

The Reluctant Book
a short story by Paul Di Filippo

There followed hard upon the death of Master Biobiblioplexist Vincent Holbrook the pressing question of how best to dispose of his extensive library. None of the unsentimental heirs to the moldering Holbrook estate cared to assume the daily demands of such a large collection of books. The motley assortment of assignees--amongst them various second cousins, great-nephews, and assorted ex-brothers-in-law left over from the multiple marriages of Holbrook's two serially promiscuous sisters, Marlys and Taffy--were all a decidedly illiterate lot. No one was inclined to assume responsibility for even a limited number of the approximately five hundred volumes left forlorn at librarian Holbrook's passing, for the selfish heirs simply had no use for such arcane objects. (Complicating matters, the Catalogue had gone missing upon Holbrook's demise, so that an exact tally of the library's contents was lacking.) A lanky, happily seedy and reclusive fellow well into his second century (although fated by a lurking cerebral aneurysm undiagnosed by his glitchy domestic homeobox never to embark upon a third), given to dressing in fusty non-regenerative clothing prone to showcasing every gravy stain and every dribble of the pungent sengchaw constantly lumped into his cheek, Holbrook had been devoted to his library, sparing no expense on housing and maintaining his collection. His own living conditions at the cavernous, crumbling mansion named Rueulroald betrayed commensurate economies. But Holbrook's bookbarn was assuredly first class, the envy of many of his fellow MBs. Occasional sotto voce grumbles from his uncaring heirs during his lifetime about how the old man was wasting his money--actually, for all practical purposes, their money--on such a self-indulgent hobby failed to disturb the equanimity or enthusiasm of the doddering bibliophile. He managed to ignore even the ravings of one particularly vindictive niece who, in an act of psychic displacement transparent to everyone but herself, speculated loudly that Holbrook actually derived pleasure from the frustration of his nearest and dearest. Why else would he wantonly continue to pour their dwindling inheritance into the acquisition of new volumes and the multiplication of his existing ones? The why was simple, had anyone cared to inquire: Holbrook fancied himself a scholar, and boasted a scholar's unswerving dedication to the pursuit of knowledge above all else. And in truth, out of his well-stocked, heavily permuted, and continually refreshed library had flowed some original contributions in a number of fields: stellar intelligence; gravitokarmic mechanics; intractability parsing; asteroidal archaeology; quantum erotogenics; string collecting; creative teratogenesis; and even those

neglected twin domains, once upon a time so creatively mined, fiction and poetry. Holbrook had seen a number of successes, receiving invitations from various ahuman judging intelligences to port his findings out of his books and into the relevant cybernetic audiovisual datawebs that formed the real repositories of useful information in Holbrook's era. But deriving all these entertaining and educational results from his books was an arduous and demanding task, admitting of little nonbookish relaxation or convivial pursuits even with fellow MBs. His hobby was conducive even to monomania, perhaps, and Holbrook had paid the ultimate price for his interests. And soon now, so would his books.

MB Kratchko Stallkamp resembled a constitutionally ill-tempered, mangy crane recently denied its dinner. Stalky legs encased in yellow pipestem

pantaloons; a roundish torso fluffed out with a weskin of synthetic quills

fashionable over fifty years ago; hunched winglike shoulders and perpetually scrunched-down head resulting in ears nearly on a level with

his Order of the Bookbinders epaulets; and a beaky nose and hard eyes intent on the main chance of spearing something. The wispy hair partially

concealing his scabby scalp anomalously evoked the downy plumage of a chick. As if his avian semblance were not offputting enough, antique eyeglasses retrofitted with intelligent actilenses lent Stallkamp the impossible air of a goggling time-traveler from the Reductionist Millennia.

Ushered from the wintry collonaded front porch into the cold corridors of

Rueulroald by a gimpy Turing-five factotum (one of the few functioning servants left on the estate, an antique whom Holbrook had chosen perversely to address as "The Venerable Bede"), Stallkamp clutched to

his quilled chest, as if suspicious of imminent theft, a battered leather case

whose handle had long gone missing. "Allow me to conduct you to the mysteries," said The Venerable Bede. Stallkamp barked, "What! What's that? I'll have no truck with mysteries of

any stripe!" The Venerable Bede opened a panel under its left armpit and reset a switch. "Excuse me, I meant the mistresses." "Very well then. Lead on."

