

# phallicide

## CHARLES SHEFFIELD

*Much ink was spilled in the last few years about Viagra and other male “virility drugs,” but, as the harrowing story that follows suggests, sometimes you just might need a drug that works completely the other way around... One of the best contemporary “hard science” writers, British-born Charles Sheffield is a theoretical physicist who has worked on the American space program and is currently chief scientist of the Earth Satellite Corporation. Sheffield is also the only person who has ever served as president of both the American Astronautical Society and the Science Fiction Writers of America. He’s a frequent contributor to both Analog and Asimov’s Science Fiction, as well as to other markets such as Science Fiction Age and The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction. He won the John W. Campbell Memorial Award in 1993 for his novel Brother to Dragons and in 1994 he won the Hugo and Nebula Awards for his story “Georgia on My Mind.” His books include the bestselling nonfiction title Earthwatch; the novels Sight of Proteus, The Web Between the Worlds, Hidden Variables, My Brother’s Keeper, Between the Strokes of Night, The Nimrod Hunt, Trader’s World, Proteus Unbound, Summertide, Divergence, Transcendence, Cold as Ice, The Mind Pool, Godspeed, and The Ganymede Club; and the collections Erasmus Magister, The McAndrew Chronicles, Dancing with Myself, and Georgia on My Mind and Other Places. His most recent books are the novels Aftermath and Starfire and a nonfiction book, Borderlands of Science. His next novel, The Spheres of Heaven, is due out near the end of this year. His stories have appeared in our Seventh, Eighth, Eleventh, and Fourteenth Annual Collections. He lives in Silver Spring, Maryland, with his wife, SF writer Nancy Kress. He has a web site at [www.sff.net/people/sheffield/](http://www.sff.net/people/sheffield/).*

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he human brain is a three-pound mass of blood and nerves and jelly;

anything less like a muscle is hard to imagine. Yet there are resemblances. If I work my brain long and hard, then give it a rest, I find that the break pays off. Puzzles resolve themselves and old difficulties disappear. I return to work mentally reju-venated and in top creative condition.

I gazed at the screen and decided that I must be long overdue for that rest. Those were my own research results, but I stared mystified at what sat before me on the display.

*Was this my work?* I recognized the data, but they didn't feel like mine. Instead of the expected intimacy, so close to the latest experiment that you live inside it, I felt like an outsider.

I scrolled toward the end. *The response is decidedly nonlinear and follows an approximate two-thirds power law. When the oral dose is doubled, the average time of sustained erection increases from nine minutes to 14 minutes. When the dose is quadrupled, the average erection time becomes 22 minutes. Elevated nitric-oxide levels persist in the corpora cavemosa for 38 minutes after orgasm . . .*

It was my own work, without a doubt. More than that, they were my own *words*. I may not be the world's greatest stylist, but one thing I recognize, always and unmistakably, is what I have written. Change an adjective, add a comma, and I will know.

My own words, but surely not my *recent* words. I checked the file. It was dated Thursday. Yesterday. The experimental data had been entered three days earlier.

I was still staring at the screen when I heard footsteps in the corridor and a quiet knock at my closed door.

Although I was fairly sure that only one person would be visiting my office at eight in the morning, the key strokes to change to a second document area were pure reflex. By the time the door opened, the screen in front of me showed a bland table of daily blood pressure from an unidentified subject.

"Good morning, Doctor Rachel," said a cheerful voice behind me. "Let's take a look at you."

As expected, it was Sharon Prostley, administrative assistant to the head of the lab. I stood up and turned around, and she gave me my

morning head-to-toe critical examination.

“Not bad. Not bad at all.” She came forward and touched the clip in my hair. “My own choice would have been apple-green as a better match to your skirt. But emerald will do nicely, and it goes well with your eyes.”

“Thanks, Sharon.” Color-blindness in women is 10 times rarer than in men, but I suspect that it usually matters a lot more. I was relatively lucky. I had trouble only in distinguishing certain classes of blues and greens.

“Happy to do it,” she said. “Not many things let me feel useful early in the morning.” She moved away toward the door, but turned at the threshold. “I forgot to ask. How was the vacation?”

I stared at her, and she went on, “Did you get to spend time with your family?”

My autopilot took over. “Yes. Oh, yes, it was great, thanks. I had a wonderful time.”

“Wish I could get away. I’m tied here till spring break.” And Sharon was gone, back along the corridor toward her office.

As the sound of her footsteps receded, I switched my computer back to its hidden document area. *The response is decidedly nonlinear. . . .* The familiar/unfamiliar words confronted me. Yesterday’s date. Except that—I clicked to the day and date setting on my computer. Friday, as it should be. But instead of March 12 it was March 19.

I had lost a week. Vacation. Family. I felt a moment of dizzy memory and partial understanding, and I turned my computer off abruptly without waiting for the usual utilities disk-check. I had to get out of here — out of the room, out of the building, off the campus, alone into the fresh air where I could think.

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By 8:15 the sun was rising and the overnight chill was already off the street. I walked west from the university campus along the flat, even thoroughfare of St. George, toward the distant brown hills that rose clear and stark in the dry air.

I wandered seven long blocks and finally sat down on a bench in front of a bicycle store. The vivid posters in the shop window showed grinning

riders drifting effortlessly uphill. While I stared, the lost week filtered back into my head fragment by random fragment. I knew that I had been again to Bryceville, 95 miles to the northeast beyond the Zion National Park. I knew that I had seen Naomi and the rest of my family there. I knew I had been heavily drugged; and I knew why.

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“It’s for your own sake more than anyone else’s.” Elder Cyrus Walker’s bald dome and twinkling gray eyes had been part of my life for a quarter of a century. With his barrel chest and strong sloping shoulders he was like a rugged tree, never seeming a day older as the years passed. “We still trust you completely. But suppose you are doing things that might give you away, and you don’t even realize it?”

An interrogation was inevitable. It was standard on each return trip. The fact that drugs of my own design were used in the questioning added a special irony. “Can’t I at least see my family first?” I pleaded. “Today is Naomi’s 13th birthday. She sent me a class picture, and she’s grown so much I hardly know her.”

“Of course you can see her. There’s absolutely no rush, you’ll be with us at least five more days.” Elder Walker patted my shoulder with a hand as thick and hard as a chopping board. “But we don’t want you going back to the university, do we, acting and feeling groggy? We all have too much invested to jeopardize the effort now. And there’s other work to do. Shall we say, the day after tomorrow for the tests of your latest work?”

“I suppose so.”

“I don’t care for that tone of voice.” Elder Walker stood up and wandered over to the window. Beyond him I saw the bleached wooden walls and steep roof of the Patriarch’s lodge, jutting high into the blue desert sky. He went on, “You know, Rachel, you are a very fortunate young woman.”

“I realize that. And I’m truly grateful to have such a wonderful opportunity to serve the Blessed Order.” Before I was 11 years old I had learned to hide most of my thoughts and all my opinions. Yet in a sense I agreed with Elder Cyrus Walker. I was lucky; lucky to have an unusual mind, one with a memory and logical powers that even the Council members could not ignore.

Had it been otherwise . . .

The Escalante bus had dropped me off in late afternoon at the edge of town, and as I walked through slanting sunlight I saw Deborah Curzon and Mary Dixon waiting outside the school until classes were over and the older children were let out. Deb and Mary each had one babe in arms and three kids in tow. Young ones. The two women were 27, my exact contemporaries. They looked twice my age. Nine or 10 kids can wear down even the strongest.

Deb and Mary had stared back at me —with pity. Their nods said, Why, it's poor Rachel Stafford, not pretty enough to be taken as a third or even a fourth wife. My one child, Naomi, hardly counted. Her father was the Patriarch himself, and from their looks they thought that he had surely bedded me from duty rather than desire.

“And, of course, we must have adequate time for the tests. Can't afford to rush.” Elder Walker still had his back to me, gazing out of the window at a tumbleweed rolling ghostlike along the dusty street. “I assume that you have made further progress, and brought the results of your work with you?”

“I think so. But I won't really be sure until the tests are complete.”

“Naturally.” Elder Walker turned and held out his hand. “Better, don't you think, to put them in my safekeeping?”

It was phrased as a question but I never doubted that it was an order. I handed over the vials. Cyrus Walker ran Bryceville. Oh, sure, the Patriarch was the ultimate authority, the Blessed Order's spiritual leader and final point of decision. But the Patriarch was 89 years old. No one spoke of his health or even suggested his mortality, but 13 years ago, when I had been led a nervous virgin to his bed, he had been stick-limbed and wheezing and barely able to become aroused. Without the drugs and careful preparation given to me and the generous lubricants, entry would have been impossible.

Thank God, he had met the challenge. He had known me, briefly, and five minutes later he lay snoring. I remained wretched at his side for two full hours before I dared to leave the chamber and creep down the broad wooden staircase. What I remembered most was the scaly touch of his skin and his unpleasant smell, like moldy wet straw. For a full month afterward I prayed that I was pregnant and would not have to go back to him. As my period failed to arrive, day after late day, relief and joy burgeoned within me like the child itself.

