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To Leuchars
by Rick Wilber
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TO LEUCHARS

Rick Wilber

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To Leuchars

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FIRST EDITION

For Rich, Samantha, and Robin

I

Arribada

The regularly scheduled Ominous News Of The Day -- new movement by The Ships, as we'd all come to call them -- was all over the newswebs once again, and there were probably a lot of frightened people who thought staying home and hiding under the covers was the best way to respond to this latest crisis.

But my brother and I had more important things to worry about. After all, ten times in the year since they'd arrived those ships had moved, and ten times it hadn't meant a thing. So on this bright Tuesday morning Tommy and I sat, unworried, on small canvas folding chairs tucked into a gap between a pair of sand dunes up past the high-tide line on Egmont Key while we waited for the first of the Kemp's ridleys sea turtles to arrive. Our only concession to the events of the day was the newsvue my editor made me wear, one of those fancy new ones with all the bells and whistles including, of course, a real-time stream of updates on news, sports and weather. If this was the day the Earth stood still, we'd know. Meanwhile, a cruise ship, the Sensation, passed by in the distance, filled with tourists heading out through the mouth of Tampa Bay toward Grand Cayman and Cozumel: business as usual. Tommy and I weren't the only ones who'd quit worrying about the intentions of whatever it was up there in The Ships that circled our little dot of a planet.

Given enough time, people get used to anything. All the craziness of those first few months -- the religious nuts on all sides, the politicians blustering, the scientists changing their minds every day on What It All Was About -- had calmed down, as the months passed, to a wait-and-see punctuated by the regular frenzy each time the ships moved around.

Here, it was nine in the morning and already the temperature was in the low eighties. Florida in the summer takes its heat seriously, but we were comfortable enough, with a light breeze coming in off the water, enough sunblock slathered on us to stop a nova, and a big jug of ice-water to keep things cool. I had until about noon, and then I'd have to take the boat back to the Fort DeSoto pier and drive over to the Times to get my column done. I was hoping for some action before I left, so I'd have something to write about

Really, it was about as nice a morning as you can get in Florida in the summer. Later, things would change. The price we pay for our mornings here is the afternoon clamor, when the breeze dies down to a deathly calm just before the daily thunderheads crackle with lightning as blinding sheets of rain pour down.

But I wasn't going to worry about what might happen later. I'd done plenty enough of that lately. Instead, right now I was excusing myself from all the damn guilt I'd earned for myself and just enjoying the perfection of the morning while my brother and I awaited for the Kemp's ridleys to arrive and bring Tommy the fame he'd earned.

This little gathering of turtles would be big news. Until now, all the Kemp's ridleys in the world had always laid their eggs on a single stretch of beach in Mexico, Rancho Nuevo. In the old days, thousands of females would arrive nearly at once: an _arribada_ they called in Spanish. In the 1940s, one local with an eight-millimeter film camera caught footage of some forty-thousand of the turtles crawling ashore on the same day, pushing and shoving and climbing over each other to find a spot where they could dig, lay,

bury and scoot.

But that one little home movie damned the Kemp's ridleys to likely extinction. There had always been raccoons and bobcats along that beach to snatch the eggs. Once that film got out there were ambitious locals looking for a free meal, and then, when they realized the value of the shells and the eggs, a lot of others, too, looking to make a good living off those turtles. For awhile, they did, all those earnest egg-laying mamas were awfully easy pickings. But it couldn't last with all that pressure on one site: best guess was that by the turn of the millennium there were maybe two-hundred of the turtles left.

Over the years, there'd been any number of efforts to get the turtles to change that nesting behavior and spread things out to other, safer beaches, but the Kemp's ridleys were having none of it. One group of scientists on the Texas Gulf Coast had spent millions on a site at Padre Island and managed to coax a total of eight turtles into nesting there. None of their eggs hatched. By the time Tommy was in college and got started on his project, the experts thought the Kemp's ridleys were gone in the wild and everyone had pretty much given up on the turtles.

But not my little brother Tommy. He'd succeeded, he hoped, where no one else had. Almost a decade ago Tommy, a doctoral student then working on his dissertation, offered fishermen in the Bay of Campeche a reward if they found any Kemp's ridleys. The fishermen, over the course of six months, found five.

Two of them were females. Tommy opened them up, took somatic cells from the ovaries of both turtles and fused them with enucleated eggs -- eggs with the DNA removed -- from leatherback turtles, then grew those eggs in the lab where he had all the substrates and environmental parameters required. Tommy's mitochondrial DNA analysis said it ought to work; but it was out there, very edgy, doing something like that for turtles. Kemp's ridleys aren't sheep and the cloning didn't come easy.

But it worked. The process resulted in nearly one-hundred viable eggs total from the greens. Tommy and his team had buried them -- no mean feat there, getting that done just right, he told me -- into nests here on Egmont, and then watched with joy as ninety-four of those genetically clean Kemp's ridley hatchlings boiled out of the nests sixty days later and headed for the water.

Question was, how many would survive and would those survivors return? Had they imprinted on this beach or were they lost forever, artificial creations that would never find their way home?

Tommy tracked as many as he could, attaching the latest in transponders just inside the lateral scutes, up near the head. The batteries were meant to last for five years. Problem was, it takes ten for the turtles to mature, mate and return. That meant Tommy had a year or so at the midway point to try and capture as many of them as he could, put in new transponders, and start the tracking all over again.

It had kept him busy, catching dozens of them from all around the Gulf of Mexico and even on up the East Coast as far as Cape Cod. Two turtles, in fact, drifted with the Gulf Stream all the way to the coast of Ireland.

Tommy was a bookworm, god knows, and no adventurer. He was the most cautious guy I knew. But he'd done what he had to do with those turtles, and I was proud of him for that. He didn't like to travel, hated being on the sea, was scared to death to snorkel or scuba. But he'd gone to those Kemp ridleys, brought them home to the Gulf, put in new transponders, and wished them well as he released them.

It was a hugely ambitious, and expensive, effort; all the lab work, all the tracking and re-tagging. It became his life's work. It defined him, made him who he was. Sitting here in the sand dunes waiting for the payoff, I figured he'd sure as hell earned the headlines I could already picture in my mind: Dr. Thomas Holman, Savior of the Kemp's Ridleys; or better still, Dr. Thomas Holman, the Architect of Change for a Doomed Species.

If it worked. Now, today, we'd find out how worthwhile all that work

had been. He hoped a dozen or more mothers might show and start laying their eggs.

* * * *

We all pay a price for what success we find. When Tommy had started his research, ten years before, I'd been sitting on the bench at the University of Florida, a fifth-string quarterback hoping to get a few minutes of playing time for the football Gators. Sitting on the bench is hell, and when the Gators wanted to move me to a blocking back I'd jumped at the chance. The move cost me a lot, including all the cartilage in my right knee; but I could always claim I'd played big-time football. Hell, I even played professionally for a couple of years after that, banged up knee and all, in the NFL's European League, playing for the Claymores in Scotland. I liked it there, living in Edinburgh.

But the docs told me finally that it was time to quit or start thinking of knee replacements, and _that_ wasn't a price I was willing to pay, so I hung them up and came back to writing, the only other thing I knew how to do. I was a Creative Writing major at Florida; there was a time I'd thought of myself as destined for literary greatness. I won the undergraduate prize in poetry, and even had a pair of poems published in Kenyon. The poet/running back made pretty good copy there for awhile for the university's sports information guys.

But at about the same time I figured out I wasn't destined for the NFL I realized, too, that my poetry didn't seem to be getting much interest from the New Yorker, other than that scribbled "Sorry," at the bottom of the form rejection. In poetry like in football, I didn't really have the legs for it.

So I faced reality and quit the poetry and left Scotland to come home and be a sportswriter, the perfect blend of talents for someone with my level of ambition. Over the next few years I worked my way up through the ranks of smaller papers to bigger and better ones -- from the Ocala Star Banner to the Birmingham News to the Orlando Sentinel and then, a few years later, to the St. Petersburg Times, where I finally made the move from sports to real news, and eventually wound up with my own column.

I loved the work and got paid pretty well for it. I cared about what I did. Maybe too much.

It's easy to get caught up in newspapering. When I started out, the papers were at the end of their print era; back then the newsroom's computers tied you into the world in a way that was special. I'd feel, as I cruised through the wire services, like I knew things no one else did. When I was editing and writing, I knew that whatever anyone read in my paper was because I thought it was worth their reading. That's a heady sense of power. Even a few years later, when the Internet came in and anyone sitting at their computer at home who wanted to know the world's news could, I still loved the business.

Early on, as a sportswriter, I learned there's no feeling in the world like digging into the stench of a corrupt college athletic department, finding the poison deep in the center of it all, and telling the world. I got two very popular coaches fired and I was hated for it by some people both times. Now, on the news side, I did the same sort of legwork on local politicians and religious leaders. One recent story on the financial scams of a local preacher had a congregation in a huge uproar. They thought I was the devil himself, come to torment their leader.

But I was right about what I found and what I said, and that matters.

That passion cost me: two marriages, an admittance by age thirty that alcohol and I got along too well altogether, and the certain knowledge that I had too many enemies and not enough friends. I figured those things were the price you paid for finding the truth and saying it out-loud.

In the last couple of years I'd even gone into broadcasting, showing my ugly mug via the paper's converged website. There I was, in all my splendor, talking about the news instead of just writing it.

I wasn't particularly proud of sliding over into broadcast news like

that, even over the web, but there seemed no way to avoid it as print news fell into its death throes.

To my mind, broadcast types weren't journalists, they were "talent" -- actors, really -- with perfect hair and teeth and not a news-bone in their bodies. I told myself that maybe my scraggly, thinning hair and the chipped front tooth that I refused to have capped would be good a good dose of reality for the medium. My boss, an older newspaper person herself, seemed to agree, and my ratings shares were good, so I got plenty of airtime.

For Tommy, it had been a quieter progression. He'd been waiting and tracking and publishing a few things while he built a career as a teacher and waited for those turtles to confirm his research skills. He'd started this all as a brilliant eighteen-year-old, knowing it would take a decade while he worked on other research projects, studying cow-nose rays and jellyfish larvae and doing some shark cartilage debunking. All the while he'd bided his time, waiting for the Big One, the Kemp's ridleys, to come to fruition. Waiting and tracking and trapping and tracking some more; and patient all the while, really patient, while the data came in.

* * * *

And now the payoff. I looked over at him and he was fidgety, squirming on his folding chair as he used his binoculars to scan the water offshore. I smiled. You didn't get to see Tommy be fidgety very often. He was always the calm one, the focused one.

