hands were shaking. It occurred to me that he'd caught this disease, and I had a little tremor of fear. If he got it, and him so high up in the Church of the Eryx, then I could get it, too.

"You look like death warmed over," I told him. No sense kidding around.

"Yes. I've got it. Eryx Fever. I don't have long." "Hasn't your god come up with a cure?" Ehrenzveig shook his head. "That's not his way." "Then what's the advantage of being in his church?" "Some of us think knowledge is worth anything." "Not me," I told him.

Ehrenzveig spent a while coughing. Quite pathetic it was. Finally he was able to speak again.

“I’ve come to tell you the translation of the cloth that was found with the Eryx.” “I’m all ears.”

“It was a warning. It was written by one of the last beings to come across the Eryx.”

“Let’s cut to the chase. What did it say?” ‘ ‘It said, ‘The Eryx hates human life. It hates alien life. It tolerates no life but its own. When you find the Eryx, it is the beginning of the end of your species.’ I’m translating very freely, you understand.”

“No problem,” I said. “It sounds like one of those old Egyptian curses.”

“Yes, very similar. In this case, it happens to be true.”

“That’s great,” I said, sarcastically, because of course Ehrenzweig was reading my own death sentence as well as his. But hey, I never thought I’d go on forever.

“So what happens now? Masque of the Red Death on a whole-world scale?”

“That’s about the size of it,” Ehrenzweig said.

“How long have you known?”

“For quite a while. All of us in the religion of the Eryx have known. The Eryx told us.”

“How’d it do that? Send out thoughts?”

“Dreams. Prophetic dreams. And we accepted what it told us, and found it good. It is only right, you see, that the Eryx can tolerate no other life than its own.”

“That’s understandable,” I said. “I like a little elbow room, too.”

Ehrenzweig bowed his head and didn’t speak.

Finally I asked him, “So what happens now?”

“I die,” Ehrenzweig said. “Everyone dies.”

“That’s obvious, dummy. I mean what happens to me?”

“Ah,” Ehrnezveig said, “the Eryx has plans for you. You’re the Last Adam.”

“What sort of plans?”

“You’ll see. Come with me.”

“On whose orders?”

“The Eryx wants to get a look at you.”

Well, I didn’t like the sound of that one bit. I decided it was about time to quit the organization, get away from the Earth, find something else. But Ehrenzveig wasn’t hav-ing it that way. He had a bunch of his buddies outside my door. They escorted me—under protest, I can assure you—to this place where I live now.

The followers of the Eryx bustled around me for the next few weeks, setting me up in my little apartment, installing the cameras, arranging for food. There were fewer of them every day, and finally I was here all alone. Locked in.

But even if I could get out, where would I go? I’ve got a feeling everybody’s gone now. I saw my last human face weeks, months ago. Frankly, I don’t miss people one bit. They were a bad lot and to hell with them. I’m glad they’re gone and I won’t be sorry when I’m gone, too.

I’ve never seen the Eryx, but I suspect he’s taken some form other than that in which I found him. He’s studying me, I think. Maybe he studies the last specimen of each race he annihilates. Just out of curiosity, I suppose. That’s what I’d do. Maybe the Eryx and I aren’t so different. Except for our circumstances. He’s got the world. The galaxy, I suppose. And I have one room and a bathroom and a glassed-in enclosure. And you, Julie.

* * * *

AFTERWORD

I only knew Roger Zelazny through our three novel collaborations. We met in the flesh only a few times. Working with Roger was one of the great

pleasures of my life. Roger was a great combination of intuitive genius, fantasy dreamer, and careful, punctilious story plotter. He was one of the great ones. I greatly regret not having had the opportunity to know him better. But I can't tell you how pleased I am at having had the privilege of working with him. Collaboration tells you a lot about a person, and about yourself.