One month before Naomi was born, a chance event altered the course of my life. Confined to bed in the final trimester of a difficult pregnancy, nervous and uncomfortable and bored, I saw in a magazine the announcement of a national science essay contest. Although the deadline was only four days away, I scribbled 20 pages on the role of nitrous oxides in amphibian metabolism, and on amphib-ian reproductive cycles. The results arose from my own observations — and, let me admit it, my own experiments — on my pet frog, Jasper, and his descendants.

My entry went out in the next mail. I sent it without permission, a major sin. On the other hand, I was sure that I had no hope of winning one of the four cash prizes, or even of achieving an honorable mention. And, in fact, I received neither. What I did receive was a visit from Elder Walker. With him came a tall, dark-suited stranger with a maroon bow tie, piercing dark eyes, and a drooping black mustache.

Walter Cottingham was a lawyer from one of the big pharmaceutical companies. The home office of Tilden, Inc. was near Philadelphia, a city which at the time sounded to me as far away as the Moon. Walter Cottingham, to my 14-year-old perspective, was a senior authority figure. Only later did I learn that he was just 10 years older than me and fresh out of law school. The suit, bow tie, and mus-tache were his attempt to look older. But he was good at his job. For two hours, closely watched by Elder Walker, Walter Cottingham sat on my bed end and asked me polite but shrewd questions related to my paper. What did I know about cyclic guanosine monophosphate? Had I ever heard of phosphodiesterase-5? How had I known that nitric oxide serves to relax blood vessels?

At the end of that time he stood up, turned to Elder Walker, and said, “I am authorized to offer one hundred thousand dollars, payable at once.”

“It must be discussed with the Council.”

“Naturally.” Cottingham, to my vast surprise, winked at me. “There must also be one other condition.”

“That she does no additional work which could possibly infringe on or affect your patents?”

“Good heavens, no.” Walter Cottingham stared at Elder Walker, and I think that for the first time since his arrival he was genuinely astonished. “That would be the very last thing we at Tilden would suggest.” He grinned down at me, and the smile changed him from a ferocious stranger to a

friend. “When the baby is born, Miss Rachel, and you are recovered, you will receive a proper education. Naturally, at our expense.” He turned again to Elder Walker. “Miss Rachel should pursue research, preferably in the area where she is already active. However, Tilden will not constrain in any way the nature of her work, or the institution where she chooses to apply her talents. My company demands one thing only: Tilden will enjoy an exclusive right to any resulting patents. In return for this we will give you a royalty on gross product sales, plus other financial rewards.”

I understood only a fraction of what Walter Cottingham was saying. Certainly, I had some idea that the direction of my life was changing, but I did not realize that I had at that moment diverged forever from the other fertile females in the Blessed Order. Unlike them, I would have no more than one child. Unlike them, I would become no man’s wife—first, second, third, or fourth.

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After Naomi was born I was allowed to remain and care for her for two more years. Depending on your definition, that was either an easy or a very hard period for me. I did no manual work, which for a female in the Blessed Order was unheard of. On the other hand, in every spare moment two tutors from Tilden crammed me with physics, chemistry, and biology. Mostly I loved it, but some-times, struggling to absorb difficult material while Naomi suckled at my breast, I broke down in tears. At the time I had never heard of postpartum depression, and really I don’t think that was my problem. It was that soon I would be in a far-off town, while my baby would remain in Bryceville.

I was just 17 when the time came for me to leave. By then Naomi was a sturdy two-year-old, more beautiful than I had ever been. She had my dark eyes, and my chin, but the nose and cheekbones were a mystery. Others said that they saw the Patriarch in her. I agreed—in public. In private, I rejected fiercely the suggestion that anything in that wrinkled face and those bleary eyes could live on in my child.

I left Bryceville, sure that I would miss Naomi every waking second. For the first week, I did. Then the heady thrill of access to a real lab with real equipment grabbed me. I moved my area of study from amphibians to mammals, and I mapped out an ambitious research program.

My area of study. *My* research program. Even, *my* laboratory—I thought of it that way, although a dozen other research workers were there.

What an innocent! At the time I saw nothing peculiar in the fact that a lab suitable for my specialized work lay less than a hundred miles from Bryceville. It never occurred to me that the long arm of Tilden, Inc. could reach out across the country and endow and equip a new university facility in the town of St. George in less time than it took me to wean Naomi. Most of all, I had no idea how closely the interests of Tilden coincided with those of certain members of the Blessed Order.

I had mapped out a research program? Yes, and no. Certainly I had written the proposal. But now I know that I was steered to it by a master plan of directed education, existing equipment, and available funding.

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Five and a half years after my scribbled notes on amphibian reproduction, I was offered—but did not understand—evidence that the direction of my “independent” research work had been carefully channeled from the beginning. It came during my usual six-monthly visit to Bryceville. Naomi was by this time a precocious handful, taxing the patience and stamina of my ailing mother. I wanted to be with both of them as much as I could, but half a day after my arrival I was called to a meeting with Elder Walker in his private quarters.

“Rachel, my dear.” As I entered he stood up and enfolded me in a hug. Maybe I had become hypersensitive since leaving Bryceville, but that embrace felt more personal than paternal. Elder Walker’s sexual energy was no secret in Bryceville. Rather than taking the seat offered on the couch next to him, I remained standing.

He looked at me sharply but said only, “I have been reading your research summaries.” He picked up and waved a sheaf of papers. “I want to tell you a way in which you can be of extraordinary service to the Blessed Order. Before we begin, you must swear that what we will discuss today will be held absolutely secret.”

“I promise.” I was intrigued, as any 19-year-old is intrigued by secrets, and I could see no reason not to give my word.

“Secret,” he added, “even from other members of the Blessed Order. Unless I give permission for you to do so, you must not speak of this to your mother or to anyone else in your family. And, of course, to no one outside.”

That made me hesitate, but after a few moments I nodded. “I



promise that I will speak to no one unless you tell me that I may.”

“Very good.” Elder Walker relaxed back onto the couch. “Rachel, you are a highly intelligent and talented young woman. But you have been here very little for the past five years. You have not seen the changes in the Patriarch.”

Cyrus Walker was on very delicate ground. The Patriarch was eternal and un-changing, almost by definition. It was forbidden to speak of him except in terms of veneration and as a symbol of absolute authority. I said, truthfully, “I have not seen the Patriarch for more than five years.”

The last time had been on the occasion of my impregnation with Naomi, as Elder Walker surely knew.

“Then take my word for it,” he said, “there is cause for concern. I must be direct with you, and on a highly sensitive subject. The Blessed Jasper is not what he was. Mentally, he remains acute; but physically, he has trouble performing . . . certain traditional functions of our Order.”

He glanced at me hopefully, eyebrows raised. Could he be saying what he seemed to be saying? I declined to take the risk, and stared at him in silence.

He sighed, and went on. “It is an element of the faith in the Blessed Order that our numbers in the world will increase and we will thrive. Our children are drawn from superior stock. They grow untainted by the habits of a degraded society. And, of course, the Patriarch is the best father that any child could ever have.”

Now I was sure. I said flatly, “The Blessed Jasper has become impotent.”

He grimaced. “My dear, never *ever* say such a thing outside this room, or hint at it to any other person. But what you say is correct.”

“Into which category does his impotence fall?” My professional interest had been roused — the physiological interplay between the conscious mind and the autonomous nervous system was the very area of my own research — and for me, scientific curiosity always overcomes shyness and diffidence. Elder Walker stared at me and I went on, “Male erectile disorder falls into several categories. Primary impotence means that the male has never been able to maintain an erection long enough to perform sexual intercourse. Of course, we know that is not the case with the

Blessed Jasper.”

Elder Walker flinched and raised his hand, as though to ward off blasphemy, but after a moment he took a deep breath and nodded.

“You are disconcertingly frank, my dear. I blame your exposure to subversive influences beyond the Order, and I excuse your conduct. Continue.”

“Secondary impotence covers several different cases. Sometimes a male is in-terminently potent. Sometimes a male is potent with certain partners, and not with others. Sometimes the male achieves an erection, but cannot sustain it long enough to complete the act; and sometimes a previously potent male, because of age or illness, loses all ability to achieve erection. Which one of these best de-scribes the Blessed Jasper?”

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I thought he was not going to answer. He stood up and went over to his desk. Half a minute later, without looking at me, he said, “The last one. But the Patriarch is not ill —at least, no worse than he has been for years. Can anything be done to help him?”

“I don’t know.”

“You must, it is your area of specialty. Surely there are medications, injections?” He turned to me and he was holding papers in his hand. “You mention them in your own reports. The scientists at Tilden have 32 pending patents based on your work.” Stumbling over the words, he read, “Alprostadil, CGMP, guanine hexafluorate. Sildenafil-what’s-this-say?”