My newsvue beeped at me: a discreet little tone. I glanced at it. The anchor, a chipper young blonde named Salli who I'd had been out with a few times, said with a serious expression that The Ships had disappeared. That couldn't be a good thing. I looked over to Tommy and caught his eye.

"They've lost track of The Ships," I said.

He stared back. "This might be it, then."

"Or not," I said. "Maybe they've left."

"Not too damn likely, Pete." He turned away to look out toward the water. "Well, hell. I hope the turtles make it in soon, then."

* * * *

Tommy was the smart one, growing up, the one who knew the real facts about things while I was the hazy dreamer who wanted to do nothing but play sports, read books and daydream. I was into religion and was going to be a priest. He was into science. We were altar boys together for one year when I was twelve and he was ten.

There's a moment in the Catholic Mass when the priest holds the host -- a little wafer of bread not much bigger than a quarter -- up high with both hands and says "This is my body," and then, a bit later, "This is my blood." At that moment, Catholic belief says, the host becomes the body and blood of Christ. Not _like_ the body and blood, but the actual, real thing. It's called Transubstantiation, and I'd believed it, firmly, from the time I was seven until that year when Tommy became an altar boy. It didn't have to make sense, I just believed, the way you're supposed to.

The first time Tommy served at Mass, he was kneeling on the cold marble of the altar in St. Thomas Aquinas church as the priest raised that host up high. Tommy watched, and shook his head. I was there with Mom and Dad, in the front pew, watching him. They didn't notice that disbelieving shake, but I did. After Mass, he sneaked a host home and put it under the microscope so we both could peer at it. Just bread, he concluded. Then he took snippets of it and ran it through his chemistry set to see what it really was. It was bread, that was all, and even then I knew better than to argue with him.

A year or two later I switched my dreams from the priesthood to the NFL. Later, when that didn't turn out to be real, either, at least I didn't have to blame Tommy for pointing out reality to me.

When I was a high-school jock Tommy was jumping grade levels until by the time I was a junior in high school Tommy, two years younger, was a senior. By the time I wandered into Gainesville, Florida, as a Gator football player Tommy was done with his bachelor's there and deciding which grad program to

zip through.

He was an academic star, but I was on the football team and so on campus he became, no surprise, Pete Holman's little brother. We tried hanging out as much as we could, though we ran in crowds so different it was hard to believe we were brothers. Still, the women came easy to me and not so easy for him, so I helped him out where I could. The girls I hung out with had sorority sisters or friends, and Tommy's a good-looking guy behind those glasses and that shy smile, so it usually went okay. They babied him, or course, those older girls. They treated him as the cute, smart little brother of the football star. That must have grated on him, but he never admitted it, and he kept going out with them.

Then we moved our separate ways for a time and I kept confusing sex and looks with love while Tommy stayed married, I guess, to his mind, that being the price of his genius. Eventually, I'd pretty much settled with myself, though I wasn't particularly happy with what I'd found -- a guy who was good in the shallows with women but couldn't handle the deep water. Tommy? I thought he'd been too damn busy to ever bother even wading in.

Then, a year-and-a-half ago, just before The Ships showed up, came Heather. Pure dumb luck had Tommy and I in the same town again, sleepy old St. Petersburg, where he was at the university's school of marine science and I was writing my column for the Times. We hung out some when we could. Tommy seemed settled and happy enough. He had a nice house down at the south end of town, overlooking the bay and with the Skyway Bridge arching across in the distance. He liked to sit out on his dock at night and look at the water and the stars and the distant lights of that bridge. My own place was a decent apartment right downtown, with an impressive view of the city's waterfront and, way in the distance, the lights of Tampa ten miles away across that part of the bay. The girls I brought home were always impressed with that.

He called me at work one day, said he had a surprise to show me and asked me to bring someone along and come to his place for dinner -- grouper out on the grill, some sweet corn in the boiler, a few Ybor Gold beers, some Buffett on the sound system. That sounded pretty good to me, and Danni, my current friend, would like it just fine. I didn't kid myself that we had a future, Danni and I, but she was a joy to look at, and perfectly good in the sack, and I'd learned the hard way that was all I should expect.

We got there about seven, and Tommy was grinning as he opened the door. Behind him, her arm comfortable over his shoulder, was Heather.

She was plain enough. Short, straight black hair framed a round, pleasant face with dark eyebrows, brown eyes, no lipstick, thin lips, a nice smile. She looked athletic to me, solid, with the sort of body built for soccer or softball, solid and firm.

"Pete, this is Heather," Tommy said, obviously proud of himself.

I wondered, shaking her hand and saying my hello's, how long Tommy had known her. They were acting like a couple that had been together for awhile, at ease with other. As we headed through the house and out to the back porch and that nice view of the Skyway, in fact, she headed off to the kitchen for drinks, acting at home, comfortable, like she knew her way around.

Tommy might as well have read my mind. He came out right behind me as we walked onto the wooden decking that edged out from the porch. "We've been seeing each other for a week, Petey. Can you believe it?"

"No," I answered truthfully.

He laughed. "It's like I've known her all my life. I didn't know it could be like that."

"True love, you mean?"

"Hell, I guess so." He shrugged his shoulders. "What else would you call it? It's like we're perfectly made for each other. Fate, I guess."

"Am I hearing you right, Mr. Scientist? Fate? You were _meant_ for each other?"

He laughed. "It's really something, huh?"

"Yeah," I said, "it's really something."

Later, when Tommy came out on the deck to explain to Danni about how that Skyway Bridge was the longest concrete suspension bridge in the cosmos, I wandered into the porch and sat down next to Heather. She looked at me and smiled.

"So you're the famous nasty reporter brother," she said. I wasn't expecting that, and while she said it with a smile, there was a definite bite.

"Hey," I said, and held my hands out as if to stop her. "I'm only nasty when I have to be. I say nice things, too, you know, when I get the chance."

"You just don't get the chance very much, right?"

I nodded. She laughed. "I read your column. You get really personal. Girls like Danni must worry about hanging around with you."

"Girls like Danni are hoping I'll say something about them. Anything."

"I wonder, are you going to write about me tomorrow? Should I be careful about what I say?"

"No. I won't write about you. This is all off-the-record."

"Off the record?"

"Not for quotation. Private. Means I won't use any of it in a story." I grinned at her maliciously, "Unless, of course, you _want_ me to quote you."

She smiled. "Not right now, thanks." She took a sip of her drink. "What a strange job you have. I've wondered about that, about what it's like, making a living off the misery of others."

I shook my head. "I don't think of it like that. I think of it as finding out the truth about things, and getting paid for it. I'd like to think I'd do it for free."

"You love it that much?"

"Yes, I do."

"Telling the truth is that important to you?"

I didn't have to think about that answer. Journalists who cared about knowing the truth died all the time in the search for it -- dictators, drug lords, right-wingers and left, there were a lot of people who didn't like what we did for a living. Three different times in the past five years I'd been in situations that could have gone bad on me. Each time I'd come through it okay. So, "Yes, it's that important, it's what I do." I thought about it for a second. "Hell, it's who I am."

She laughed at me. "Mr. Truthfinder? Even when it's unpopular? Even when people disagree? Even when they hate you for it?"

I shrugged. "If I write a column where the truth doesn't piss somebody off I figure I didn't do my job."

She nodded. "And, of course, some people love you for it. They tell me that underneath all that attitude you're very talented. They say you could be a big star if you wanted to."

"Whoa," I said. "Who the hell tells you that?"

She shrugged those perfect shoulders. "Friends. They say you're too good a writer to stay in this town, that not enough happens here. They say you should be on the top newswebs, that you need just one big story here -- something that will get you some national attention -- and you'll be gone from here, off to New York."

"I don't especially like New York."

"Too big? Too crazy?"

I grinned. "Yeah, that's it, just too crazy up there for a simple old Florida boy like me." Then I got more serious. "Really, Heather, I'm just not looking for that Big Story. I'm happy right here, where there's enough corruption and stupidity to last me a lifetime. I'm quite content being local, thanks."

She laughed. "Content being local? An ambitious guy like you? I bet you know all the top editors in the business. I bet what you _really_ want is the biggest audience you can find."

I just smiled. "Sure, I know a few editors." Truth was, I had friends at CNN.com and ABCNews.com and MSNBC.com and all the others. And they knew me. And I got job offers every few months. Truth be told; you can't win awards in

this business without having headhunters come after you. But I liked it right where I was, that's what I told myself.

She nodded, brushed her hair back from her eyes, stared at me with eyes that seemed bluer somehow against that black hair. "I thought so. And you want to know what I think?"

"I get the feeling you're going to tell me whether I do or not."

Another laugh. "I sure am. Here's my prediction: You and your brother are a lot more alike than either of you know, and you both want success. Tommy's going to find it with his turtles -- he's going to make it work, you know. He's going to save that whole species. He'll pay any price he has to for that to happen.

"And you. Someday soon the right story will come along and you'll realize the price of telling the whole world the truth is worth all the risk and you'll go for it, too. Bingo, you'll be a big star."

I laughed. "I'll get to tell the whole world? Bingo? Just like that?"

"Just like that. You'll get a chance to go national; hell, international, and you'll take it. And Tommy, he'll get his chance, too. " She raised her glass to me. "And you know what else? Both of you will find out that some things are worth almost any price."

"I think you're right about Tommy. God knows he's already paid the price -- all those years of work. But me? Nah," I said. "I like it right here, thanks."

She laughed -- and she had a hell of a laugh, throwing her head back with the energy of it, mouth wide open, enjoying herself. "Well, I guess we'll see then, won't we? The turtles, Tommy says, are supposed to come back to nest this summer and that will be his time."

"And me? When's my time coming?"

She laughed again. I liked that laugh. She put her fingertips on her temples, acting the mystic. "I sense it coming soon. Fame. Fortune. Difficult decisions."

I chuckled and shook my head. I meant to ask her then what she did for a living, and why she was in St. Pete. But Tommy and Danni came in to get out of the humidity and we all wound up talking about the Devil Rays, who were winning for a change. I kept looking at Heather as the evening wore on. She was all subtleties with her looks, I decided, in contrast to her conversation, where she seemed to delight in saying exactly what was on her mind. Tommy seemed to find that charming.

Later, at my place, when I made love to Danni I was thinking about Heather. Some women, the ones like Danni, the more you get to know them the less attractive they are. There's something about their personality that begins to affect their looks, or at least how you see those looks. With Danni and her easy acquiescence, it took me a week or two to start to think her nose was too small for the broad features of her face, or that her lips needed all that careful attention she gave them because, really, they were thin and hard. Things like that started adding up, as they always do.