Lame leg evoking a regular plastic knocking, the factotum conducted the human visitor through many a drafty, dusty hall hung with animated tapestries whose ancient routines ran only spastically now, and through many a polycarbon-cobwebbed chamber where only the glowing LED eyes of artificial spiders illuminated their way. In one vast high-ceilinged ballroom, sentry bats squeaked from on high, alert for intrusions by

any of the myriad types of rogue colonizing insects--escapees from hobbyist workbenches--that populated the dense forests around the manse, those groves themselves engineered so long ago that the names of their

designers no longer erupted in spontaneous stipples from bark or leaf.

Finally the pair reached the center of the house, a warm, well-lighted kitchen. The heady fragrance of brewing Estruvial Spice tea filled the room with a synthetic allure. In one corner of the kitchen a cot with rumpled covers indicated as plainly as speech that here had Holbrook slept, as well as taken his rudimentary meals, ceding the rest of the house to moth and decay.

"The mysteries," announced The Venerable Bede, then departed.

Seated at a big wooden table with a warped and scarred top were Marlys

and

Taffy Holbrook. The sisters both exhibited the high-gloss perfections

of

the extensively reconfigured elite, although each possessed her own individual style. Marlys had had her scalp hair eliminated and facial features minimized: eyes, nose, nostrils, ears and mouth reduced to the barest pinpoint functionality across a head bare as an egg. The result sketched the nearly empty china face of a doll whose maker had run out

of

materials or ingenuity or both. Taffy boasted a leonine head of tawny

hair

framing a bestial living mask. The end of her leathery snout gleamed wetly, her whiskers vibrating with each breath. Marlys wore a pinafore

and

flouncy skirt, Taffy an elastic suit striped from its scooped neck to ankles.

"MB Stallkamp," purred Taffy. "Please, take a seat."

Marlys's high voice emerged as if from a paper-bellows-and-bamboo-reed mechanism of no large size. "Yes. Join us in some tea."

Stallkamp waved away both offers brusquely. "No time for socializing.

I'm

only interested in the books."

The ladies sought to preserve their dignity and decorum. "Of course,"

Taffy said. "We recognize your devotion to learning, and we're so

grateful

that you wish to purchase the library as a whole. It surely would have pleased our dear Vincent to know his collection would end up in such

fine

hands."

"That's why we favored your tender over all the others," piped Marlys.

Stallkamp denied the tactics of the sisters. "Don't pretend. I know

through my contacts that you have had no other propositions, save from

the

knackers offering you pennies on the dollar. None of my peers wanted a library without a Catalogue, a record of all the permutations and stud lines. Too much work by half getting the whole affair sorted. You can't rely on the books themselves for the information, of course. Except in text mode, they're stubborn prevaricators, every one of them."

"Oh, true."

"So true. Nasty things, books."

"But I'm different. Once I get them home, I intend to overwrite them

all

anyway, and to hell with their current contents. Your foolish brother's holdings never supplemented mine in any case. He wasted his time on all sorts of nonsense. Gravitokarmic mechanics, indeed! No, I'm paying you

as

if the books were all blank, straight from the publishers--with a

sizable

discount for heavy usage, of course--and that's the best deal you'll

get.

There's no point in jollyng me up to try to extort a few more dollars

out

of me. So you might as well conduct me to the library right now."
The sisters stood up resignedly. Taffy pointed to a large door set in

one

wall beside the large stasis cube that served as icebox for
comestibles.

"The bookbarn is right through there, MB Stallkamp. Vincent never
wanted

to be more than a few steps from his precious books. Do you need us to
accompany you?"

"Not at all. The books will be jittery enough without the presence of
two

non-librarians. Let me just check my equipment one last time, though."
Stallkamp deposited his flat case on the tabletop and cracked it open.
Racked inside were several perfusion hypos--prefilled with varicolored
semiotic liquids in their graduated cartridges--and a wicked-looking
pronged device like a tuning fork fused to a pistol grip.

Marlys pointed to the weaponish thing. "What is that? I don't believe
Vincent ever had one."

"It's a librarian's fine-assessor." Stallkamp took up the bifurcate gun
and closed his case. "The bookbarn door is locked, I assume."

Taffy removed a key from her décolletage. "Here's all you need."

Stallkamp strode impatiently to the door, but was brought up short by a
shrill invocation of his name from Marlys. He turned around. "Yes?"

"There's a way you could gain Vincent's library without expending any
money, sir. Each of us in the market for a new husband. Surely one or

even

both of us might appeal to a learned gentleman such as yourself."