“Sildenafil citrate. That last one is already patented by Pfizer. It was the first of the Viagra-class drugs. But it would still be my first suggestion here.”

“It was tried earlier this year. There was some success, but also side effects — headaches, and alarming fluctuations in blood pressure. I judged it too risky to continue.”

My mind felt topsy-turvy. So many years with the image of the Patriarch as all-powerful and all-knowing, and now Cyrus Walker spoke of the Blessed Jasper like some prize animal needing to be restored to working condition.

“There are many other drugs,” I said. “I can suggest dozens. The problem is, they have never been tried on human subjects under controlled conditions. It would take years for Tilden to get any of them through the FDA.”

Prompted by another blank look from Elder Walker, I added, “FDA is the Food and Drug Administration. It would have to approve any drug.”

“Why should they know anything of the drugs that you have developed? They belong to us and Tilden.”

“The FDA has to be told of any experiments involving humans. And Tilden won’t risk crossing the FDA; they have too much at stake on hundreds of products.”

“Then neither Tilden nor your FDA shall know of the experiments.” Elder Walker had regained control of himself, and of the meeting. “It is very simple, Rachel. You will develop and provide the test drugs. Here within the Order I will find males to take part in your experiments. The results will come back to you, and you will make the evaluation. No one outside will know anything.”

I shook my head. I was frightened, but I had to protest. “I can’t do that.”

“What do you mean, *can’t*?” Elder Walker was scowling.

“It’s dangerous, and unethical, and unfair to Tilden. They’ve always worked in good faith with the Blessed Order. Walter Cottingham has treated me kindly, and I regard him as my friend.”

“Tilden, and Walter Cottingham, are unbelievers. Your duty is to serve the Blessed Order.” Perhaps there was still a hint of rebellion in my look, because he went on, “You will do as you are told, Rachel. Or would you rather never see your daughter again?”

He had hit my weak point, and he knew it. They had Naomi. I dared argue no more. I nodded, and said softly, “It will be as you say.”

If I am completely honest, I must admit that the decision was not so difficult as it may sound. I was fascinated by the prospect of applying some of the ideas that bubbled up in my head as soon as the problem was defined. Also, my whole upbringing had been one in which obedience to

Elder Cyrus Walker and the needs of the Blessed Order was immediate and unquestioned.

So the secret program was launched —secret from Tilden, secret from the uni-versity, secret from my friends and fellow workers in the lab. I was told, and accepted, that in the interests of secrecy I would be interrogated regularly during my visits to Bryceville.

I was allowed to spend an extra four days with Naomi. Then I returned to the university and I began to work, harder than ever in my life. I cannot deny that I reveled in the challenge.

It would be two more years before I began to suspect that Cyrus Walker's mo-tives were not what they seemed. And a year beyond that when I started to question the whole structure and *raison d'être* of the Blessed Order.

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Not for nothing do the priests of another religion say, "Give me the child for the first seven years, and I'll give you the man."

Whatever an infant finds around herself is, by definition, the natural order of things. Quite reasonable to me, all through my first and second decades, was the idea that a man had the right to take several wives; accepted, that a woman's success would be measured by the number of healthy children that she bore, and that she would function in all the affairs of life as "the lesser man"; natural, that children were first and foremost the possessions and servants of the Blessed Order; unquestioned, that the sex rights and privileges of the males should contain a defined hierarchy, with the Patriarch at the head and Elder Walker as his powerful lieutenant.

In every class in Bryceville's school, biblical authority was cited for these matters. At home, my mother and seldom-seen father drove home the same message. Is it any wonder that five full years were necessary, away from Bryceville and in the company of heretics, before I began to feel differently?

And yet with hindsight I believe that I was in some ways always a rebel. Un-known to anyone, I had secretly named my first frog *Jasper*. Taking the name of the Patriarch in vain was blasphemy. Unknown to anyone, I had done my private froggy investigations and mailed the results to a science contest in the huge and unknown world beyond Bryceville and the Blessed Order. That was, at the very least, gross disobedience. It

ought to have raised a red flare on the lofty roof of the Patriarch's lodge, glaring enough to warn any alert Council member that Rachel Stafford was the worst possible person to send into an outside world of skeptics and unbelievers.

Perhaps they were overconfident. After all, they had Naomi. And indeed, during my first years at the university any Council member would have seen little reason to doubt the decision to send me there. True, I did take driving lessons and obtain my license, something denied to female members of the Blessed Order; but I used the license mainly as an ID in stores. I was young and shy and avoided social contacts. My work and my visits to Naomi filled my life; and although it should not be for me to say it, my understanding of neurotransmitters, human biochemistry, and the human mind-body interface grew to exceed anything that I could find elsewhere in the world. I published little, but Walter Cottingham filed a torrent of patents based upon my work. He told me —strictly, I am sure, against company policy— that Tilden was more than getting their money's worth. No other company had anything remotely like the selective-memory suppression and keyed-memory access drugs that my work provided. Of course, the “forgetters,” the “truth tellers,” and the “button pressers” (Walter's terminology) still had a long way to go before they could be turned on and off in hours rather than in a few weeks; even so, he and Tilden were highly satisfied.

But I was not. It was not so much that the Order used the truth tellers on me. Rather, it was that as year followed year I became increasingly convinced that I was just getting started. The human brain and body form a wondrous and complex interacting system. The idea that a drug—any drug—might produce a single effect on the delicately balanced human brain is as preposterously naive and wrong as the thought that a combination of two medications will produce no effect beyond their separate influences. Tilden had its patents; I, mapping cross-connections, had something more: the vision of a whole new world where drugs affecting the mind affected the body that affected the mind ... on and on, in infinite regress.

As year followed year I also became more certain that the society of the Blessed Order was corrupt and rotten at its heart.

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I looked up. The sun was high in the sky. I glanced at my watch and realized that I had spent two dazed hours staring at the bright posters in the window of the bicycle shop. The hard bench seat had cut into my thighs. When I

stood up, my calves felt the pins and needles of returning circulation.

I walked slowly back to the campus. Nothing was happening now that had not happened many times before. I had been to Bryceville, reported to Elder Walker, and delivered to him my latest work. He had given me test results for analysis, and he had interrogated me, in detail, while I was under the influence of drugs of my own devising. Soon the effects would wear off, and I would feel normal.

Back in my office, I again turned on the computer and called up the hidden data files. *The response is decidedly nonlinear and follows an approximate two-thirds power law. . . .* The words felt no less remote. However, I could now tell myself that there was a good reason. I had been away for a week, naturally my work would seem a little strange, a little less immediate.

Then why was I filled with such an alien sense of dissatisfaction? I have a powerful memory, but somehow I did not feel that I could trust it. Something was missing. Was that real, or just more drug aftereffects?

I leaned back in my seat and stared at the screen. My office lies at the end of the corridor. I heard no sound but the soft whir of the disk drive and faint footsteps on the floor above.

I felt a strengthening conviction. During my absence someone had been in my office, started my computer, and tampered with my hidden files.

Who? That was not difficult. The Council of the Blessed Order knew exactly when I would be visiting Bryceville and away from the university. Asking me questions was only one way of making sure the secrets of my work were safe; a more direct method was to explore my records firsthand. I did not remember doing so, but under earlier drugged interrogations I might have revealed everything about my secret files.

It was easy enough to check my suspicion. I went to the central log, where records were kept of every transaction of material called from storage. The history was in reverse chronological order. My hidden work files contained nine years of notes on the anti-impotence drugs and protocols, from their earliest beginnings when I arrived at the university through to the same pages that I had been examining earlier in the day. Those last pages had been accessed on March 16—a date when I was away in Bryceville.

During my absence, representatives of the Blessed Order had been

here and examined my files.

I had my answer. It was exactly what I expected, but it brought no peace of mind. I folded my arms, stared at nothing, and wondered. Since it was no surprise to me that my files would be explored in my absence, why the continued uneas-iness? These records said nothing that I had not already revealed, in full, to Elder Walker and the Council of the Blessed Order.

The rhythmic click of leather shoes sounded far off in the corridor. Someone, probably Dr. Jeffers, was pacing steadily up and down. It was his preferred way of thinking. As this was mine. Sitting in a half-trance, lulled by the sound of footsteps and by the faint hum of the computer's hard drive, I listened to my inner voice. I realized that my worries had nothing to do with my work, or who had been investigating it.

My worry was Naomi. I know that a mother is not the best judge, but I had always thought her an exceptionally pretty child.

*A child.*

Except that on my most recent visit, that word had not been appropriate. In the six months since I had last seen her, Naomi had become a woman. Not just the young breasts, filling out her tight cotton dress; not just the way that the men of the Order looked at her —covertly, hotly, with the eyes of lust. That was bad enough, but worse was the way she responded to those looks; the knowing sideways glance of her dark eyes, the way she held herself and moved her body.