With Heather, it was just the opposite. The more I saw of her as the weeks went by the better she looked to me. I had to work to remember that I'd found her plain at first. She wore almost no make-up, and didn't seem to care about her looks in general. But every time I'd be at Tommy's or he would bring her by my place over the next few weeks, I'd find myself seeing, as if for the first time, how perfect her body was, or how natural and beautiful that face. I watched her walk, watched how she moved around, marveled at how her face came alive when she cared about something -- and she cared about a lot. Politics, the environment, the hapless Devil Rays: she had ideas on how to fix them all. She wouldn't tell me directly who she worked for, but I picked up easily enough that she was a lobbyist, and that I was a target of her efforts. That should have set off every ethics alarm bell in my feeble little journalist's head. You don't mess with lobbyists, no matter how much you're starting to like them. Or how much they seem to like you. I could see it every time she got started, looking at me when she spoke.

And I watched her as she watched me. Little smiles. Little messages in those blue eyes. Eventually, that all got the better of me.

We never got a chance to talk our way out of it, talk about how it was happening between us, before it all got so crazy. As far as Tommy knew, one day she was there for him and the next day she was gone. All she left behind was a polite little note saying goodbye. And right about then The Ships arrived and the whole world got a little crazy there for awhile.

* * * *

I put the spout of the water jug to my lips and took a sip. It was getting hot. I squirmed around some on the canvas seat trying to get comfortable. I took another look at my newsvue. Still no sign of The Ships. Everyone in the world who could search for them was doing it, but they weren't there.

I looked out at the Gulf of Mexico, a brisk sea-breeze stirring up a foot or two of shore break. That looked very promising, Tommy had told me; the Kemp's ridleys were the only sea turtles to nest during the day and they liked windy weather for it.

But the turtles? They weren't in sight either.

I looked over at Tommy. He looked back and smiled, gave me thumbs up. He'd forgotten to worry about The Ships. Today was the day, he'd told me a couple of hours ago before we settled in to be quiet. Everything was just right for the turtles; the weather, the tides, the timing. I smiled back, returned the thumbs up, stole another glance at the newsvue. Nothing. I squirmed some more. Looked toward the water. Sighed. I could have had a relaxing morning with Tammi -- the current item -- but no, devoted brother, I was here in the sun with young genius Tommy, watching the waves roll in. I squirmed again, thinking of excuses to leave, thinking of how much I liked the nipples on Tammi's breasts, and then, there, maybe, I saw something. A shape at the edge of the water? Something coming in through the tidal pool? Just a big ray, probably, this was their time of year to lay eggs, too, and they did it right up at the edge, in inches of water.

I put the binoculars to my eyes and there she was, a turtle the size of a meat platter -- bad image, I thought right away, since the taste of their meat was one reason there weren't many left. But there she was, coming clean out of the water, heading inland. I turned to let Tommy know but he'd seen her, too, and had his digicam going. I turned back and hit the zoom on the binocs and got a close-up of the turtle. I wanted to follow this girl all the way up the beach as she came ashore. Then I saw, on both sides of her, more of them. I zoomed back. More still, a couple of dozen maybe, all of them, all at once, a tiny _arribada. _I grinned like a son-of-a-bitch. Good for Tommy. He'd earned this moment's satisfaction, my baby brother. It'd been a long, hard trail for him getting to this, and it was certainly the damnedest thing I'd ever seen, a regular D-day of turtles invading this one beach. I kept my eyes in the eyecups and more and more of them emerged, eighty or ninety of them. I tried to count but couldn't keep up, so I watched the moms come ashore and marveled. This was big time, all right. At that moment, I couldn't imagine anything bigger.

* * * *

It'd been past midnight when I pulled into Tommy's driveway. I'd been at another of those awards banquets. This time I'd been named Florida's best at finding out the truth about things in my category, and for newspapers of a certain circulation, distributed in a certain way. God knows we love to give ourselves awards, we journalists, and if you break it down into enough categories we all win something.

Tommy wasn't there. Heather opened the front door before I got to it. She was wearing blue-jeans, a short-sleeved blouse, no bra. Her hair, longer, I realized, than I'd thought it was, was pulled back into a ponytail.

"We figured you'd come over," she said. "Tommy just got a call that there's a leatherback nesting over on Longboat. Said he'd be back later."

She'd been spending most nights at his place for a few weeks by then.

There'd been rumblings from Tommy about asking her to marry him. I'd told him I thought it was a great idea. I'd told him she was smart and nice looking and seemed in love with him and what more could you possibly ask than that?

I stood there and took it all in for a moment. She smelled like summer rain, like the energy in the air right before the downpour. I looked at her and she looked back, not saying anything. She smiled, leaned up a bit and kissed me on the neck. My brother's girl, the one he was talking about marrying.

We went very slowly. She didn't say a thing at first, stepping back so I could undo those buttons, one by one, from top down to bottom. Then I reached up inside the blouse to push it back off her shoulders, off her arms as she let it slip to the floor.

I'd never seen her breasts before, though god knows I'd fantasized about them. They were round and firm and perfect, the areolas a thin dark band around the deep red of the nipples. I stared at them.

"They're yours, Peter. I've wanted you to see them for a long time. Kiss them for me, please."

I did. Later, after, in bed, I did again. It was three in the morning by then and Tommy still wasn't home. I kissed those breasts, kissed her on the lips, and then again. Entered her one more time while she brought me to her, the electricity crackling as if the first time.

We fit together. It was perfection. I didn't want it to be, but there it was. Making love to her, making love _with_ her, was the best thing I'd ever done, the only true poem I'd ever written, the best truth I'd ever discovered, a weird and welcome transcendence from what I'd thought, with so many women, was love.

But there was Tommy to think of. Jesus, there'd be hell to pay. I wondered if that's what she'd been getting at that first night we met when she talked about paying the price. Had she figured then that we'd wind up in bed, in love?

Was I in love? I sure thought so. One of the things I'd finally learned after a hundred girlfriends and three wives is that great sex and True Love aren't even in the same neighborhood. And this was so different, so not what I'd known, that I had to think it was something real.

Finally, burdened and torn between two awful truths, my head whirling over what we'd done, I left. Went home to my own house. Climbed into bed but couldn't sleep. Got back up, slipped into shorts and a t-shirt and sat on the couch, waiting for the phone to ring or for the pounding on the front door from Tommy's hurt and angry fists. Finally, around seven a.m., the phone jangled. I picked it up.

"Hello."

"Petey." He sounded so terribly hurt.

"Yeah, Tom."

"Pete. She's gone. Heather's gone."

"Gone?"

"There's a note here. She loves me, but she has to leave. She's gone."

And that was that. We never saw her again. As the weeks went by, Tommy seemed to get used to it. The Kemp's ridleys helped him with that. Me? I couldn't believe, at first, that she'd chosen that path; but eventually you have to face the facts. And maybe, I thought, she'd done the right thing for us both. With her gone, I never told Tommy what had happened. If she'd been there, that all would have gone differently.

* * * *

Tommy had a worried look on his face. As the turtles kept coming ashore by the dozens, he and I got up from behind the dunes and walked out into them.

"I didn't think there could be this many, Petey," he said. "It's really unbelievable."

"So be happy, Tom," I said. "Enjoy the moment. You're the genius who saved a whole species." And I patted him on the shoulder as we walked. He just shook his head, overwhelmed by his own success.

The turtles were blind to us, so focused on nature's dictates that we didn't exist for them. Invisible, we walked into the warm surge of the shorebreak, and out to the sandbar, moving through them as we went, shoving them aside every now and then when we couldn't avoid it. Tommy wanted to get out there and look back so he could tape them moving into the beach and see the beach as they saw it during their approach.

We got past the shallow water over the bar and waded into the deeper, far side of it. In a few steps it was thigh-deep. I unclipped the newsvue and held it in my right hand, everything else was going to have to get wet. We took another couple of steps and it was waist deep, then, still on a downward slope off the sandbar, it was chest deep. We stopped there.

Tommy turned around to film. I next to him, and before I made the turn I saw, out there in the darker blue of the deeper water, something big.

"Tommy. There's something out there behind us. It's big."

"Barracuda," he said, not taking his eye away from the eyecup. "They won't bother you, Petey, don't sweat it." He paused. "Damn, Petey, look at them. God, there must be a hundred of them."

I felt a bump against the back of my leg and panicked, jumping away from it.

"Damnit, Pete. Keep it cool. I'll be done with this in a minute or two," said Tommy, turning away from the eyecup long enough to frown at me. He turned back to film more.

I looked back where I'd been. There, in the water, rising, was a turtle, that was all, coming up from the darkness to find the sandbar, get over it, get into the beach and lay her eggs. Just another turtle.

And then, beyond it, deeper, a large shape hurtled by. A barracuda? God, I certainly hoped so, I didn't want it to be a bull shark. I'd been snorkeling all over the Caribbean, from Grand Cayman to Trinidad; that's how I used to spend my vacations, with someone attractive at an island with a good reef and a good bar or two. In those places I'd learned not to worry about barracuda; they were curious, but for all their sleekly vicious appearance they never seemed to bother anybody. Not like bull sharks, they'd come and get you when they could. People survived it when a bull shark hit them if they could get away after the first attack. Usually it was just a chunk of calf that was gone, or a long slash on the arm where the shark grabbed and then let go, a little exploratory nibble before coming around for a second strike, the serious attack. You didn't want to still be there for that second go-round.

* * * *

Catholic guilt is an interesting thing. You think you've put all that stuff behind you, all the stuff the nuns and the Jesuits fed you in school. But then you do something stupid, something you knew was awful even as you were doing it, and you realize that the Jesuits, especially, never let go. If they had you for high-school, they have you forever. Bless me, Father, for I have sinned.

When I heard from Tommy that Heather had left him that note I expected her to show up at my door. When she didn't I went through a whole string of emotions -- anger, mostly: at myself for not having more control over things, for having done that at all with my brother's girl. At her for leaving. Hadn't that been something special? Did she think leaving made it all okay?

I didn't think so. I thought her leaving made it worse. I couldn't get it done and over with, either with her or not, and it all ate at me, that guilt knotting up in my stomach while I kept trying to figure out a way to make it better without telling Tommy what had happened.

At St. Pete Jesuit we had a priest as assistant principal. We called him Father Very Vicious. He didn't pull his punches, especially with me. At the end of the school year he told me I'd never amount to anything if I couldn't stop daydreaming and get some ambition. "You have to learn to _try,_ Peter," he said to me, "not everything in life is easy, you know. Coach Noll tells me you don't even try hard in football. You can't get far without risking the effort, Peter. You think football is going to be your easy

meal-ticket, son? You think you're going to be a big star in the NFL without even trying?"