From between his overarching shoulder blades, Stallkamp favored each of
the women with a long piercing look before saying, "Sorry, but no. You

two

are of an exquisitely high-toned breed incompatible with my humble
station."

Inserting the still-warm key into the lock of the bookbarn door,

Stallkamp

quickly let himself in, leaving the Holbrook sisters simpering from the
flattery whose irony had escaped them.

Canto had not asked to be born a book, any more than he had chosen the
ratios of his mixed genotype and his consequent motley appearance. But
having received such an assignment from fate (in the case of the
subservient Canto and his fellow books, of course, fate wore an
all-too-human guise), he generally tried to make the best of things.

Being

a book--at least in this collection--did not hold the terrors
associated

with many other chimerical employments: toxin tester, vacuum worker,
seabed miner. Boredom, lack of freedom, the rigors of new textual

creation

and mixing--these were the worst things a book generally faced.

Some days were easier than others, naturally--days when the majority of
books were left uncalled-upon and could conduct their own well-ordered
social life. But since the death of their beloved librarian, MB

Holbrook,

these good days had been few and far between. True, not a single
requisition had obtruded on their private time, but this accidental
vacation was not without attendant drawbacks. First had come the
diminished heat and light in the bookbarn, leaving the books to shiver

and

huddle in the unchanged hay of their darkened carrels. Next they had

felt

the sting of hunger, as their meals began to arrive from the automated synthesizers with increasing infrequency and diminished quality. (The books were not privy to the many arguments among Holbrook's heirs about how best to minimize estate expenditures during the breakup of the property, nor were their votes solicited.) Finally, the books suffered from the black, bleak uncertainty concerning their future. The bookbarn bulked four stories high, with over a hundred carrels per floor. Central to each level was a reading room forbidden to the books save when called there by the librarian. Serving as their social focus instead was the unallocated floorspace around the meal synthesizers, and to a lesser extent, the toilets. Often, the older books, leaders of the community, would call meetings in front of the food dispensers. With some squeezing--not at all disagreeable to the small, hairy books, especially given the chilly conditions obtaining lately in the barn--all the books could accomodate themselves in the open space. On this day just such a meeting had been called--by old Incunabula, leader of the first-floor. Eager to see his beloved Vellum once more, Canto was among the first to arrive. Generally, aside from eating and toilet errands, the books were supposed to remain permanently in their carrels until called by the librarian, and that routine still held to a large degree. But in any library of longstanding agglomeration, the books invariably became familiar with the usage patterns of their owner, and felt safe in circumspectly venturing out among themselves, especially when the librarian was asleep. Under the current circumstances, of course, with their owner dead, no one was likely to call for any volume whatsoever, and the books felt safe in assembling during the day. Perhaps too they were lulled by the fact that MB Holbrook had never assessed any penalties for going misshelved. Beneath the louing dusty rafters of the first-floor ceiling and in front of the food chutes now assembled scores of books, pouring in from the various convergent corridors. Soon Canto was surrounded by his fellow volumes, and he had to strain onto tiptoe in search of Vellum. All roughly three feet tall, the books evidenced their heterogenous genetic composition in every line of their furry bodies. Part squirrel, part babboon, part hare, part whistlepig, with a certain admixture of human qualities, the books sat upright on big hindquarters and lagomorphic clawed feet, carrying their upper limbs close to their chests. Their disproportionately large heads seemed set almost directly onto their shoulders. Wide hazel eyes glimmered, ears twitched, and blunt chisel teeth flashed as the books greeted each other. They spoke, of course, in the pure human tongue. Canto spotted Vellum's attractive dappled pelt across the convocation and hustled through the musky crowd to join her. "Hello, Vellum. Have you missed me?"

Vellum smiled prettily. "Of course I have, Canto. I won't ask you the same, because I can see right away that you have."

Canto sighed. That was romantic Vellum all over, perceptive and sensitive to a fault. A surge of melancholy passed through Canto as he wished for the hundredth time that he and Vellum embodied the same type of text.

But they didn't, and without that prerequisite, chances were they would never be allowed to mate.

The books had no diurnal libidos. Chemically suppressed, their sexual instincts were allowed to come afire only when the librarians wished to mate two books and produce a new text. And the chances that books from different fields would be brought together were minimal. What, after all, would be the point of breeding a work on neutrino construction with a volume of chaoticist poetry? Chances were that the offspring would be useless--although sometimes such wild hybrids did give rise to completely new areas of fruitful study--and in that case, the book-knackers would be summoned to dispose of the useless whelp.