I have suggested already that I am not a stupid woman. Why, then, was I so slow to realize that Naomi, at 13 years, was close to the age when I had been taken to the Patriarch, and far less innocent than I?

I had not seen, because I did not wish to see. To me it was unthinkable that Naomi would be forced to endure what I had gone through myself, 14 years ago. Unthinkable that she would be made to commit incest, even though such a union with the Patriarch, the earthly embodiment of God himself, was sanctioned and blessed within the Order. Unthinkable, but unavoidable.

I became aware that something in front of me had changed. The computer, unattended for more than 10 minutes, had switched its display. Instead of the chronological list of files accessed, it showed a variable screen-saver pattern. A flood of multicolored bubbles rose slowly up the

screen, popped, and dispersed.

The upward drift was random, and then after a while not quite so. I stared, puzzled by a twisting area where green and blue bubbles faded into each other, I was seeing letters —words. *Sharon File 32V*. Visible for a few seconds, then vanishing. Random bubbles formed and rose and burst.

I kept looking. After about half a minute, another confluence of merging bubbles formed the words again: *Sharon File 32V*.

Very few people would be able to read that message. Even if they switched on my computer and let it sit idle until the screen-saver pattern appeared, chances were that they would see nothing. To a person with normal vision, there was no message. Only someone color-blind exactly as I was color-blind would find anything on the screen but random bubbles.

I had left a message to myself. And I had no idea what it might be.

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The hours from noon to early evening were very difficult. Sharon Prostley would be gone by 5:30, but others of the lab left later and they would find it odd to see me using Sharon's work station. I could plead problems with my own computer, but I did not want anyone peering over my shoulder and offering helpful advice when I took a look at File 32V in Sharon's system.

I waited as long as I could stand. It was 20 minutes after seven when I walked for the 10th time along the corridor, found every office empty, and tiptoed into Sharon's room. Most of one wall was a long window, so even with the door closed I would be perfectly visible from the corridor as I turned on her computer.

It took a few minutes to feel my way in — Sharon's machine was organized quite differently from mine. I was forced to look in quite a few places until, in an operating system directory where Sharon was never likely to go, I found 32V. It was a text file; or, more accurately, a nested set of them.

I loaded Sharon's word processing system. Nervously, wondering what I might find, I brought in the first file.

FLGEYRRO PROCIUET PSCIQCXN OFPAJWFS.

Gibberish. Not words, not data, not anything.



Unless... I stared, became dizzy, felt the room sway and rock around me. Memories, suppressed by my own drugs and keyed now by the button pressers, flooded back.

My fingers sought and found the new data bank. Terse notes filled the screen — secret from Tilden, Inc., secret from Elder Walker, secret from everyone. Scanning them, I doubted that they would be intelligible to anyone but me. But scanning them, I saw ample reason for extreme caution.

First entry: *Penta-sild. + cyto. heptahydrate + oxidant* —> *strong short-term in-crease.*

It was a tailored anti-impotence drug that I had recently developed and was testing on members of the Blessed Order. Strictly speaking, any drug was merely being evaluated before being made available to the Blessed Jasper. In practice there was never a shortage of volunteers. Elder Walker told me to bring increasing amounts on each of my six-monthly visits.

And now the subtext: *Penta-sild. + cyto. heptahydrate + GABA undergoes meta-morph.* —> *new neuro. + feedback*—> *6-mo. l(sero. & dopa. levels)*—> *pituit down* —> *testost. to zero. Permanent.*

Interpretation: The same drug, plus gamma-aminobutyric acid, crossed the blood-brain barrier and had a neurotransmitter breakdown product. Used for six months or more, the pituitary gland would be increasingly affected and the male testosterone level would drop to zero; with that decline would go all sexual desire. Furthermore, the effect would not reverse itself after use of the drug ended.

How much did I hate the Order that had raised me? Enough to want to destroy it; but I told myself that was not my motive. All I wanted was to save Naomi, Another few months would be enough; provided that they did not take her virginity until July or August, she would escape my fate.

\* \* \* \*

March, with its warm days and pleasantly cool nights, slowly gave way to the baking heat of June. I worked late every night, but the sidewalk was still warm beneath my sandals as I walked home to my single-bedroom apartment.

As always, I checked my answering machine. Every week I had a friendly call from Walter Cottingham, and now and again there were questions or comments from the scientists at Tilden, Inc. Occasionally there was a message from Bryceville. The Blessed Order did not approve of electronic devices but it did not always follow its own rules. I knew from Walter that Elder Walker telephoned him every week on financial matters. For a senior member of a sect that eschewed all worldly concerns, Cyrus Walker was surprisingly interested in money. I did not know how much Tilden, Inc. paid the Order for what I was doing, but it was far more than the cost of my room and board, plus a small discretionary amount for incidentals. That had been granted, grudgingly, after strong words on my behalf from Walter.

On June 28, I arrived home at nine. I made myself a glass of iced tea and listened to the calls. Raoul Caprice, from Tilden, with a shrewd question about an implied viral inhibitor effect of one of my recent reports. Would it work equally well for retroviruses? I wondered. Would it? Probably. I liked Raoul, or at least I liked his mind. We had never met in person. I looked at the clock and decided, regretfully, that it was a bit late to call him back on the East Coast.

A telemarketer, who must have had more spare time than sense, had left a long message inviting me to buy “heating oil futures,” whatever they were. Sharon Prostley had called, apologizing for not dropping in that morning. She was PMSy and had been in a shitty mood all day. See you tomorrow. Abner Wurtshelm, of whom I had never heard, nervously wondered if I could tell him how the prostaglandins worked. He was doing a science report for high school —deadline in three days —was going to pull a certain D unless he came up with something spectacular —got my name from the college book—would love to buy me a coffee—lunch even —if I would answer a few questions.

I smiled. Abner had a real nerve, but maybe I would call him back. He sounded bright. I started to walk toward the phone when the final message started in mid-sentence.

“ — later on. I have something tremendous to tell you. Call me on return — as soon as you get this message.”

Naomi, too impatient to wait for the end of my standard message to callers. Naomi!

I was dialing before I could ask myself where she was, or how she

had managed to place a call.

“Yes?” The gruff voice that answered was male.

“Naomi Stafford.” I was filled with a mixture of excitement and terror. *Some-thing tremendous* — surely that couldn’t be anything to do with the Blessed Jasper. So what was it? “I mean, I would like to speak to Naomi Stafford.”

“I’m sure you would, Rachel.” It was Elder Walker. “She’s right here. One moment.”

“Mother?” It was Naomi, breathless but somehow more adult in tone than when I had seen her last. “I have some absolutely wonderful news. I’m going to be married!”

“Married. To—”

I found it hard to get the words out. The Blessed Jasper was father to a 10th of the children in the Blessed Order, but he had not married for 40 years.

“To the Blessed Jasper?” I said at last.

“No! Of course not, silly.” Naomi’s laugh, young and carefree, grabbed my heart. “Mother, I’m going to marry Elder Walker. Aren’t you going to congratulate us?”

No 90-year-old Jasper. Instead, rugged and ageless Cyrus Walker, with his bald head, barrel chest, and sly, gray eyes. The heir apparent to the leadership of the Blessed Order had chosen my daughter —my not-yet-14 daughter —to be his wife. She would join the three cowed, abject women already married to him. My work had not saved her. It came too late.

“Mother?” said Naomi. When I still could not speak, Elder Walker’s voice came on the line. “Of course, we hope you will be here for the wedding. You will come, won’t you?”

It was more a command than a question. Elder Walker was used to command-ing.

“Ah — uh — of course, I’ll —when —when will the wedding be?” I still had hope. Elder Walker, whose sexual appetite had been whispered about by the women since I was a small child, would surely be one of the men

taking the newest drug that I had provided. A couple more months . . .

“Oh, don’t worry, there’s plenty of time for you to get here. The ceremony won’t be until Saturday.”

“Which Saturday?”

“The next one. July 3.”

Today was Monday. Five days from now.

“Too soon,” I said, and then, to cover my mistake. “I mean, it will be hard for me to get away from the lab at such short notice. Is there any way it could be later—even a few weeks?”

“The arrangements have all been made. They can’t be changed.” Elder Walker’s voice left no room for negotiation. “Tell people at the university that it’s your daughter’s wedding. They will understand.”

“May I speak again to Naomi?”

“You can speak to her tomorrow. Then you’ll know what day and time you’ll be getting here, and we’ll see how you fit into the ceremony. Naomi would like you to be part of it. See you in a few days.”

I heard a click and was left with a dead line. In a few days I might be dead, too. I knew I would go to Bryceville—I had to, to talk Naomi out of it, plead with Elder Walker to wait, ask for an audience with the Blessed Jasper. Hopeless, but I had to try everything.

And I would go to Bryceville with memories of my own subversive work against the Blessed Order intact. The selective-memory suppression drug I had used on my last visit required a careful protocol and weeks of preparation.