Well, yeah, I _did_ think that, back then, what seventeen-year-old high-school star doesn't? Father Very Vicious sure wasn't going to convince me otherwise, either, so I just sat there in his office and tried to listen politely. He shook his head at me. "That brother of yours. He's very smart, but he works hard for it. Your brother, he's going places, Peter. You," and he shook his head again sadly, "I just don't know, son. If you don't change your ways, if you can't change that attitude, I think you'll regret it."

It took me a long time to figure out how right he was, that priest. Tommy did go places, and I, mostly, didn't. Which is why, when my football dreams didn't pan out, I wound up a journalist in a small Southern city, where all I had to was imagine the worst about people and then prove it true. Living, like Heather said that first time I met her, off the misery of others.

* * * *

There was another shape out there. Two of them now, moving fast, back and forth, feeding maybe, in the deeper water. One shot off in a hurry and disappeared. The other slowed, then just drifted there, a gray shadow in the water, just deep enough to be hidden from view.

"Tommy, you about done?" I asked, turning back to look at him. He was heading back to the beach, filming it all as he went, the shallows filled with scrambling turtles. He turned back once to wave at me. I could see the grin on his face, full of triumph; he'd done it, damn it.

As he reached the shore, a good thirty yards away from me, I saw something move by to my left. There, in the trench just this side of the sandbar, surrounded by the arribada of Kemp's ridleys all swimming in to shore, something was rising up from the water, a blur in the bright splatters, shimmery then clearing as it stood, looked toward us, raising a hand in greeting. My god, I thought, The Ships had arrived.

What was I supposed to do? Run? I turned to look at Tommy. He was filming a mother scratching out a hole in the sand to bury her eggs in. I turned back and stood there as the still-arriving sea turtles shoved their way past me.

It was, though I didn't quite realize it then, the start of the end of things as I'd known them to be. I got within ten meters of him. There was another shape in the water, something as large as him, scuttling as I approached, a quick flick of a tail and it was gone.

His skin, dark and slick, smelled vaguely of low tide. His fat, porpoise-shaped body was five feet tall, maybe a bit more, and he had on what looked for all the world like comical Bermuda shorts that ended at the knees of short, thick legs. Halfway up the torso there were thin, tiny arms coming out from the side.

"Hello," he said, in perfectly good English, with that mid-Atlantic flat dialect the newswebs use. "I am very pleassed to introduce myself."

In a week, the whole world would know him. For now, for this moment, it was me.

"You are Peter Holman, yess," he said in that sibilant whistle of a voice I soon got used to.

I nodded.

Good. I am Twoclicks." He waved at that high blue sky, "We are from Imperial S'hudon."

I looked up to see what he was pointing at. No clouds, a solitary frigate bird circled over us, hoping to spot a handout.

And then I felt, more than heard, a distant rumble. It vibrated through me, subtle at first and then stronger, a steady background timpani that grew in intensity until I could hear it, too; a low distant rumble that grew louder and louder -- a plane doing some low-level thing right over us? Some big boat rumbling by just out sight?

I looked back at Tommy and he was looking my way, shaking his head. He touched his ears, shouted something I couldn't hear.

There was a scream; a metallic tear in the sky above us. I dropped to my knees in the water and grabbed the side of my head, covering my ears, then falling from the chair and into the sand in pain as it screeched, fingernails against the ultimate blackboard.

And then it was gone. Ten seconds, it couldn't have been longer, and then gone.

I stood, looked at my brother in the distance as he, too, stood. I looked around, and there, out in the gulf, I saw something huge and dark settling into the shallow water. I am in the business of description but it's hard to say how it looked that first time. It took me a few moments to find things I could compare it to, something to use as a tool to understand what I was seeing.

It was delicate for all its size, its legs all spidery connecting at their top to that egg-shaped main body as it settled in, no noise now but that deep, physical rumble. Then, behind it, more of them began to settle, coming somehow unseen from the sun-splashed clarity of the sky right into view as they settled on those spindly legs into the shallows of the Gulf of Mexico. I watched as a dozen of them settled into the sandy bottom off Egmont Key. It couldn't have taken more than two minutes, though they looked fragile, those first S'hudonni freighters, and they fooled us, looking in the distance to smaller than they turned out to be. The Ships had arrived.

They were a quarter-mile offshore or maybe a little more. And they were quiet. The only sounds I could hear were the slight slap of the six-inch shorebreak against the packed, wet sand and, even at this distance, the scrinch of sand being dug out by the turtles back on the beach.

"Hah!" Twoclicks said from behind us and, as we turned to see him he held those delicate arms of his out wide. "Iss very impressive, right? You can ssee the strength of Imperial S'hudon."

I nodded, turned once more to look at Tommy. He was filming this. With his zoom he could get in tight on us.

Twoclicks let his arms drop to his sides, then lowered himself into the water until only the top of his head, and those strange eyes, were visible. He held it there for a second, rose again.

"Ahh, your water iss very nice here. Warm. Safe." He seemed to take a deep breath and went into a little prepared speech. "The great sstrength of Imperial S'hudon iss not what matterss today. It iss, instead, our friendship."

"Right," I said. "Sure. Our friendship." I wondered how in the hell I seemed to be in charge of intergalactic peace and diplomacy. "But I don't think we're the ones you should be talking to. In a few minutes, I bet, there'll be some people arriving here..."

"We have brought giftss for you," he said. He held out his hands, nothing in them.

"I don't understand," I said. "Gifts?"

"Yess. Gifts. All these turtless," and he waved one stubby warm toward the beach behind where the mother turtles by the dozens were digging into the sand, laying eggs, renewing a species that the experts had predicted was doomed.

"You had something to do with this? The Kemp's ridleys? The arribada?"

"Yess. We have," he paused, seemed to think it through for a moment, "manipulated them, the turtles. They will return here, alwayss." He smiled, a strange, artificial, lipless grin that he must have taught himself for our sake. "Their species is saved now, yess?"

I wondered what Tommy would think of that, his life's work down the tubes, his level of science suddenly right there with the discovery that two sticks rubbed just right could start a fire. I supposed I'd be the one to tell him.

"And we have work for you," he said to me. "We undersstand you have certain talents, and accesss to certain avenues of information flow, that you

can help us communicate. That iss true, yess?"

I wanted to disbelieve it all, wanted to blink hard once and wake up back in Kansas, back in reality. I'd worked hard for years to be a professional skeptic. But here this thing was. Right in front of me.

"Yeah," I said, then "I mean yes. Sure." Hell, it was the story of a lifetime. First contact. Here. Now. Me. So, the Big Story I didn't want had come my way after all.

"How do you know this about us. Why have you come here, to us?" I asked him.

"Oh," he laughed, a jovial belly-rolling laugh that I came to know well in the months to come. "Oh, that. You have the highest recommendations. Very highest." He pointed out toward the ships again. "We have consstructions," he said. "Biological constructions. Creationss of ourss. Capable of great changes. They have been here for ssome time. Working. Searching."

As if to prove how much he knew, he said to me, "You are a communicator, yess?"

"A journalist," I said, crazily trying to score some kind of point. Communicator sounded like public relations to me, and in the middle of all this insanity I at least wanted that distinction made -- a PR flack I'd never been, damn it.

Then, I swear, he winked at me, a thin membrane sliding down over one eye as he squinched it closed for a second. "And," he said, sliding into that belly laugh again, "you are excellent at reproduction, at sexual congress, yess?"

"What?!" This Twoclicks seemed to think he was some kind of intergalactic stand-up comic. "What the hell are you talking about?"

He held out his arms in a practiced move, palms up, faking innocence. "Iss what I am told." He chuckled a bit more, a deep rumbling from inside that fat, sleek body. "We ssuppose it is besst if we sshow you, yes?"

"Sure," I said. "Show me."

There was something headed our way in the water, something dark and fast. It swept in fast, just below the surface, neared us, then veered away, turned, swept back by one more time, then again veered away again.

Then it slowed, finally, and drifted in toward us until I could see it, another of these porpoise-shaped things, longer than this Twoclicks character, maybe leaner. There'd be nothing Tommy could catch with his camera, though, unless the thing stopped and stood up.

While I watched, it started to shimmer and blur, vibrating under the water. I couldn't quite see exactly how it was happening, but the water trembled with the change, wavelets of energy obscuring what we could see.

Then it calmed down, things cleared up. It had changed, lost its porpoise shape, grown thinner, longer, with limbs. Nice limbs, in fact.

There, rising from the sea, was Heather.

She started wading toward me, moving through the water with a liquid perfection that now made sense to me. I shook my head and laughed at myself, at how stupid I'd been, as she came near us.

"Hello, Pete."

I just stared at her, then turned to see what Tommy was doing. Had he been able to see her change? Did he know she was some kind of damn machine, a changeable _thing._ I could see he was filming it. I waved at him to come toward us, join us, bring the camera in and get close to all this. He might as well know, and the sooner the better. But he stayed where he was.

Heather smiled, reached up to push the hair from her eyes. "So here it is, Pete. The Big Story, the Biggest Truth of them all."

"Yeah," I said, and just kept staring at her. Her skin was rippling, like she was fighting to keep in under control: like there was something about being in the water that made it difficult for her.

"It's yours Pete," she said, the smile fading. "This is your story to tell. All about us. All about the new future for you, for everyone."

"It's a hell of a story, that's for sure." I looked at her, standing

there, beautiful and perfect, the woman, the thing, I'd made love to. To her left, Twoclicks was reaching down with those fragile arms to scoop water into his hands. He splashed it on what passed for a face then smiled at me, wet and dripping.

"We need you, Pete, as the project here begins."

"The project?"

"Twoclicks is my employer, Pete. He has a great deal of change planned for here. You'll all be better for it, eventually, but it will take some time and everyone won't be happy about the changes. Governments, politics, the way you live here, how you live, where .... All that's going to change."

"And you want me to help you?"

She smiled that perfect smile, stable now, under control. "And Tommy, too. Someone has to explain it to everyone, someone people here can trust. The two of you, working together, can do that."

I shook my head. It was all too crazy to even think about.

"Someone will speak for us, Pete, why not let it be you? You can explain things for us, can communicate with the whole world. If it goes well, your work, a lot of people will be better for it."

"And if it doesn't go well? If we don't sign on?"

She shrugged. "It _is_ going to happen here, Pete, there's certainly no stopping that." She waved her hands toward the ships out there, settled and quiet in the shallow Gulf of Mexico. "We _need_ to be here, or this wouldn't be happening."