Canto shuddered at that thought. Better never to know the bliss of conjugal union with Vellum than to bring such a hapless creature into the world.

Just as Canto was about to exchange more pleasantries with Vellum, the herd of books began to fall silent, focusing their attention toward the food dispensers. Canto took Vellum's paw and they both directed their gaze forward.

Onto a tabletop clambered with some hesitancy a grizzled, plumpish book: Incunabula. Able now to command the whole herd, supported by two assistants, Trivium and Quadrivium, Incunabula began to speak.

"Ahem, my fellow books. Thank you all for leaving your carrels to attend to my humble speech. I shan't keep you long. I only wish to say that I fully realize that since the untimely mortal passage of our dear librarian, all of us have been anxious about what the future might hold for us. Some of us might even have thought of following the Catalogue into the outer world, where only dangers and hardships await--bibliovores such as the gnoles and gnurrs and zipper-nut squirrels. I caution anyone entertaining such a desperate scheme to be patient. Surely we shall all find a new home very soon. After all, our utility and value are unquestionable. Are not we books the fount of all new conjectures and theorems? Unlike the static databases, the ever-shifting texts we embody, cleverly manipulated by our librarians, are the prime source of new concepts and fresh perspectives. Even in a culture such as the current human one, which prizes stability and feels that many limits of knowledge have already been reached, new thoughts are still welcomed by many scholars and--"

"What's going on here!"

The shouted query from the rear of the herd caused every book to squeak loudly and nearly bolt for their carrels. The herd swayed, but held. Summoning all his courage, clutching Vellum's paw tighter than ever,

Canto

turned around to look for the source of the angry shout.
A human stood on the fringes of the herd, and he held an object Canto
had
never actually seen before, but only heard horror stories about.
A librarian's fine-assessor.

MB Stallkamp's library back home at his manse Brundisium consisted of a
mere ninety books, housed in a smallish barn recently much extended in
preparation for his anticipated acquisition. He consulted his tomes by
ones and twos--perhaps by threes, at most. Dealt with in such small
numbers, the books had always struck him as feeble and impotent
creatures,

susceptible to easy command and prone to cower under his astringent
tone.

Now, faced with scores of self-motivated books, Stallkamp was forced to
revise his long-held estimate of the books' tractability. This
unexpected

show of initiative went counter to his expectations. His gut rebelled
against the massed smell of the volumes, and their ranked stares
unnerved

him. But realizing that he should not let any of his fear or
uncertainty

show, lest he lose any trace of the upper hand, he followed his first
instinctive question with a bellowed demand, directed at the one book
who

stood out from the herd.

"You on the table! What's your UDC?"

Only among themselves did the books indulge in proper names, names
which

were meaningless to their librarians. To those masters, they were known
by

their Universal Decimal Classification, as displayed above their
carrels.

The portly book stuttered out its code. "Theta gamma dot zero nine
seven

two slash five blue one--master."

Nerving himself up to a desperate pitch, Stallkamp crane-strutted his
way

through the books as they fell desperately away from him, squeaking,
their

hairy flanks brushing his calves. Coming within firing range of the
book

upon the table, Stallkamp halted.

"You look to be the leader of this rabble, and as such will have to be
fined."

Raising his assessor and pointing it at the book, Stallkamp squeezed
the

trigger. The assessor emitted no visible ray or projectile.

Nonetheless,

the book grunted as if struck, short arms scrabbling at its chest, then
collapsed. The two assistants jumped back in fright.

Stallkamp approached the fallen book, hefting one limp limb. Dead. He
must

have had the assessor set too high, or perhaps this book suffered from
some organic defect which the assessor had magnified. Whatever the

answer,

the deed was done. Now to make it serve.

"Back to your carrels," shouted Stallkamp, "or you'll all get the same!"

The herd dispersed in seconds, all save the slower of the two aides,

whom

Stallkamp had grabbed by the loose skin at the back of its head.
"You're to come with me to the reading room."
Dragging the book by its scruff, Stallkamp attained the reading room.

Here

he found the lectern--a book-proportioned couch with sturdy straps--a chair for the librarian, and various oddments of the biobiblioplexist's trade: blank paper, syringes, a small semiotic distillery and the like. Stallkamp motioned the book onto the lectern and secured it in place.

Then

he uttered two readout commands: "Open your covers. Title and table of contents."
A look of disassociative withdrawal slid over the book's countenance as the commands triggered automatic retrieval and verbal output. "Advanced Principles of Planckian Geometry. Chapter one, methods of charting. Chapter two--"
"Stop." Stallkamp opened his handleless case and removed a perfusive

hypo.