What were the chances that I would be interrogated again during my visit? I would have to take the chance. I told myself, it had been only three months and after all I was there for a wedding, not a research review.

I felt a powerful urge to drop everything and head at once to Bryceville. The sooner I knew the worst—all the worst—the better. A night, long and sleepless, and a brief conversation with Naomi the next morning, convinced me otherwise. I worked the next three days in the lab, pausing only for meals and brief naps and never leaving the building.

At two o'clock on Friday morning I returned to my apartment, showered for the first time in four days, and set the alarm for eight.

At nine o'clock I did something I had done only twice before in my life. I rented a car. I took it to the university, picked up a package from the lab, and eliminated a group of files from my computer, overwriting the storage areas so there was no possibility of reconstruction. Then, instead of taking the usual bus to Bryceville, I drove. On dusty roads, through sheer-sided red canyons and across stark desert scenery, the car's air conditioning fought the summer heat while I, shivering and sweating by turns, worried about Naomi and what was going to happen the next day. The more I thought about Cyrus Walker, the more Naomi's fate seemed worse than mine. I had lost my virginity to the Blessed Jasper; she would lose her whole life when she became Elder Walker's fourth wife.

A mile and a half before I came to the outskirts of Bryceville I left the highway and parked the car in a little arroyo. It would be in trouble there in the event of a flash flood, but it was well out of sight of anyone on the road. I took a knapsack out of the trunk. That was my usual luggage when I went home for visits. Then I hesitated.

Should I take the other thing, too? If I didn't, I might have no chance to come back for it. The cylinder would fit in my knapsack, but suppose that were to be searched? It never had been, so far as I knew. All it usually held were toilet articles, a couple of changes of clothing, and some small gift for Naomi. I had never checked closely to see if anything had been removed and returned.

I looked at my watch. In 15 minutes the Escalante bus was scheduled to pass by this part of the highway. I had to be on it. I finally decided to leave the cylinder behind in the locked trunk of the car, and hurried back out of the arroyo.

I had cut it close. The bus was no more than a mile away, its outline shim-mering in the heat, when I reached the road. I stood by the roadside and waved, and it wheezed to a halt.

"Bryceville," I said, as I climbed on board. "How much do I owe?"

"Not worth charging you." The driver, a towheaded man in his early 20s, nod-ded toward the road ahead. "We're almost there, you could have walked it in half an hour. But I guess it's a bit hot for that."

“Hot, and dusty,” I said, and went to sit down. I was glad to see that only half a dozen other people were on the bus, and none of them had the dress typical of members of the Blessed Order.

The bus dropped me off in the usual place near the edge of town. It was just after one o'clock, so all the children were in school and no mothers were waiting. In fact, no one at all was on the street. My precaution in arriving by bus felt like a waste of time as I walked slowly toward Elder Walker's house, in its favored position next to the Patriarch's tall lodge.

Why there, and not to my mother's house, where Naomi lived? I think I wanted to know the worst as soon as possible. I approached the door of scrubbed white oak, and gently knocked. After a few seconds it was opened —by Naomi.

“Mother!” She sounded delighted and she looked wonderful, cheerful and ra-diant and more free of worry than I have ever been. “I didn't think you would arrive so early.”

“You're living here,” I said. *Too late.*

“No, I'm not. I came this morning to help with the arrangements —it's going to be a huge ceremony. Cyrus isn't here, he'll be back in a few minutes. But the Patriarch is. Come in and see him.”

I would rather spend time with the Devil. But I stepped into the familiar broad hall flanked with Anasazi relics and followed Naomi to the rear of the house.

She led me not to the big living room where Elder Walker had gazed out of the window at the rolling tumbleweed, but to a little, dim-lit den. I had to wait for my eyes to adjust before I could see the Patriarch sitting in an armchair.

At once, I knew what Naomi apparently did not. I was looking at a man close to death. He was small and shriveled, a doll figure dwarfed by the massive chair. The skin of his bald head was like a jaundiced saffron egg, marked by prominent dark veins. His mouth was open, a dark toothless cavern, and his yellowed eyes stared at nothing. When they did not move as I stepped closer, I knew that he was blind.

After the Patriarch, what? The inner circle would never be open to me, or to any woman, but it was not hard to guess its decision. When the Blessed Jasper died, Elder Walker would become the Patriarch.

Looking again at Naomi, I realized that I had been wrong. She *knew*—knew that Jasper had little time to live, knew that tomorrow she would marry a man destined for supreme power within the Order. That sounded wonderful to her— but what about the life she would lead afterward, as a fourth and lowest wife? At 13, no one thinks of the long-term future.

“Can we go home soon?” I said. “I want to see your grandmother, and I would like to spend some time with you before the wedding.”

“That might be difficult.” She gave me the rapid, side-of-eye glance that I had seen her use on older men. “Cyrus said we’d be very busy today and it would be better for me to stay at this house tonight.” She added, her chin pushed a little forward, “It will all be very proper and respectable. Two of Cyrus’s brothers and two of his sisters will be here.”

“Naomi, we need to talk.”

“We’ll have plenty of time for that—after the wedding.” She turned at the sound of the door opening back along the hall, and said importantly, “I think that must be Cyrus. I must make sure that things are ready for him.”

She hurried away. I took another look at the Patriarch. He lolled in his chair just as he had when I arrived, apparently seeing and hearing nothing.

That seemed to be confirmed when Elder Walker breezed in. He ignored the Blessed Jasper and came straight across to me.

“Excellent, excellent.” He clapped his meaty hands together. “You are early, and we need all the help we can get. Rachel, I want you to go down to the main meeting hall and tell Belinda Lee that the table arrangements for the meal have to be changed. Tell her that the Blessed Jasper” —the skeletal figure made no movement at the sound of his name —“must be seated alone at a special dais, and he should not be served a meal.”

“Naomi,” I began. “I’d like to meet with her and — “

“Tomorrow. Far too busy today, all of us.” He took my arm and led me back toward the front door. “Lots of time for the pair of you to talk tomorrow. Off you go and help Belinda. And you won’t need that just now.” He took my knapsack from my hand and hefted it speculatively. “We’ll get it to you later.”

I went cold, recalling how close I had come to bringing the cylinder. I

said not a word, but as he ushered me into the street he spoke again. “One other thing, Rachel. The questioning regarding the progress of your work. We’ll put that off until after the wedding. We’ll do it on Sunday, all right? Hurry along now.”

He closed the door before I could reply. Instead of hurrying I leaned my back against the sturdy wall of the house and closed my eyes. I was unprepared, and interrogation on Sunday would doom me. All the way from St. George I had wondered what I should do —what I could do, what I dared to do. Now, I had no choice.

\* \* \* \*

Sometimes I wonder where I came from. That feeling is never stronger than when I have spent a few hours with my mother. She was thinner than ever and very frail, but she was enormously cheerful. She asked me about my work, and after a couple of minutes of simplified description she nodded and said, “A wonderful marriage, it will be. As I’ve told Naomi, she is very lucky. Everyone expects that Cyrus Walker will become — “

She paused, reluctant to voice the unspeakable. *Cyrus Walker will become the new Patriarch when the Blessed Jasper dies.*

“Mother, Elder Walker is an old man, at least 60, and he has three wives already.”

“Do you think that Naomi minds that? Rachel, don’t you ever even *look* at your own daughter? Naomi is happy as can be, every move she makes says that. She *wants* to marry Cyrus.”

“But she’s only 13. She’s a *child*.”

She stared at me. “You had Naomi at 14. I had *you* at 14.”

“But that doesn’t mean it was right. To spend your whole life bearing children, until you are too old or too sick or die doing it.”

She stood up, and she was trembling. “Rachel Stafford, I don’t want to hear one more word. I didn’t bring a child of mine into the world so that she could spout blasphemy. I didn’t raise you that way, and I didn’t raise Naomi that way, either. It’s that godless college you work at, and that godless work you do. I should never have let you go. I’m going to lie down.”



No use reminding her that she had had no say in the matter. My future had been decided by Elder Walker and the Council. Mother had been a nonentity, as I would also be a nonentity except that my continued presence at the university was both useful and lucrative for the Blessed Order.

At eight o'clock my knapsack was dropped off at the house by a teenage girl whom I did not recall meeting before.

"I'm a friend of Naomi," she said. She stared at me curiously, and I wondered what tales were told in Bryceville of the strange visitor who was Naomi Stafford's mother. After she had gone I looked inside the knapsack and found that the contents were not arranged as I had packed them.

By 10 o'clock it was fully dark. I waited another hour until my mother, who after our first disagreement had said no more than a few words to me all evening, was in bed and soundly asleep. Then I slipped out. The street was quiet and empty. Unless something had changed in the past few months, the summer curfew in Bryceville would last until five in the morning.