I turned away from her, looked again at Tommy, tried again to wave him toward us. He stood there among the Kemp's ridleys and watched us through that zoom. Around him, the turtles dug their holes, dropped their eggs.

He took his eye from the lens. Lowered the camera. Shook his head slowly, staring at me across the water. He was my brother. I thought of the price he'd pay for all this. I thought about what I owed him, how I could possibly, ever, make it right.

Heather's face was rippling a bit as I turned back to look at her, those perfect cheekbones widening for an instant, then settling down. My god. Then she smiled again, that face stable for a moment. "Tommy will matter. He'll be famous."

She reached out to touch my cheek, let her fingertip trail down to my lips, pressed there lightly. "And you, Pete. It was very, very good between us, wasn't it?"

I nodded.

"You'll be the most famous journalist on Earth. Every word you write. Every word you say. The whole world will listen."

I looked past her, out to where those ships stood. Shook my head at the thought of it. Good between us? This incredible, beautiful thing and I? Yeah, it sure had been.

The whole world listening? Yeah, well, that was surely a lock.

I wondered, that's all, as I turned back to look toward my brother who stood there, silent among his sea turtles, their flippers flailing away at the soft sand of Egmont Key, what the price was going to be. For me. For Tommy. For all of us.

Swimming with Gort

Sweating in the heat and glare, Tommy watched from the rocks as Sondra swam away from him, the sun glinting off the ripples her fins stirred up. A hundred yards out, over on the other side of the reef she was heading toward, there was a movement in the water, something almost coming to the surface, something big. A dolphin maybe, or a leatherback sea turtle.

This part of Rum Point was tricky to snorkel. The current ran strong over the reef, then swept by the point and out toward the breakers. The trick was to swim against the pull for a couple of hundred yards, then let the current take you effortlessly back over the coral and fish for a few minutes before you angled out of it and came ashore at the edge of the point. Wait too

long and you could wind up way out there by the breakers. Beyond them was nothing but deep, blue ocean until you got to Cuba.

Just to please Sondra he'd forced himself to snorkel the reef a couple of days ago, and managed to enjoy the thrill of it. But he'd been nervous about the current, worried enough about it that he'd had to force himself to notice the clouds of little tropical fish, or the startling clarity of the water, or the parrotfish pecking away at the huge mounds of brain coral that dotted the bottom.

It had been a real kick, no question about it, but that one time had been enough for him, and once was never enough for Sondra. He watched as she reached the reef, blew a spray of water to clear the snorkel, then let the current take her, bringing her back his way.

Snorkeling was such a fragile way to see what was down there, with none of the comforting hardware of scuba diving or the island's submarine rides. Himself, he liked technology, the feel of the hardware, the mechanical certainty of it, and so he was always a little fearful when he strapped on the mask and snorkel, slipped his feet into those big fins. Anything over about ten feet deep and he started to feel threatened, began worrying about drowning, about being attacked by one of those long, barrel-shaped barracuda, about the currents or a sudden cramp in his legs -- Christ, anything could kill you out there.

But not Sondra, she'd rather be out there damn near naked, no comforting regulator, no weights or tanks. No fear. In the few months he'd known her, she'd never been afraid to do or say anything. The deeper the water the more she liked it.

Living with Gort was the best example of it. The guy was, for Christ's sake, a S'hudonni; a bulbous and tottering character on thin little legs that looked like they couldn't support the body above them. He looked like something Dickens would have invented if he'd been into science fiction.

It was damn unnerving, really, that lipless smile of his and the watery chuckle that bubbled out of it when he found something funny, as he often did. There were maybe two-hundred S'hudonni wandering around Earth, a sort of accreditation team, they explained when they'd first arrived. Just looking things over, taking a few local samples of flora and fauna here and there, making reports to the homeworld. We'll let you know the results as soon as they're in, they promised.

One of them, Twoclicks, seemed to be the boss of the whole thing. He was the one who'd taken Peter with him, out to the stars, to see the homeworld of S'hudon while Tommy stayed behind as a sort of scientific interpreter for Gort. It was a job that, at first, Tommy'd thought was important. Now he knew better.

Heather was gone, too; beautiful Heather whom he'd misread so badly, out there now with Peter and that Twoclicks character. There was time when he'd thought he was in love with her.

Back then, though, he'd thought he loved his brother, too. Times change.

And Sondra, he had to admit, was really something. He hadn't wanted to work with her, at first. He'd thought, back then, that he hated her. But she was hard to hate. As his job, what there was of it, became more clearly a joke, a sort of thin, humiliating waste of time; the way he felt about Sondra was the thing that took on substance, became increasingly real, dangerously real.

The S'hudonni had been the biggest news story ever for a month or two, back when they first arrived. Tommy and Pete'd had their fifteen minutes of fame, being in on things right from the start. Now Pete was gone, out There somewhere, and Tommy, well, the world being what it was, even first contact with aliens drifts out of the news, replaced by crashing jetliners and sinking ferries and all that new trouble in the Horn of Africa.

They all had cutesy names, the S'hudonni. Sci-fi stuff: Hal, and Tweel and !Tang and Kzin and Twoclicks and the others. Very funny.

Tom had seen the movie that Gort got his name from, and he thought that Gort had it wrong, taking that name. Gort had just been the robot in that movie, not the alien. Just a mechanical man.

Tom found it comforting that Gort could get it wrong, but it wasn't something he wanted to mention to him, not the way things were going lately. The S'hudonni could be vicious when they wanted; Tommy had seen that side, first-hand.

He admired Sondra's courage, in fact; the way she hung around Gort, challenged him sometimes, laughed at him. And Gort took it from her, every damn time. It was part of what drew Tommy to her, that fearlessness, that incredible nerve. Maybe he even feared her for it a bit, knowing that it was the sense of danger that was part of the attraction, drawing him to her, showing him something he'd never seen before, making him feel like someone he'd never been.

He loved her. It was terrifying, but there it was. She was an incredible lover and the most beautiful woman he'd ever known, all tall and blonde, those wonderful breasts, that face, the long legs, the full lips, the way she could pout, that brilliant smile, those eyes he fell right into.

She didn't come across, he knew, as the brightest person you'd ever meet. But that was only on the surface, an act she put on. Down deep there was a bright core, a deep sense of understanding that baffled him sometimes when she let it out. He wondered, often, if she wasn't a lot smarter than she let on.

She was, truly, amazing. Damn. He couldn't believe, sometimes, that it was him making love to her, making love to one of the best known faces in the world, making love to the lover of Gort.

Tom had even begun to think, in his fear and cowardice, that he ought to try and end it, get away from her, from Gort, before he got consumed by the whole thing. But Sondra had enough courage for the both of them. She'd made that clear.

"Look, Tom," she'd said just this morning, sitting in the wicker chair, brushing her hair. "Gort's a wonderful person, really. I admire him. You have no idea what he's gone through to be here, the changes he's made in his body so he could fit in -- it was all very painful you know.

"But let's not let our worries about him get in the way of what we have, you and I. He's an alien, Tom. He's different. I'm not sure he even cares about what we're doing."

She stopped brushing. Stared at herself in the mirror.

"So quit worrying about it, Tommy. Just, like, relax, okay? It's under control, dear, it's all under control."

He'd wanted, then, to say something. But, Jesus, he'd never been very good with words anyway. He was a scientist -- or had been, before all the science he knew had become worthless with S'hudon's arrival.

But not good with words, not good with risks. He'd started to tell her that, when she turned to face him, stood up, laughed, and slowly unsnapped her bra and held it out in her right hand, let it drop, cupped her breasts in her hands, watched him as he couldn't help but look at them, flawless, the nipples seeming to harden while he stared, darkly red against the brown of the areolas. Jesus, she was perfection, and to have her wanting him like this, to be able to make love to her as often as he dared, was a kind of heaven.

"Take me, Tommy," she said. "Now. Here. Before Gort gets back from the meeting."

"Sondra," he said, "he could come back anytime. I mean, really."

"Tom. Tommy," she said. "Now, love. Right here."

She walked over to him, embraced him, those nipples pressing against his ribcage. Then she had stood up on her tiptoes to kiss him, quickly, and then lengthening the kiss until they were, again, making love, she leading the way.

There was really nothing he could do about it when she demanded him like that. He hadn't been able to help himself the first time, when they'd met

for lunch at her request; and it had been the same every time since.

As they made love this morning he'd had an odd sudden moment of clarity, thinking about the whole affair. It was after he had brought her to orgasm once with his tongue and while she was on top of him, those perfect breasts beaded in sweat moving rhythmically up and down over him, her head angled back in pleasure, that half-smile, those little moans that excited him so much. He'd wondered, briefly, before the pleasure of it took him spinning away again, about what she saw in him, about what she saw in Gort, for that matter. Was he good in bed? An alien, good in bed? Did they even make love, Sondra and Gort? Tom didn't know, Sondra wouldn't talk about it.

Maybe, he'd thought in that quick moment of clarity, it was all that simple. She didn't get any from Gort, so Tom filled in.

Then she'd started to have her orgasm, the moans turning to cries and noises and yesses, and he'd lost the thought, quit worrying about it, and just fell into the enjoyment of it, the wanting of her.

Now, watching her float his way over the reef, he shook his head. It was all very stupid in a lot of ways, he was taking an incredible risk. But, Jesus, she was terrific -- acting the airhead at one moment, and then saying something brilliant the next. And always, always, gorgeous perfection.

And it was great sex, no question about that. All of it, too, the other things as much as the act of making love; the way she ran her finger along his thigh at the dinner table, the way she stroked him through his pants as he drove the rental car, getting him hard and then slowly unzipping as he drove, reaching in to feel him, hold him.

Today, as they drove here from the Hyatt, she'd gone even further. They were waiting for that red light in George Town, the locals and a few tourists -- the sort of people who still had money for a trip to the islands -- crossing the street in front of them, when she leaned over and put her head in his lap, that perfect blond hair falling down to cover him while she found her way through the zipper, pulled him loose, and then licked him, running her tongue lightly across the top.

Oh, Christ. He'd been embarrassed by it, frozen, his hands on the wheel, hoping no one would notice, afraid to look around and see who had. But she knew no embarrassment, knew only the enjoyment of it, and the fun of seeing his discomfort while bringing him hard.

When the light changed he'd been slow to react, and the car behind him had beeped. He'd jumped in the seat, banging her head into the steering wheel. She'd found the whole thing hilarious.

He had an erection now just thinking about it as he watched her glide by, no more than fifteen or twenty yards out, moving quickly in the current this close to the point.