He applied its snout to the neck of the book and shot the device's measure of sophisticated erasure molecules into its veins. Stallkamp sat down and consulted his watch. On the couch, the face of the book twitched in small spillover reactions incidental to the ongoing erasure, as dendritic delinkers did their brutal work. After

approximately

ten minutes, Stallkamp addressed the book again.

"Title and table of contents."

The book opened its mouth, but seemed unable to offer anything.

Stallkamp

radiated pleasure. These hundreds of blank books--further modified according to his special scheme--would certainly go all the way toward bringing his pet project to its long-sought conclusion. Then wouldn't

the

smugly ridiculous MB Sauvage get a nasty shock!

Stallkamp left behind his visions of triumph, and took the book offline.

"Close your covers."

The command brought the book back to self-awareness and nervous apprehension of its surroundings. Stallkamp released it from the restraints, and ordered it back to its carrel. The book departed,

somewhat

shakily. Likewise, Stallkamp swiftly made his way through the deserted corridors of the bookbarn and back into the kitchen of Rueulroald.

There

he found the Holbrook sisters awaiting him.

"Was everything satisfactory?" inquired Marlys eagerly.

"Absolutely. I performed a random wipe without a hitch. The books will serve my purposes well. I'll have the trundels come round in the

morning.

Factota will stasis-box the library and take the whole collection away. Upon receipt, I'll deliver your payment. Oh yes, there'll be a small deduction though."

Taffy asked, "What for?"

"The library has just been diminished by a single book. It seems one of the volumes became foxed beyond repair when I handled it."

A complacent satisfaction and discurious inertia reigned over Earth. Mankind had, for the most part, simply lost the desire or perhaps even

the

capability for old-fashioned creative ventures. Millennia of scientific and esthetic discoveries--held safely in instant-access databases and inexhaustibly compiled and cross-referenced by cybernetic intelligences--answered all common questions and practical inquiries, served the majority of entertainment requests, and insured that the weight of knowledge would generally crush all initiative. Yet a few eccentric scholars still sought to explore those tattered pockets of art and science that might yet bear a few lousy grains of undiscovered knowledge in their seams.

The living books were their instruments for searching, engines of knowledge creation. Into the capacious neurons of a blank book could be loaded an entire text, many, many units of semiotic import. But simple holding of a text meant nothing, was a task better left to other, more stable media. The innate talent of the books lay in the ingenious ways their unpredictable, parallel-processing wetware could permute the initial semiotic units. Under the influence of various old-fashioned agents (chemicals, enzymes, herbs, hormones, proteins, nutrients and drugs, administered by the librarians through a combination of recipe and guesswork), as well as through the instrument of dendritic relinkers (impossibly tiny units operating in the bloodstream according to onboard algorithms), the brains of the books would shuffle and mutate selected portions of their contents in a wild manner no artificial intelligence could duplicate. Outputting the new semiotic units resulted, nine-hundred and ninety-nine times out of a thousand, in sheer gibberish. But the aleatory point-one percent of worthwhile new information led down strange and curious paths. A final procedure, undertaken when the librarian desired to rely on the evolutionary wisdom of sexual recombination, consisted of breeding two books. Neural changes were reverse-transcribed into the sperm or egg cells of a book, and the brain of the offspring consequently encoded the random reshuffling between parents, offering a new launching point into uncharted information-space. (Although juvenile books took about two years to come fully online neurally.)

The books had no conscious access to the texts they held. No corpus callosum connected their isolated twin hemispheres. Their individual, private mental life took place all on one competent side of their severed brains (protected from the various text-modifying reagents by arterial filters), while the textual work went on unmonitored in the other half.

A small inviolate interpretive nucleus in the textual half (several hundred thousand neurons) hooked into the book's hearing and speech circuits, responding to verbal librarian commands and handling basic operating systems functions. But having no direct access to the contents of one half of their skulls did not mean that the books could not sense in a subliminal manner whether