I moved slowly and tried to stay in the shadow of buildings until I was safely out of the town center. I had no flashlight with me — a failure of planning on my part—but the Moon was only a few days past full and there were no clouds. Even so, the world looked different enough at night that I was not sure I had the right arroyo until I actually saw the car.

The cylinder weighed about 10 pounds. With more time in the lab I could have cut that down considerably, but everything had been done in a blazing hurry. I tucked the smooth, gray shape under my arm and started back.

It was after midnight when I reached the outskirts of Bryceville. In the past two hours clouds had moved in from the west to hide the Moon. The weather was changing. I sneaked again through the dark streets, knowing that the hard part lay ahead of me.

That effort could not begin until morning. I tiptoed upstairs and lay down in the same bed where I had slept as a child. Amazingly, I slept like a child. Or perhaps not so amazingly. The mind can push a long way, but at some point the body asserts its own demands.

\* \* \* \*

Summer rain in Bryceville was a rare treat. The wet morning faces that I passed on the streets all seemed to be smiling. People who recognized

me paused to congratulate me. I forced a smile of my own, held my knapsack tightly under my raincoat, and hurried on.

The ceremony would be held in the town meeting hall at 11:30, followed at once by the reception in the same building. As I had expected, Belinda Lee was already there, worrying over final arrangements. She did not question my presence. Elder Walker had assigned me to help her yesterday, he must have done the same today.

I went to the rear of the hall to put down my knapsack and hang up my raincoat. Walking to the arroyo and back I had thought about the layout of the meeting hall and wondered where to put the fat, gray cylinder. It had to be hidden, but it also had to be accessible to me during or just before the ceremony.

Belinda Lee, thank God, was a worrier who liked everything planned and perfect to the last detail. She was not at all surprised when I appeared to have the same attitude.

“Right here,” she said, leading me to the third long bench. “You’ll enter with Naomi, then you leave her at the front and come and sit down at the aisle end for the whole ceremony.”

“I just want to run through it once to make sure,” I said.

Belinda’s vague nod said, all right, but I’ve got other things to do. Women were arriving with home-cooked food, which had to be placed ready for serving after the wedding. She took no notice of me when I sat down on the bench and leaned forward to peer beneath it. The solid wooden back ran all the way to the floor, and there was a good foot of open space below the seat.

I went back along the aisle, picked up my knapsack, and walked slowly forward leading an imagined Naomi on my arm. As the dais I paused respectfully with head inclined, then turned and went to sit at the end of the bench. I slipped my knapsack underneath and bent down as though it would not easily fit. The fat, gray cylinder had to come out. I eased it free, pushed it back a little farther, and used the empty knapsack to hide it completely from sight. Leaning far forward, I could still reach its black valve.

Two other young women, strangers to me, were at the front of the hall now. I went forward.

“I’m Naomi’s mother. Elder Walker sent me to help. It smells awful

musty in here, and with the rain we don't want to open the windows. Do you have anything to make it smell nicer?"

Female members of the Blessed Order do not question male authority, even when it comes secondhand. "We've got disinfectant," one of them said. "But it doesn't smell all that good."

"How about rosewater?" the second one asked. "We've got plenty of that. Wouldn't it be better?"

"It would be perfect," I said. "Bring me all you can find. And the disinfectant, too."

They looked a little doubtful as they went off. With reason. Ammonia and rosewater provide an aroma like nothing you can imagine. By 9:30 the front part of the hall had its own unique smell; neither pleasant nor unpleasant, but enough to make people sniff and look puzzled when they came in. I left, highly nervous about what I was leaving beneath the bench, and made my way through the rain to Elder Walker's house.

If I had ever imagined that I was a key player in preparations for the wedding ceremony, the illusion ended with my arrival at the house. I was hardly noticed. Elder Walker had already departed, sequestered with the rest of the Council, but half a dozen older women had been there since early morning. Naomi's attention was all on her appearance. The Order held that elaborate dress and undue attention to person was sinful, but no one seemed to have told my daughter. She was fretting about her puffy face, her imagined double chin, and the state of her complexion. And what would happen to her dress and her hair when she had to walk in the rain? I told her—truthfully—that she looked radiant and absolutely gorgeous. The idea of Cyrus Walker forcing himself onto and into that soft young body made me want to vomit.

All unions of the Blessed Order are said to be fore-ordained by Heaven. Today the weather seemed to support that. At 11:15, just as we prepared to walk over to the meeting hall, the rain stopped and the sun emerged.

Ten of us, all women, walked through the streets with Naomi; but when we came to the open double doors of the hall, I alone continued with her on my arm. The great room was already three-quarters full. I guessed maybe a thousand people were there — this was a major event for the Blessed Order. As Naomi and I went down the long aisle I saw Elder Walker and a group of Council members waiting at the end. Behind them,

on the dais in a massive ceremonial chair, sat the wasted form of the Blessed Jasper.

The wedding ceremony within the Order was lengthy, and as long as I had lived in Bryceville the Patriarch had played a central part in it. As I left Naomi with the group before the dais, turned, and made my way to my place on the bench, I wondered. How could a living skeleton, blind and deaf, perform any function at all, still less deliver the customary invocation and blessing?

I should have known better. The Council had faced the problem of a failing Patriarch for a long time. As I sat down and leaned far forward as though in prayer, I heard a familiar voice. "Dearly Beloved, we are gathered here today..."

I jerked my head up. That was the Patriarch's voice, firm and clear. But the mouth of the frail figure on the platform was not moving. I glanced around and saw others behaving as if the situation was perfectly normal. Suddenly I realized what was happening. The Order, sneering at the world outside Bryceville, decrying modern machinery, suspicious of innovation, still found its own uses for technology. Someone, years ago, had foreseen the present situation and recorded the Blessed Jasper in a wedding ceremony.

I leaned down, reached underneath, and savagely turned the valve. As I straight-ened up I heard the hiss of escaping gas. After a few seconds my neighbors on the bench, three women, turned in my direction. They were catching a faintly acrid smell, but the continuing ceremony masked the sound. They stared at me for a moment, saw nothing, and returned their attention to the wedding service.

The next five minutes were agonizing. I felt sure that the smell of the spreading gas would overwhelm that of disinfectant and rosewater, and someone would investigate and expose what I had done. If that didn't happen, the alternative was almost worse: In another hour, Naomi would be married to Cyrus Walker. And there was a final possibility, one I almost dared not think about. I hoped that I understood the interaction of the chemical now spreading through the air with the drugs delivered in the past year to the Order, but in the last few desperate days there had been no time to calibrate dosage or explore other possible effects. Suppose that I killed everyone in the meeting hall? It was small consolation to know that I, sitting right above the cylinder would be the first to go.

I waited, gradually becoming convinced that I had made a gross

mistake and nothing was going to happen. The voice of the Patriarch seemed to go on forever. Then one of the Council members standing right at Naomi's side raised a hand to his head, half-turned, and dropped to the ground without a sound.

\* \* \* \*

The men nearby bent to help him, but before they could do more than lift his head their attention was diverted to the raised dais. The Patriarch, who up to this point in the proceedings had neither moved nor spoken, uttered a hoarse, strangled moan. His skinny figure lurched to its feet, stood swaying and rigid for a moment, then fell forward head first. The crack of his bald head on the hard floor of the hall was loud enough to sound through the still-continuing invocation.

A wail of horror and disbelief rang through the hall. Council members moved to the Blessed Jasper, while dozens of other people started forward. Before they could do anything to help, another man was toppling to the floor. Then another, I saw Elder Walker, swaying on his feet, grab at Naomi's arm for support. Then he crumpled and fell. I leaned forward, thinking to close the valve, but it was too late. The women on my bench were screaming and they forced their way past, making it impossible for me to bend over. I stood up and turned around. The room was pandemonium. Some people pushed forward to help, others were head-ing toward the doors. And, everywhere close by, men were falling. The front of the hall was littered with their silent bodies. Other men right beside them re-mained standing. They stared around, bewildered and afraid.

I hoped and prayed that I was seeing unconsciousness, and no worse. I had killed the Blessed Jasper, I knew that—the three-foot fall from the dais to an impact with the hard floor would have cracked the skull of a man far less frail.

Naomi was kneeling at Elder Walker's side, crying hysterically. I pushed my way through, grabbed an arm, and tried to lift her. "We have to get out of here!" I shouted.

"No!" She would not move. "Cyrus is hurt. I have to look after him."

"It's too risky. If we don't leave, the same thing will happen to us."

I don't know if she heard me, but others certainly did. I heard screams and cries of "Let me out!" The press toward the main exit began in earnest. Men and women forced each other out of the way and trampled the bodies

on the floor. Again I tried to lift Naomi, but she would not move from Elder Walker's side.

I stayed with her, waiting for the crush to subside. Then, when no one was near, I did what I hated to do. The jab of the needle to the nape of her neck was not painful — barely enough to make her look up at me in surprise.

I waited for 10 seconds, then said, "Naomi, we must leave now. Come along."