He thought for a moment that she'd forgotten where she was, was going to drift right out toward the breakers if he didn't risk it all and jump in after her. But then she looked up, waved, and swam easily over to him, angling against the current to reach the tiny spot of beach that held sand instead of coral, where she could stand and walk in, her skin and that white bikini swim suit sparkling in the hard sunshine as she tugged off her mask and snorkel.

"Tom, it's wonderful. I can't imagine why you didn't want to snorkel it with me. God, the fish! And the star coral, huge boulders of it, like little mountain ranges full of tropical fish that you just drift over. It was really amazing."

"That's great," he said, scrambling over the rocks to her, handing her a towel. "I was getting worried about you, actually. The current..." He let the thought drift.

"Oh, Tom. The worst thing that would happen is that I go around the point and then swim in from the other side. I swear, you're such a worrier."

Then she laughed at him. "There _was_ this huge barracuda out there, just next to the main reef. Big thing, maybe six or seven feet long. It was just hanging there, flicking that tail a bit in the current, watching me. And then something else, too, another one I guess, out past it, where there's that

drop-off. Just caught a glimpse of that one.

"It was terrific," she said, "they're so powerful, so lethal looking. But everyone says they never attack. They just watch you."

"Yeah," Tom said. "They just watch."

"Oh, Tommy, you're such a worrier, I swear."

"Yeah," he admitted. "Yeah, I am." Then, trying to lighten up, he added, "But I suppose someone has to worry, right?"

She was toweling off her hair, rubbing it in long strokes, as she looked up at him, smiled. "If you say so, Tom."

"Look, Sondra. Let's walk back to that little beach bar and have a drink, okay? Get out of the sun for awhile, cool off. And then we'll snorkel some more if you want, out on the other side of the point."

"That's really boring over there, Tom, nothing but sand and a few stingrays. And I don't want a drink, yet. In fact," she flashed him that smile, "maybe we could do something else."

"Here?"

"Why not? It's secluded, it's a perfect little beach on a perfect little island, with the sun, the sea. I mean, really, Tom, what more could you ask?"

Some privacy, he thought, but didn't voice it. Truth was, he didn't feel all that great. Another headache. There'd been a lot of them lately, not surprising, given his stress level.

"Come here, Tom," she said, and reached toward him, grabbed his hand, pulled him down off the rocks and onto the small strip of sand.

She kneeled, put the towel down, spread it out on the sand, patted that spot. "Join me, Thomas?"

And he did, kneeling to kiss her and then lying with her on the towel as she slid his trunks down without breaking the kiss.

She took him in her hand then, still kissing his face, his cheek, his forehead while gently tugging on him. He hadn't thought, given everything, that he could get erect that quickly again; but he was quite wrong.

Then she pushed him onto his back, stood, looked around once, out toward the reef and then over the rocks to the beach on the other side of the point, smiled, then slid her own bottoms off and came down to sit astride him, easing him in as she lowered herself down.

"There," she said, once she was on him completely and he was lost in her again. "Now, isn't this better than walking over to that bar?"

He smiled. He could barely see her against the glare of the hard blue sky, her hair a wispy halo around that perfect face. "Better," he said. "It's always better, Sondra."

And then she started to move, and he rose and fell with her, his eyes shut, a red haze through the closed lids all he could see, her moans all he could hear.

It only took a few minutes and was over. God, they were matched so well, hitting that moment right together. Why hadn't he found her before Gort had? He would do anything for her.

They both waded into the water to rinse and splash a bit after that. Tom heard a distant splash and looked out toward the reef where there seemed to be something, another snorkeler maybe? A porpoise? A big patch of roiled water where it had surfaced, anyway.

He shrugged. Whatever, whoever, it was, he was safe enough here, now, on dry land with Sondra.

They picked up their knit bags with the masks and fins in them, slipped into their sandals, then picked their way back over the rocks toward the beach. There, they found the path that wound its way through the pines and casuarina trees. Sondra held his hand as they went along, bumping up against him purposefully a few times, chatting away happily about how much she liked the island, how she would hate to leave tomorrow, about how soon they could come back.

Tom didn't say much. Coming in over the rocks he'd seen Gort a few

hundred yards out in the water, wading in. Naked as a baby, that bloated S'hudonni body emerging from the clear water, rising while Tom watched, the chest, the waist, the crotch, the smooth, doll-like perfection of the crotch.

It was a long way off, but Tom could see that Gort was missing things. Tom wondered crazily just how it was that the guy took a piss.

Well, that explained a lot, anyway.

Then, while Tom watched, Gort stopped, looked their way, raised his right hand in greeting, waving hello to his Earthie assistant and to Sondra, his Earthie girlfriend.

Tom waved back. Sondra was still acting like she didn't see him out there, though. She stopped, turned to face him, put her hands behind his neck, brought his face down to hers, pulling his toward her though he tried to keep some distance, and kissed him.

Damnit.

The kiss ended. "You're, like, a wonderful man, Tom Holman," Sondra said.

"Sondra," he said. "Look. Out there," and he pointed toward Gort.

"It's Gort," she said, smiling.

"Yes."

"You know S'hudon is a waterworld, Tom, right? Gort's people are amphibian, really, they live mostly in the water."

"Sure, I knew."

"That was him today, out by the reef. We swam together, he and I, for a while. He told me some things..." She let the thought trail off.

Tom looked at her. Looked out at Gort, walking toward them now, maybe fifty yards away, that perfect body, but smooth in all the wrong places.

"Hello, Thomas," Gort yelled across the water, waving again.

Tom just shook his head.

"So, Sondra, what's going to happen here. Am I fired? Will he have me killed? Promote me? Or doesn't he care?"

"Oh, he cares, Tom."

He looked at her, at Sondra. She was smiling up at him, reached up to touch his lips. "Such a good kisser you are, Tom. I've enjoyed every minute of it, every second."

"What's going on, Sondra?"

"We're leaving, Tom."

"Leaving?"

"Gort and I, and some of the others. We're leaving Earth. We have what we need, we're ready to go home."

"You?"

She smiled. "Yes, Tom. Me."

"I don't understand. Sondra. You're one of them? You're..."

She waved him off. "Well, of course, Tom. I've never lied to you, Tom. I've never told you otherwise."

"But, I thought..."

She laughed. "Oh, Tom. You're so sweet, you're such a dear. But, really, Tom, we all had quite a bit of work to do here, a lot of information to gather, samples, examples. You know, things to take back. Emotions, physical sensations, the tension and fear, the semen -- all of you, Thomas. We'll take that back with us."

He wasn't sure what to say, what to do. Should he scream? Break down and cry?

"Collected?" was all he could manage.

Sondra smiled.

"Hello, you two. Wonderful water, isn't it?"

It was Gort. Friendly Gort. The collector, for some zoo back home, probably.

"I was just telling Thomas that we're leaving soon, Gort."

"In just a few minutes, actually, Sondra. If that's all right with you. The others are already on board. The ship will be here shortly."

"And me?" asked Tom. "Sondra, what about me?"

"It's quite clear in the contract, Thomas," said Gort, rubbing his head with his hands, shaking out the water. "You'll be compensated nicely, of course, for this premature closure. You'll be quite wealthy, by local standards." He smiled, added oddly, "And we certainly wish you the very best, Thomas." He actually seemed a bit wistful as he said that.

"That's not what I meant."

"He knows that, Tom," Sondra said. Beautiful, perfect Sondra, smiling at him. "He knows. And it's all right. You've been wonderful. But now it's over. That's all there is to it."

She laughed. "And I have good news for you, anyway. Your brother and Twoclicks are on their way here. A year from now, maybe even sooner, and they'll be back."

"That's great."

"Heather will be with them, Tom."

"Heather? What do you know about Heather?"

But Sondra didn't answer. Instead, she reached out to touch his lips with her finger, then leaned forward, kissed him, smiled.

Tom looked out for a moment at the sea. The white spray from the rumbling breakers rose against the blue of the open sea behind.

He held, in his left hand, the fins, the mask, snorkel. Flimsy, plastic; they felt fragile, silly.

But they worked. Low tech, but they worked. You could see underwater with the mask on. You could breathe with the snorkel.

Oh, hell. He took a deep breath, exhaled slowly, and walked with them over toward the beach bar, the shade of the Australian pines.

They had a couple of drinks each, the three of them, while they waited. And then, two hours later, when Gort and Sondra were gone, Tom walked back to the rocks, clambered over them to the little beach on the other side, slipped the fins on, the mask, put the snorkel into his mouth, and jumped into the water, fighting the current, paddling into it until he could see the reef.

He thought, as he snorkeled, that he'd have to find something to do with himself until Peter got home. And Heather. Then he dived down to the bottom for a bit, surfaced, dived again, then came back to the surface and breathed through the snorkel while he looked straight down, the current carrying him along as he just watched the fish swim by ten or fifteen feet below, unaware of him, not knowing about him, or his life, or his plans. Just swimming down there. Just eating each other. Just living and dying.

With Twoclicks Watching

Twoclicks was a sloppy lover. Like all the S'hudonni, he was noisy at it out of the water. The sharp wet slaps of his bloated bulk against the deck and his crisp barks of delight cut right through the low rumble of Tempest's twin diesels.

Holman was at the helm. He watched with appropriate scientific detachment from the bridge as Twoclicks rolled his large mass over on his side to ease the ventral fin out of the way and enter the changer. She, in turn, angled to accept him, and grunted in feigned pleasure.

There were unpleasant sucking sounds.

The moon was nearly full, the Egmont Light a tiny offering off port, the Gulf nearly glass this close to shore. It was August and the heat, even out on the water, was oppressive. Holman was sweating just standing at the wheel. Another mile in and the mosquitoes would find them, too. Twoclicks, of course, welcomed the heat, and the mosquitoes didn't care for him, they swarmed him but never seemed to bite.

Freedom for Holman was just two hours away, when they would reach the tired old Pass-a-grille marina. Twoclicks had promised to sign the release papers there, have a bit of a ceremony for his indentured Earthie after all these good years of service.

Holman allowed himself a smile, though he knew it might be a dangerous

couple of hours, the riskiest of this whole, odd little five-day holiday. They were running in at midnight to this shore, with its dozens of inlets and small bays that sheltered the smugglers who fueled the Florida District's violence.

Coming in at night was Twoclick's idea, of course. The S'hudonni merchant liked the edge that came with risk. That's what the sex down below was probably all about, his way of adding to the night's tension, its heat. Disgusting old Twoclicks was down there with Heather, Holman's changer, feeding off the night's potential for danger.

Holman looked away from the sweaty, grappling bodies and stared instead toward the distant smudge of shoreline. This should be a good time, a pleasant one. He should be happy. Home the hero, home the great journalist having enlightened the cosmos about humanity. That was how the newsnets had billed it for the first few days after he'd returned.