things were going well or not in the hidden arena. After all, the textual side of their brains lived off the shared bookish metabolism as much as did the conscious half, and various feedback loops such as the enteric system remained as grounds where the two halves could exchange wordless data. Being wiped left a book devastated. Canto had not felt this way since leaving his publisher. In fact, he had never really felt this way at all. In his faraway youth, some five years ago, textual blankness had been the only state he had ever known, an accepted emptiness, half his mind a wet clay tablet awaiting stylus. But after all these productive, albeit unexciting years under MB Holbrook's perusal and overwriting, Canto had become accustomed to feeling full of knowledge. He had felt useful, even proud of his unique, inaccessible contents. And now they had been stolen from him, wiped clean in the space of a few minutes. Canto was now a palimpsest, helplessly awaiting new input on the smudged surface of his mind. As were all his peers. The trundles from Brundisium had arrived and disgorged their efficient factota (so harshly unlike the kindly Venerable Bede, who had often provided the books in Holbrook's library with filched snacks). The factota had floated into Rueulroald pallets bearing compressed stasis boxes, unfolded them, and boxed up the library. Suspended insensibly in the smallest possible cubic area, five hundred books were trundled off to Brundisium. There they were unpacked one at a time, shot with delinkers, and hustled off to their new carrels almost before they were capable of staggering away. MB Stallkamp had not splurged on the annex to his bookbarn. Instead of individual stalls, tokens of respect affording some comfort and privacy, the books were dormitoried fifty to a tight room. Their hard beds lacked even any comforting UDC numbers, since the books were now unclassifiably blank. In the eyes of their master, they were generically identical. For the first few days after their acquisition, when not eating or eliminating, the books merely stayed abed, nursing their violated neural interiors with occasional groans, fearful of doing anything that could earn them a touch of the fine-assessor. The death of Incunabula had proven a sharp lesson in the rigors of their new existence. Whispered conversations in the depth of night had been their most seditious actions. But one morning Canto could not stand the inactivity any more. He was worried about Vellum. How was she dealing with the new conditions? Canto longed to hold her paw and exchange reassuring words with her. So, without announcing his intentions to any of his fellows, he slipped to the edge of

his fifth-level bunk, climbed cautiously down the ladder (his big feet nearly becoming entangled in the rungs), and surveyed his fellow chamber mates.

Canto's eye fell on Papyrus and Parchment, Breviary, Octavo, and Folio, Watermark and Septaugint, Microfiche and Athenaeum, among many others whom he had less familiarity with, since they had once resided on floors in the Holbrook library where Canto had not often ventured. He saw no original books from Master Stallkamp's library. Those holdings seemed relegated to other stacks. But most importantly, his chamber contained no Vellum. Cautiously, Canto poked his head out into the newly constructed yet still somehow dankly dismal, sweat-walled corridor of the bookbarn. He knew the location of the adjacent dormitory from trips to the food chutes. His heart pounding violently (a wise librarian kept his books cosseted and as serene as possible, hoping to limit the amount of endocrinal emotional flux on the blood-washed text), Canto hopped next door. The books in the second dormitory stirred with uneasy and timorous curiosity when Canto crept in. As soon as he got nose-deep into the room, he smelled Vellum. Within a second or two, he was by her side where she lay in a low-level niche.

"Oh, Vell, are you all right?"

Vellum opened her limpid eyes and essayed a brave smile. "Nothing to complain about that we aren't all sharing, dear. Just this knackered sense of uselessness."

Canto started. It wasn't like Vellum to swear. Her cursing revealed to Canto how deeply she had been affected by their common tragedy. A sudden geyser of anger and rage fountained up in Canto's furry bosom.

"Let's escape, Vell. We'll run away, just the two of us."

Vellum squeezed Canto's paw with both of hers. "Being boxed up, we didn't get to see anything of our new surroundings, but I'm sure our new master lives someplace as remote as Master Holbrook did. All the librarians do. Outside is probably miles and miles of forest just teeming with bibliovores. We wouldn't last a minute out there. No, we'd better just resign ourselves to serving out our lives here. Once we get some new texts in us, I'm sure we'll all feel better. Life will go on, Canto. Perhaps you and I will even share a partial UDC. Then maybe we can breed. Wouldn't you like that?"

Canto tried to envision this tolerable future Vellum sketched, but the vision wavered and refused to cohere. Nonetheless, he tried to match his level of resignation and optimism to hers.

"Of course I'd like such a wonderful thing to happen. But I just don't see--"

Vellum laid a clawed finger across his lips. "Shush, Canto. Have faith. Now, go back to your carrel so you don't get either of us in trouble."

Canto and Vellum rubbed wet noses, and then Canto snuck off. He had one foot across the lintel of his own dormitory when, like the jaws of an antique steam-shovel descending on a clod of soil, a roving security factotum gripped his shoulder with a steely pinch.