She rose to her feet with a bemused expression on her face and allowed me to lead her away from Elder Walker. When we came to the bench where I had been sitting I made a quick detour and picked up the knapsack and cylinder.

At the double doors I paused and glanced back into the hall. I had no time for an accurate count, but I estimated that 50 people remained, all near the front, all unconscious, and all men. In front of me, hundreds had turned again and were standing, unsure if it would be safe to go back in. It had begun to pour, mingling warm raindrops with tears. No one spoke to us or tried to interfere as I led Naomi away along the street.

She said nothing for a hundred yards, and then, "Where are we going?"

"Home, first. Then to where we'll be safe."

She glanced back toward the meeting hall but did not answer. I could feel her arm trembling, and I tucked it into mine. "We'll be all right, love. We'll be fine."

She stared at me vacantly. "Where is Cyrus?"

"He is fine, too. He wants me to look after you."

"And the Blessed Jasper?"

I dared not answer that. I believed that the Patriarch was dead, and I had killed him. I told myself it was not my fault. The old man ought to have been allowed to die in peace.

We had reached Mother's house. I expected her to be there, until I saw that the wheelchair was missing. I hadn't seen her in the hall, but she

had almost certainly been there for the wedding. I hoped that she was safe. In any case, I could not take the time to find out.

“Naomi, pack some clothes, and anything else you think you need.”

“For how long?”

*Forever.* I would not ever dare to return to Bryceville, and I wanted Naomi to stay away.

“For a week.” In that much time I would be able to explain everything to her.

“Are you taking me to where you live, in St. George?”

That had been my own first thought, until I recalled how members of the Blessed Order had known exactly how to get into my computer. We would not be safe there. We would not be safe anywhere, but I could not tell that to Naomi.

“Not St. George,” I said. “We are going farther away than that. You’ll get to fly in an airplane.”

“Oh.” Her face showed some life for the first time since the man at her side had fallen silently to the floor, but then she frowned. My poor, sweet Naomi. Today had to be a far worse nightmare for her than for me. “An airplane?”

“Drink this,” I said.

She swallowed the little cup of red liquid I handed her, and after a few seconds her face cleared. “An airplane. I’ve always wanted to go on one. But isn’t it wrong?”

“Not when it’s really necessary. The Blessed Order says, in certain cases things like airplanes can be used.” I glanced at my watch. Amazingly, it was not yet midday. “Are you ready to go?”

“Just about.” She smiled. “Will you really take me on an airplane?”

“I will. I promise.”

Three-quarters of an hour later we were at the arroyo. The rain had made the ground slippery but there had been no flood. The car started

easily. I headed north. Four hours later we were at the Salt Lake City airport. By seven o'clock we were taking off, and Naomi was staring out of the window. She seemed bliss-fully content—too content.

I, in the seat next to her, worried about dosages, gripped the armrests of my seat and tried not to think about where I was.

I, too, had never been on an airplane.

\* \* \* \*

Where to go?

Although my research work had carried me electronically to hundreds of people on every continent except Antarctica, I knew no one. I had no close friends, no knowledge of how or where two people without much money could hide from possible pursuers.

I had been too desperate to do anything but run until we flew out of Salt Lake City. Only when we landed at Philadelphia at six o'clock in the morning did I call Walter Cottingham. I reached his answering machine, and left him a despair-ing message with the number of the phone where I was standing.

I went back to sit down. What were Naomi and I going to do? She had slept through most of our long red-eye flight with its two connections, exhausted by her nightmare morning and with a mixture of drugs still in her system. She drowsed on a seat near me. Now, somehow, I had to get us to a place where we could shower and eat, and she could recuperate.

While I was still wondering, the telephone rang and I jumped to answer it, almost knocking down a woman struggling with two big suitcases.

"Walter?" I said. The woman was glaring at me, and I gave her a conciliatory smile.

"It's me. I'm home. Just sleeping. Do you know what time it is? Where are you?" He listened, then said, "Stay right there. I'm on my way. Don't worry, we'll take care of this."

I collapsed back onto my seat. For the first time in 24 hours I was able to close my eyes and relax a little bit.

He arrived an hour later, when I was beginning to worry that he wasn't



coming.

“Traffic,” he said. “You look tired out. How are you, witch-woman?”

He caught Naomi’s puzzled expression. “It’s nothing bad. Just a name I gave your mother because our researchers say what she does is magic.”

I had told Naomi nothing about Walter, except that he was a friend. She was staring as I introduced them, and I tried to see him through her eyes. The black mustache was long gone, together with the bow tie. I noticed for the first time a few gray hairs. In the past eight years he had been through a marriage and a “friendly” divorce, and he had two children who lived mainly with their mother.

“Did anyone from Bryceville call you?” I asked.

“Not since last week.” He had picked up our two cases and was leading us to the airport parking lot. “Were they supposed to?”

“No.” I was tempted to tell him everything at once, but I was afraid that if I did he would say he couldn’t help and we had to go back. “There was a lot of trouble in Bryceville yesterday. People falling-down sick. Naomi and I had to get out before we caught it, too.”

He turned and gave me an owlish look, but he kept on walking. When we reached the car he said only, “I think we ought to go to my place first and not to the office. Because when Raoul Caprice and the others find out you’re in town they’ll kill to meet you.”

The 40-minutes drive to the western suburbs of Philadelphia was done mainly in silence, Naomi in the back and me on the edge of my seat next to Walter Cottingham. We pulled up at an old wooden house with big shade trees in the front yard, bordered by a hedge with sweet-smelling white flowers that I had never seen in Bryceville or St. George.

\* \* \* \*

Before we went inside Walter apologized for the mess. He carried the cases up a flight of stairs running from the dark little entrance hall, to a bedroom luxuriously furnished by the standards of the Blessed Order. Naomi stared wide-eyed at the telephone, the television on the dresser, the window air conditioner, and the bath-room with its variable-pressure shower head. I could see that the drugs were work-ing their way out of her system, and I steeled myself for a barrage of questions when they did.

“Make yourself at home,” Walter said to her. “I’ll bet you could use a shower, right? Come down when you’re all done and we’ll have breakfast. I’ve not had a thing to eat yet this morning.”

I could tell from the way he spoke that I was not included in the invitation to shower. I followed him back downstairs and through a dining room into a sunny enclosed porch lined with cushioned benches and with a solid butcher-block table in the middle.

He pulled out a chair, motioned to me to sit opposite him, and said, “All right, Rachel. What the hell is all this?”

I faced the devil’s own choice: be honest, and admit to my participation with the Blessed Order in an eight-year deception of Tilden, Inc., or try to invent a set of lies plausible and consistent enough to satisfy Walter’s skeptical mind.

I heard the sound of running water upstairs, and thought of Naomi. Her safety came first. Walter had to know what had happened in Bryceville — including every-thing that I had done.

“It will take a little while,” I said. “May I have a cup of tea — caffeine-free if you have it.”

\* \* \* \*

While the water was boiling, I began. The bit about the first impotence drugs was easy. Walter was actually ahead of me. He interrupted to say, “We were partly responsible for that. Our people sensed a possible gold mine of patentable medi-cations when they read your first reports. I’d say we steered you in that direction; but you were soon far beyond anything we expected.”

“And I’m sure you didn’t expect what came next.” I told him of Elder Walker’s request—more like a command—to develop the next generation of drugs and test them on members of the Blessed Order. Walter whistled and said, “Bad news. Unapproved testing, on human subjects. Did it actually happen?”

“Yes. And there’s worse.”

I talked again, for a long time, and for a long time afterward he was silent. Finally he said, “Let me make sure I have this right. Recently you

developed a new drug, one whose short-term effect is increased virility and sexual performance, but whose effect if taken over a period of months is the total and permanent destruction of all male sexual desire. That's what you meant by a 'phallicide agent.'"

"Yes. It wasn't that difficult."

"You can say that. I think our researchers would say it was damn-nigh impos-sible. And in the past week you went even further. You produced an airborne molecule that is absorbed rapidly through the skin, crosses the blood-brain barrier, and interacts with the previous drug to cause temporary insensibility."

"Yes. I hope it's temporary. Will you call Bryceville?"

"I will. How many people are affected?"

I remembered the men falling, and the floor of the meeting hall strewn with bodies. "Only males who had been taking impotence drugs and were near enough to the gas cylinder when I opened the valve. Maybe" — I hesitated — "maybe 50. But it could be as high as 75."

"Jesus Christ. You think you killed 75 people?"

"No!" I thought of the Blessed Jasper. "I do think I might have killed one."

"But you're not *sure* about the others? My God, Rachel, you stay here. It's still the crack of dawn out there, but I'm going to make a quick call this minute."

As he vanished I was left alone, my skull throbbing. I had been trying to save Naomi, that had been my whole reason for everything I had done. But if I had killed people, who would save *me*?

The door opened again. I looked up, thinking that Walter had some question before he made the call. Standing in the doorway was Naomi, fully dressed. Her damp hair was pushed back from her face and she was ghost-pale.