The nets were wrong. Holman snorted in disgust to think of how it had really been out there -- the humiliation of it, his slow realization that he was not what he'd thought, no great mind sharing wisdom with the ethereal galactic sages. What he had been, instead, was a sideshow, a carnival act. A whore.

Now he was back to the little fishing town where he'd grown up. And if there was no sense of accomplishment, he had hoped for at least some relief here, a return to his real work, the chance to write a few books, to try and remember the best of what had happened and discard the greater part, the worst of it. He had thought his dark comedy finally over.

But even that wasn't to be. There was no joy at coming home.

Tommy was dying. His baby brother had a year left, maybe less.

Tommy, bitter Tommy, had told Holman last night, had spat out the news angrily. An unhappy mass in the brain ... Glioblastoma Multiforme. High-grade. Aggressive. Inoperable. There was nothing to be done except get comfortable, get ready. Not years, a few months.

Damn.

Holman shook his head. Poor hard-luck Tommy. Always just missing the brass ring, always grabbing for it and not quite catching it. Always angry and suspicious about what life had done to him, about his genius rendered simple by S'hudon's arrival, about his older brother's successes that magnified his own failures, about being left behind when his big brother was, unbelievably, off to the stars.

And now this final thing, as if to prove those suspicions right.

Holman saw movement on the water. There was a low shadow to starboard, hard to see against the thin dark line of distant shore. One of the old marker buoys? Holman wished he had the S'hudonni nightglasses along so he could see what it was.

But no, Twoclicks was determined to go primitive, that was the whole point of this absurd little vacation. Travel like the natives. Get to know the real Earth. Make love under the moon and stars the way Holman had always described it before mounting the changer in a dozen or more cities on each of the Ten.

Holman heard heavy feet on the ladder behind him. His brother slowly clambered up onto the bridge to join him, slipping easily through the narrow opening and out onto the platform.

Tommy had lost weight -- a lot of weight -- in the time Holman had been gone. He'd been in good shape once, a jogger and a tennis player. Now he was a shadow, sliding silently through this dark world, still groggy from a couple of hours of sleep and the headaches that plagued him.

But when Holman turned to look at him Tommy was smiling. Heather, on Twoclick's orders, had taken Tommy to bed in his captain's quarters and had clearly worn him out. Holman smiled at that, recalling how Heather had seduced Tommy with a few coy phrases, a touch or two, that knowing smile. Holman nodded his head in greeting as Tommy stood next to him. Heather was well trained.

Holman, for his own part, had gone from lust to hate to acceptance of

the changer. In a weird, unsatisfying way he even liked Heather. While she'd been acting oddly on this little outing, as if she had something to say but couldn't get it out, she was basically all right, honest in her own way, more honest than most people, human or S'hudonni.

Weird constructs; odd, expensive toys, these shapechangers -- only the S'hudonni could have thought them up and then spent the money to make them. But they were what they were, that was all. For Heather, for instance, there was nothing she could do about it except get on with business. Holman had come to know how that felt. You do what you have to do, that's all.

Tommy threw his arms out in a stretch to embrace the sea, turned to look at his brother, spoke with sarcasm, a cutting edge to the thin, dry humor. "Pete, like you've been telling me, it must have been real hell out there. Imagine trying to struggle along with just Heather as your playmate."

Tommy shook his head, added, "Damn, Pete, that was the best fuck I've ever had. Maybe the best fuck anybody's ever had. She's incredible."

Tommy, of course, hadn't seen what Heather looked like right at the moment, rolling around all blubbery and damp underneath Twoclicks. In a minute, Holman figured, Tommy might notice the coupling below. It would change his impression of the changer, of just how enjoyable things had been for his older brother.

For the moment, Holman just smiled. Tommy wasn't easy to get along with, but he deserved a little fun. It hadn't been an easy life for him in the two years since Holman had left. All of Twoclick's and Heather's promises that there would be useful work for Tommy to do hadn't turned into much of anything once it was said and done. Tommy, brilliant Tommy, had wound up being, really, a kind of secretary for another of the S'hudonni, one of Twoclick's colleagues. It was make-work, something to keep Holman happy while he traveled around with Twoclicks. It didn't take Tommy long to realize it, and finally, a year into it, he'd quit. Now Tommy, the genius kid scientist, ran a charter service out of Pass-a-grille for the new masters, catered to the S'hudonni's fondness for warm seas and humid nights -- like S'hudon for them, or as close as they could get here on primitive, backward Earth.

Holman, to his surprise, had read about Tommy in a guidebook he'd found on Seventones. He'd finished his presentation in late morning, making love to Heather before an audience of thirty or so academics who'd left their seats to gather around close and take notes, whistle and click appreciatively to each other, touch Holman's erection and collect drops of sweat off his back -- the usual.

Then he'd wandered the canals for a few hours between presentations and there, in what amounted to a travel agency, had been a listing of Tommy and the charters he offered out of Tampa Bay.

Holman had laughed out loud, his first laughter in months, imagining Tommy showing the S'hudonni around, ironies bouncing around everywhere with that scenario. There was a kind of cosmic justice in it, picturing Tommy, the man whose career had been destroyed by S'hudon's arrival, making money -- probably good money, at that -- showing around some group of earnest young S'hudonni diplomats.

Later, when he thought about it more, Holman saw it as a darker thing; a sad admittance of ugly new realities. And now this, this cancer -- one they might have bought Tommy some time with not too long ago, before the Landings, before the changes. Add it all up and it was no wonder that Tommy's bitterness ran so deep. You could feel it, the hate, the despair.

"There's something out there, off starboard," Holman said to Tommy, steering things away from another confrontation. "See it?"

Tommy stared, nodded. Of course he'd seen it. Tommy had always understood the sea better than his brother, had never turned away from the sea like Peter.

"Yeah, pretty small," Tommy said, rubbing his temples to ease the headache that followed him everywhere. "Gun runners, probably. Or the local

militia. Nobody good, that's for sure. Not here. Not now. They'll probably ignore us unless we bother them."

There was a sibilant whistle and several sharp clicks from below. Holman clicked back, and ended with a three-note. His S'hudonni was pitch perfect, another reason to be glad the servitude was over. He'd had enough of the language of the master, was ashamed that he'd learned it so well.

"Twoclicks heard us talking. He wants to know how close they are," Holman translated for his brother. "I told him we weren't sure, a mile, maybe. Hard to tell in this moonlight."

There was a quiet splash from below. Twoclicks was over the side to check out the other boat. The S'hudonni could swim all day at thirty knots or more, Holman had seen it done. Once, on Downtone, Twoclicks and a couple of royal friends on a hunting party had circled a kind of whale thing for more than an hour, then finally rammed it repeatedly to finish it off. Their heads, their whole bodies really, were built for that slamming collision of cartilage and bone into prey. Straight on and head first into trouble, that was the S'hudonni way. They weren't a subtle people.

What Holman remembered best about the incident was how much Twoclicks and his friends had enjoyed it. They were like that, the S'hudonni, cruel at times just for amusement, the enjoyment of the power they held.

Holman hadn't told the story to Tommy, who was fragile enough already when it came to dealing with the S'hudonni. The last thing Tommy needed was anything that would add to his hate. There was a whole underground movement in this part of what had been the old States, and the movement still fought its nagging, annoying little war against S'hudon. It was a stupid fight, unwinnable, and it cost dearly. Holman had seen what S'hudon could do, had watched a city melt in retribution on Endtone. He didn't want Tommy to slide into anything like that.

It was good that the runners weren't more successful here. Success would kill them and a lot of others. And just putting up a struggle meant that S'hudon's technology embargo was still on, would stay on. You can't win the benefits if you don't play the game S'hudon's way.

On the deck, below, the changer was shaping back to human, back to the Heather that Holman knew from a thousand encounters. Tommy didn't see her shaping, which was fine. Holman didn't know how Tommy would react to seeing the change take place, the melting and blurring that emerged into startling beauty.

In a few minutes Heather, tall, thin and perfect now, rose from the deck and walked over to the ladder to join them on the platform. "Hello, you two," she said, with that pleasant lilt she'd developed, almost an Irish ring to it, Holman thought. He didn't know where she'd learned it.

"Twoclicks decided to check things out?" he asked her.

"He said it sounded like fun. And he likes this warm water."

"Hell," said Holman, "damn risky. It'll just piss them off if they see him. And he's not screened, of course, right?"

"You know he's not, Peter. That was the whole point of the trip, to go native. The only implant he left in was the com unit."

Holman didn't respond to that, just shook his head. Damn Twoclicks. Always looking for a little edge of excitement, and this time it might get him in real trouble.

Two dull pops echoed across the water and Tommy grunted, spoke. "Rifles. I saw the muzzle flash. They're shooting at him."

There were more flashes, and then the brief burp of an automatic weapon. The changer tilted her head. "I've lost contact with him."

She turned to look at Holman. "Peter, we all need him alive. Should I shape and go search for him?"

"Not yet," Holman said. "Give him a minute."

"The runners are circling, I don't think they've seen us yet," said Tommy, staring toward the distant boat. He listened to the growl of its engines, grunted. "I know that boat, that's Serpent. It's an old scarab,

overpowered, quick. Belongs to the Nathan brothers." He shook his head. "Mean sons of bitches."

Damn.

Heather was right, they all needed Twoclicks alive. Holman knew what would happen to them if Twoclicks were killed. A S'hudonni murdered by Earthies? This whole coast would be in an uproar. Dozens would die in retribution, hundreds perhaps. Holman and his brother wouldn't last twenty-four hours. Heather would be destroyed as soon as her evidence was taken.

A long few minutes passed, the mutter of the other boat a constant worry in the distance, Tempest throttled all the way back. Holman was about to tell Heather to shape and go search when there was a splash in the glassy water. "Down there," Tommy said, and pointed over the side.

The water swirled, phosphorescent in the moonlight. A dorsal fin, a bulky body, air out a blowhole, a feeble wave of a delicate hand at the end of a short arm.

"Help me get him in," Holman said, scrambling down the ladder to the main deck. Heather was right behind him, Tommy stayed at the helm.

There were two wounds, neither one serious. Twoclicks would be fine as soon as they could get him to the medcot on his ship.

The first was from a slug that had torn its way through the thick blubber behind the dorsal, smashing the com implant and then passing through. The wound bled cleanly.

Another slug was imbedded in the ventral, and had just missed the sheathed penis. Holman thought the wound was fitting, but didn't whistle that thought to Twoclicks.