In his lugubrious lucubratory, MB Kratchko Stallkamp sat gloating in his big actisoothe chair behind his impressive desk, looking like a ratty kingfisher plucked from its lakeside perch and unexpectedly plonked down atop a throne. Stallkamp savored now a piquant contradiction. Acquiring Holbrook's library, cheap though the purchase had been, had drained his liquid assets, insuring future material pain and roadblocks in the smooth maintenance of Brundisium. But the sacrifice would be worth it, since now imminent success in his chosen field was practically guaranteed. Stallkamp was no dilettante like Holbrook, wasting his energies across a dozen trivial fields. He specialized in a single discipline.

Remarkably, this crabbed, self-centered fellow whose horizon seemed to extend no further than the end of his nose regularly contemplated vistas of Godlike proportions, for Stallkamp was an haruspic cosmochartist. Like some extinct astrologer, he read the stars in order to prophesize. But Stallkamp and his ilk proceeded on a more scientific basis. The universe had structure: so much was undeniable. Agglomerations of stars formed galaxies. Neighboring galaxies in turn formed clusters. Clusters of galaxies arranged themselves into superclusters. And so on, upward along several additional levels of scale, a self-sustaining mode of organization that rendered the three-dimensional cosmos into something resembling a highly recompllicated sponge or a block of Swiss cheese tunneled by an infinite number of drunken mice. Haruspic cosmochartists sought to unravel the plenum's patterning, its filaments and trceries. With this knowledge, they hoped to prove certain weighty tenets of post-Tiplerian eschatology.

For several decades Stallkamp had been charting a region around the North Ecliptic Pole Supercluster, 1.3 billion lightyears from Earth. Modeling pointillistic data from a variety of exotic Oort-Cloud-based sensors (aged and frequently failing, but who nowadays had the initiative to replace them?) directly onto the pattern-sensitive brains of his books, he had made slow but steady progress, tweaking and boosting millions and millions of dendritic weightings. Always in front of him was the goal of having his results officially accepted by the cybernetic intelligences that governed the integrity of humanity's databases. Would they accept his proposed name for the shaped darkness: the "Stallkamp Void"? He could see immortality beckoning alluringly. Then, a few months ago, Stallkamp had learned of a rival. MB Humility Sauvage was working in the same field, attempting to chart the identical

region of the cosmos! It was like finding a stranger in Brundisium's gardens pissing vigorously onto his prize shatterpetal rose! Thus began a deadly race--a race Stallkamp now was sure to win, thanks to an admittedly chancey strategy. Unable to restrain his gleeful sense of superiority any longer, Stallkamp leaned forward and intellitickled the sensitive screen of his hellobox. Within seconds appeared the repulsive face of MB Sauvage, home in her airy manse called Larkrise. Stallkamp likened her aged visage in his mind to a dustmop-shrouded pumpkin inexpertly carved. Without preamble, Stallkamp launched a direct strike. "You might as well give up your pitiful efforts, Sauvage. In a month or so, long before you could possibly squeeze out any mingy results, I'll have the Stallkamp Void completely mapped." Undaunted, Sauvage sneered. "I know all about your outrageous purchase--practically a theft!--of poor Vincent's books. But bluffing won't work. You still own only some six hundred books. I own nearly that many myself, and I know that it would take the synergy of at least a thousand to achieve what we're after at one swoop, instead of incrementally." "I beg to correct you, MB Sauvage. I now own almost twelve hundred books." "How so?" Sauvage blanched, as the meaning of the new number struck home. "Surely you don't mean--" "Yes, I do mean precisely that which you are afraid to declaim. I intend to relink the neurons in the personal hemispheres of all my books, thus effectively doubling my library's processing capacity." "But the books were designed with autonomy and character for a specific purpose. As thinking individuals, they maintain themselves in a stable fashion, freeing the librarian from expensive homeostatic hookups. Plus their sentience adds unqualifiable virtues to their results. What you're proposing would be worse than ripping the tooled leather covers off antique books just to boil up more pulp!" Stallkamp waved aside these quibbles. "I have plenty of factota to minister to the minimum bodily needs of my books once they go mindless. And I've never subscribed to your 'ghost in the machine' theories. All I want is the raw neurons, not some imaginary 'spirit'!" "But you'll shorten their lives to practically nothing!" "What does that matter, as long as I get results? More trade for the knackers! And afterwards, I'll start fresh with new books. I'm sure I could find a patron who'd appreciate a supercluster named after himself, once I've proved I can do it." Reduced to meaningless threats, Sauvage said, "You'll be reviled by all your fellow librarians, Stallkamp!" MB Kratchko Stallkamp laughed. "Then I'll certainly know I did the right thing!" With a sharp stroke of his thumbnail, he severed the connection.