She stumbled forward and stood leaning against the table. "You did it," she said huskily. "It wasn't some kind of disease, like you told me. It was you, wasn't it, you and your drugs from hell? You killed the Blessed Jasper."

“Naomi, I didn’t mean — “

“And you hurt Cyrus and the others.” Tears were trickling down her bloodless cheeks. “We were going to be married, it would have been wonderful, the best day ever. I was so happy. You stopped it. And you made it so Cyrus and me can never have babies. I was really looking forward to having his babies.” Her voice rose. “I hate you —you’ve ruined my whole life.”

She stood up, blundered to the door, and pushed through it. I stood up to follow, but ran into Walter on the threshold.

“She knows,” I said. “She heard us. She says she hates me. I have to go after her.”

Naomi was out of the house, out of the yard. I saw her walking, head down, along the street.

“No. Let me do it. If she hates you right now, maybe she’ll listen to me.” At the front door he paused. “One dead —the Blessed Jasper. Everyone else is all right. No one there has any idea what really happened. Cyrus Walker told me that it was the Hand of Almighty God, reaching down to raise the Patriarch from earthly life to everlasting glory in Heaven.”

“What did he say about me and Naomi?”

“Not a word. Things are so confused in Bryceville, he probably thinks you’re still at your mother’s house.”

Walter smiled at me and was gone. I expected that he would return in a few minutes and I stood at the door waiting. After a quarter of an hour there was no sign of either him or Naomi, and I went back to sit wearily at the table.

*I was really looking forward to having his babies... I hate you —you’ve ruined my whole life.* How could she possibly feel that way?

After an hour I moved from the table to lie down on one of the padded benches on the porch. I fell asleep there, and woke from disturbing dreams when I heard the front door open. I straightened up and looked at my watch. Mid-afternoon. At least seven hours had passed. Walter came in, and he was alone.

“You didn’t find her?” I said.

“I did. She and I went over to my office at Tilden. She’s upstairs now. No — “ He reached out to prevent me from standing up. “Don’t try to go to her. You and I have to talk.”

“I have to make sure that she is all right.”

“She is. Take my word for it. Look, do you want to talk to Cyrus Walker in Bryceville?”

“No!” My stomach turned over at the idea.

“That was how I thought you’d feel. So I called him, from my office.”

“What did you tell him?”

“That you are here. That Naomi is here, too. Not a word about your role in what happened. So far as he is concerned, you ran away and you took Naomi because you were scared.”

“I *am* scared.”

“You don’t need to be.” Walter motioned me to move over and sat down beside me on the bench. “I talked this whole thing over with my bosses at Tilden, and I have their approval for what I’m about to say. When I called Cyrus Walker, I told him I knew about the way that he and the Blessed Order had violated both the law and their agreement with us by doing drug tests on humans without FDA approval. Legally, I said, we have you guys on toast. But we’re willing to cut you some slack under certain conditions. We’ll even keep giving you royalty payments. Only from now on, we control the work that Rachel Stafford does. The Order has to cut out all the crap about interrogating you, and they stop delving into your files.”

“Did he agree?”

“Not at first. And not without a condition of his own. He pleads to have Naomi back in Bryceville. I agreed.”

“*Never*. You can’t agree to that, you have no idea what it’s like there.”

“You’re right, I don’t have any idea. But Naomi does, and she’s dead keen to go *back—desperate* to go back.”

“She’s too young to make that decision. Too young to know what’s best for her.”

“Not too young to know what she wants. And what she wants is to go back home.” He raised his hand to cut off my response. “It is her home, you know, even if you hate to think of it that way. She loves you a lot, but she wants to go back to her mother.”

*“I’m her mother.”*

“Legally and biologically, of course you are. But the person who raised her, from the time she was two years old, is her grandmother. Rachel, I have to ask you a hard question. You had to go to Bryceville every six months, so they could check up on you. And you saw Naomi then. Now, did you ever make special trips to see her apart from that?”

“No. But I had—”

“Were there reasons why you didn’t go to see her? Like, you wouldn’t have been permitted to visit, or you didn’t have the money?”

“I had enough money. But with my work in the lab, I was the only one who knew what to do and when to do it. I couldn’t just walk out.”

“Couldn’t you have scheduled your experiments so that you had a couple of days, every month or two, when it was all right to leave?”

“I don’t know. I didn’t—I never.. .”

“Never tried? Rachel, I realize that Naomi means a lot to you. When you were a teenager, she was the center of your life. But it hasn’t been that way for a long time.” Walter put his hand on my shoulder. “How long have you and I known each other?”

“Nearly 14 years.”

“That long? God. Anyway, I’ve spoken to you on the phone, or I’ve seen you in person, an average of once a week for all that time. And you know something? When you were in Bryceville you talked about Naomi constantly: how bright she was, how pretty she was, what new things she had learned. But once you moved to St. George you hardly mentioned your daughter. It was all molecular biology, new discoveries, possible protocols, exciting experiments.”

“That’s what I was *supposed* to talk to you about.”

“True. But it didn’t stop you babbling about Naomi before. Rachel, you may think that I’m criticizing you, but I’m not. I’m trying to tell you who you are. You’re the witch-woman. Your life revolves around the research work that you do —work that no one in the world but you *can* do. I hear it from Raoul, I hear it from Wolf, I hear it from all our scientists: There’s only one Rachel Stafford. And Naomi, smart and nice as she may be, is nothing like her amazing mother.”

“She means the world to me.” I stopped, before I could say, “Everything to me.” Since I was an infant I have been damned by a sense of remorseless logic. I hated what Walter Cottingham was telling me, but I could not deny its truth.

“She should not go back,” I said.

“She wants to go back, and she should. But you can stay and work here—”

“Is that what you’re after? To have me under *your* thumb instead of Cyrus Walker’s?”

“ — or if you prefer it,” he continued as though I had not spoken, “you can return to St. George and work in your old lab. In either case, you will not be troubled by the Blessed Order. And I have to add that there is one other condition. It comes from Naomi, not from Cyrus Walker. You must seek a treatment to reverse the loss of virility and sex drive caused by your phallicide drug.”

If I was hesitating before, his words put an end to that. “Walter, you’re crazy. I could never agree to such a thing. The Blessed Order is an abomination. Its practices are illegal and disgusting and an insult to all women. If I did what Naomi asks — something I have no idea how to do —I would be strengthening the Order.”

“It looks that way to you. But I’ve been watching the Order from outside for 14 years, and I’ve seen what’s happening. Members drift away. So long as the Patri-arch was alive, the organization held together. Now that he’s gone, it will fall apart.”

“It has lasted over a hundred years.”

“So it has. And you, Rachel, who were born to the Blessed Order—and still fear it—think it will last forever. But it won’t. It’s diseased, and an abomination, and disgusting, all the things you said and a lot more, and I ought to be ashamed of myself for being associated with it in any way. Maybe I am. But the Order is dying.” He stared at me with those dark, hypnotic eyes that had only increased in intensity over the years. “I’ll make you a wager, Rachel. Long before you and I, or even Cyrus Walker, are dead and gone, Bryceville will be a ghost town. Naomi will grow up, and mature, and find her own future. Perhaps she’ll make her own decision to leave. You may not like it, whatever she does; on the other hand, I’m not sure I’ll approve of my own children’s choices. None of my friends seem to.”

He stood up. “Think about what I said. I’m going to get Naomi. I believe it’s time that you and she discussed this, just the two of you.”

What was there to discuss? Naomi hated me for what I had done, when all I wanted was to save her. I had nothing left.

\* \* \* \*

I wandered over to the table and sat down. At this time of day the sun was lower in the sky and shone through the porch windows. Its light showed two drying circles of water where the wet bottom of my teacup had rested. I reached out my forefinger and converted each of the circles into the hexagonal form of the ben-zene ring. The addition of other atoms and side chains felt idle and automatic, following no conscious plan. Only when I had finished did I realize that I had sketched the compound resulting from the combination of the airborne chemical gas with the phallicide.

I stared at it, visualizing the protein’s complicated shape in three dimensions. It was one that could permit conformational variation — the same atomic composition, but with several different molecular shapes. Two tetrahedral and trigonal plane bonds could be interchanged, a collinear bond would become bent. The results ought to be stable. A transforming agent should exist to induce that change.

What I had told Walter Cottingham was wrong. The phallicidal drug might be purged, and its effects reversed. But the nature of the transforming agent. . .

Within my mind, a subgroup flexed and changed from left- to right-handedness. The whole molecule twisted and deformed. Atoms swam into view, locking into place at newly available receptor sites. Other



atoms, their bonds weakened, drifted away.

I felt a rising tension. I was far from a full answer, but the search created a pleasurable ache within me like nothing else in the world.

When the door opened I did not hear it. I was not aware of Naomi's presence until she came up behind me, leaned over, and placed her soft cheek next to mine.

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