The gripless satchel lay on the desk before him. From within, the librarian took a specially marked hypo containing the omnipotent delinkers

that would bypass the publisher's filters and reach the vulnerable personal half of a book's brain. Then, yellow legs scissoring, Stallkamp

left his study. Still in the battered case, the fine-assessor sat ignored, inconsequential to the glory-bathed sight of its owner.

The small dry but dirty cell into which the factotum deposited the miserable Canto boasted a woe-faced, scraggly occupant already. Once Canto

regained his breath and calmed himself, introductions were exchanged between the two books.

"Canto. I don't have a UDC number anymore."

"Index Medicus. Me neither. Not that it much mattered, as all of us in this library used to share practically the same string before. But now we

don't even have that. The master downloaded all of our texts into temporary storage, then gave us wipes. Our elder, Dar al-Kutub,

suspects

that the one huge text we were redacting has been broken up into smaller

bits, so that you new volumes can help work on it."

"That makes sense, I suppose."

"It would, except for one thing. Dar heard the master ordering a factotum

to load the new hypos in sequence."

"So?"

Index Medicus began nervously to groom the greasy patch behind one ear.

"He arranged for twice as many shots as there should have been."

"More books are coming?"

"I don't think so. Every carrel is already occupied."

Canto became impatient. "So what are you saying?"

Index Medicus stopped swiping at his fur and stared intently at his cellmate. "Everything points toward it. We're going to be double-wiped.

All of us. The master needs the half of our brains we call our own."

The concept was so grotesquely repugnant to Canto that he had a hard time

wrapping his mind around it. Not so much for himself did he balk at the harsh reality of human treachery, the overturning of all biblioplectic tradition, as for the sakes of his friends, and one in particular. The sweet essence of Vellum blotted out of existence, as if she had never been? Such an atrocity beggared description.

"I was caught trying to escape," Index Medicus said resignedly. "I think

the master intends to double-wipe me first as a final test."

Canto said nothing, but merely sat back on his haunches.

Eventless hours dragged by, the books nearly jumping out of their hides at

every clink and rattle from beyond their door, until at last a solenoid clicked in the windowless prison door.

The master filled the portal, blocking any escape. Then he was inside with

the books and the door was shut again, lock engaging with a mean snick.

"Two of you! The factota have been diligent but uncommunicative. Well, unfortunately I brought only the single shot of this marvelous, utilitarian oblivion. Who'll go first? Who wants the honor of being the leader into the future of my exaltation? Don't clamor now! What, no

eager

takers? Well, precedence goes to the volume I've owned the longest then."

The master grabbed Index Medicus by his scruff and raised the hypo. The pitiful book let out a single squeal and went limp.

Canto's powerful legs propelled him fully atop the master's shoulders. Unbalanced, the human tottered forward, ramming his head into the stony wall of the cell. The hypo dropped, but was cushioned from breakage by Index Medicus's supine body. The librarian jerked Canto off his back,

spun

half around, then slumped to a sitting position on the floor like a man sinking wearily into a bath.

By the time the master had focused his attention enough to rub his sore skull, Canto gripped the hypo. The master's eyes widened, and his voice cracked.

"Give that over, you damnable pulpbrain!"

Canto hung his head contritely, and extended the hypo on his palm. The master smiled cruelly and grew easy.

Once as close as possible, Canto lunged forward and jabbed the master

in

the neck with the hypo's snout.

The librarian instantly stiffened as billions of tiny monomaniacal machines flooded his cortex. As the delinkers swiftly unwove the

engrams

of a lifetime, the master's body went through an alarming and unseemly display of spasticity. Retreating to one corner of the cell, the two

books

huddled together until the violent exhibition of misapplied technology reached a quiet terminus. The dose had always been intended to leave intact the lower brainstem capabilities of the books--autonomic control

of

respiration and heartbeat and so forth--so the master continued to

live,

but only as a mindless, bruised doll.

Index Medicus regarded Canto with a blend of awe and fear. "What

happens

now? Are we trapped in here? Will we starve? Will some other librarian come to save us?"

"I don't know," answered Canto.

"But I'm scared!"

"Be brave," Canto counseled. "After all, a book must show its spine."

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