That wound, too, seemed clean. Twoclicks was in considerable pain, but not much danger. Holman used Tommy's first aid kit to staunch the bleeding and left it at that.

Holman felt Tommy throw the throttles forward. The runners must have finally seen them and were coming to check them out. Tommy was going to make a run for it, but Tempest wasn't built for speed, and the runners' scarab was.

Twoclicks whistled to him. Holman barely heard the tones through the engine noise, but got the message.

"He's tired of messing around with these guys," he said to Heather. "Fun's over. Call the screamship and let's end this thing now."

There was a pause. The changer tilted her head in concentration, then nodded. "It's done. Ten minutes."

Holman patted Twoclick's side. For all the hate he'd like to muster against the flabby old con artist, Holman had to admit to certain reluctant admiration for him.

Twoclicks was of royal blood on S'hudon, but from a failed family, all lineage and no money. He'd made the classic S'hudonni turn toward trade as a way out of his aristocratic poverty.

Holman and his reproductive show-and-tell had been an academic scam that was one in a long line of minor financial successes. Holman had spent six months on S'hudon itself, had seen the decayed family manor in a minor island's steamy tidal swamp, had heard the family story and been treated with a bit of respect for a time -- and then had been told to show the family how Earthies reproduce.

The family had charged admission for the next several months, until the novelty wore off and Twoclicks headed back on the road.

There was a pained, thin whistle from Twoclicks. Holman listened, clicked and whistled back. Twoclicks was actually saying thanks, the old bastard. Holman told him to shut up, the ship was coming. Twoclicks membranes slid up over the small eyes, and then they closed.

The runners' scarab was clearly visible now, a few minutes away, no more. It was going to be close. Tommy, up on the flying bridge, kept turning to look at the boat angling toward them. Holman wished he hadn't told Tommy to get rid of the weapons before they'd started this little jaunt. The hell with

Twoclicks' rules, that rifle and old .38 would be useful right now.

Heather sat down next to Holman and wrapped her arms around her knees. "He'd be excited about all this if he weren't in such pain," she said, nodding toward Twoclicks.

Holman agreed, looking at her face as he did so. She was achingly beautiful; high cheekbones, light blue eyes, blond hair pulled back now into a ponytail. A perfect smile. Perfect love making.

No question, the S'hudonni were great engineers.

"Peter," she asked, "will we get out of this?"

He shrugged. "You can always shape into S'hudonni and swim away from it. No use getting hurt if you don't have to."

She laughed at that idea. "So S'hudon could just destroy me later? No, I'll stay."

Then she smiled that slight smile that he could, sometimes, forget was artificial. "Twoclicks asked me to talk with you, Peter. I was going to do it sooner, but the moment never came."

She paused, reached out to touch his bare shoulder. Her touch was warm, caring. He always wondered how she did that. "Peter, he wants you to sign on again, for another tour of the Ten. He'll give you very favorable terms."

Holman just looked at her for a moment. He laughed, shook his head. "You've got to be kidding, Heather. Sign on again? God, I've been counting the days until today, waiting for it to end. I'm tired of being a porn show for the empire's idle rich and a few interested academics. I've had it with this, Heather. You know that. Done. Forever."

He smiled back at her, tight. "I'm home, Heather. I'm staying here. Besides, my brother needs me."

"No," she said. "Your brother needs S'hudon. Your brother needs Twoclicks."

"What do you mean by that?"

"We know about your brother. Twoclicks can arrange for him to be healthy; to live a good, long life."

Holman stared at her. "That's forbidden. Absolutely. A technology transfer like that while there's still fighting going on here? If S'hudon found out Twoclicks had even made the offer he'd be exiled. Or worse."

"Twoclicks will take the risk, Peter. It can be done. Tommy can live. He'll think he's gone into a remission, one that never ends. He has a heart attack on the way, too, did you know that? I scanned him when we made love. There's an eighty percent blockage. That will be taken care of, as well."

"And the price?"

"You sign up for another tour. Favorable terms, complete care. An account here that will be enormous by the time you return."

"And fuck you twice a day or more, for an audience."

"And make love to me, Peter." She smiled. "Has it been that bad?"

There were times she was so damn human he had to force himself to remember the artifice of it. Maybe that was what he hated the most about himself, about the whole thing, the way he forgot when he was with her, forgot everything -- the indenture contract, her falsehood, the audience and the humiliation of it.

There was something very primitive about it, the rutting native from Earth mounting the mechanical seed collector. He wanted to think better of himself. He wanted to not want her.

But, all too often, he lost himself in the delight of her, the wanting of her. God, he loved it. He loved making love to her.

This was a terrible admission. There was an enormous self-loathing to it, an ultimate concession to his own weakness. He wondered, momentarily, about taking his life right here, now. Just over the side and start swimming, let the warm water take him, end it. How long could he stand the self-hate if he went back out there?

But Tommy, poor damn Tommy. Holman sat back on his rump and stared toward the approaching boat. In the distance there was a high scream.

Twoclick's screamship. It would be here in a minute or two.

He put his hand back on Twoclick's huge back. Heather spoke. "You can't tell your brother, Holman. He can't know how it happened, how he went into remission. Twoclicks won't take that chance. Just tell Tommy that Twoclicks has made you an offer you can't refuse, that's all. That you've signed another contract. One more tour."

"Tommy will think I'm leaving him here to die alone. We're the only family left for each other, you know."

"But he won't die, Holman. He'll be here when you get back. Older, wiser, richer. Both of you. You can tell him then."

"Sure. Wiser. Richer. I leave for the stars again while he stays here, alone, to die. That's how he'll see it. God, he's filled with hate already. This might put him right over the top."

"He'll be wrong about that. He'll live, Holman. And he'll be successful. Twoclicks can arrange a few contracts for him."

"He'll hate me. Despise me. He'll see this as proof of everything he thinks about me, that I abandoned them, just got my lucky break and left the whole damn family hanging."

The scream grew in intensity. There was a shout from Tommy. Holman looked up at his brother, who pointed toward the horizon line, toward the deadly white apparition of the screamship.

It looked for all the worlds like a whale, a giant, huge pale thing that screamed in over the heads and paused abruptly over the scarab, no more than a hundred yards away now.

A bright beam flared down from the screamship. The Nathan boys, screaming, jumped overboard and splashed away while the beam tightened, constricted on the scarab.

There was a dull explosion, a white blossoming.

Twoclicks whistled in approval. Tommy had come down from the bridge and stood next to Holman as they watched the bright flaring off starboard.

"Jesus," Tommy said. "How do they do that?"

"That's a suppressor field over the boat," Holman told him. "Contains and amplifies the heat energy."

Tommy looked out the white flare of heat. "What about the Nathan boys, Peter? Ask him about them. Is the ship going to kill them? Jesus, Peter, I grew up with those guys, you know. We went crabbing together as kids."

Holman could only shake his head. "They shot at him, Tommy. They tried to kill him. You know how the S'hudonni are."

Tommy looked at his older brother. He knew. "But you could talk to him, Peter, ask him for a favor. God, he thinks of you as a friend."

Holman laughed. Hell with it, maybe it was time for Tommy to find out the difference between a friend and a slave. "A favor, Tommy? Christ. Let me explain something to you. Twoclicks is..."

"Holman," said Heather, pointing, "over there. Both of them. Coming this way."

Holman could see them, both swimming strongly toward Tempest.

"I'll get the grappling hook," said Tommy.

There was a grunt from behind them and dull series of clicks punctuated by a high, thin angry whistle.

"Don't bother," said Holman, and watched impassively as Twoclicks went back over the side.

Holman and his brother watched, saying nothing, as the Nathan boys approached, their strokes weaker now, both of them struggling, too tired to call for help.

Fifteen yards out, no more, Twoclicks rammed the first one. There was only the quick impression of his dorsal in the dark water, than a loud exhale and a look of surprise from one of the Nathans as he was pushed hard away from Tempest. A second later he was yanked under.

"Peter!" said Tommy, turning to look at his brother, eyes wide. "We've got to stop him. We've got to make him stop."

Heather came up toward Tommy, put her arms around him from behind, hugged him, said quietly, "We can't, Tommy. Twoclicks is getting even now, that's all. It's just the way they are, the S'hudonni."

"But..."

She came around to face him. She was achingly beautiful. Holman, despite himself, despite the violence and the inherent lie in her beauty, wanted her.

She leaned forward and kissed Tommy lightly on the cheek.

"We just have to let it be, Tommy. It's all we can do."

There was a roiling in the water where the first one had gone under. The other Nathan boy finally yelled for help. "Tommy! Tommy Holman, you son-of-a-bitch, help me. You got to help me!"

"Peter," Tommy was forcing himself to say it calmly, rationally. "Peter, let me help him. If you won't, at least let me."

Holman just watched the swimmer.

Heather put her arms around Tommy's neck, then turned his face away from the scene and kissed him. Tommy stood, arms at his side, for a moment.

Holman stood impassive. There was a surreal moment of quiet on the water, a frozen few seconds, and then Twoclicks emerged in a powerful leap, arcing high and beautiful before diving cleanly back into the sea to disappear beneath the swimmer.

The Nathan boy struggled to tread water. "Tommy! Peter! God!" he said, and then from below Twoclicks struck him and he was lifted nearly out of the water by the force of the impact. Holman heard breaking bone and tearing cartilage as the neck snapped back. The body fell back into the water and Twoclicks struck again, and then a final time before dragging him under.

Heather reached down to Tommy's hands and pulled them up around her waist, slowly breaking the kiss. Then, touching his face, smiling that perfect smile, she led him toward the cabin, toward a kind of satisfaction, a kind of delight, he'd never known until she had shown it to him. For four steps, mesmerized, he followed her.

Then he stopped. "Christ! God Almighty, Peter. Those were the Nathan boys out there." He turned back, away from Heather and her offerings, to face his brother. He trembled with anger, boiling with it, containing it. "We didn't help them," he said slowly, deliberately. "You just let him kill them."

Holman didn't try to explain. Off starboard, the Nathans' boat settled hissing and crackling into the Gulf and then, finally, disappeared. The screamship slowly drifted over the scene for a few more seconds and then arced high into the night and was gone.

Holman reached down to help Twoclicks climb back aboard, was just grabbing the tiny arms, when Tommy crashed into him from behind.

"You bastard!" Tommy yelled and wrestled Holman to the deck. Twoclicks splashed back into the water. Heather watched.

"You son of a bitch," and he rolled over onto the top of Holman and pushed hard against Peter's shoulders, shoving him into the deck once, twice, a third time. "Goddamn it, Peter. Look what you are. Look what's happening. It's all going to hell here, you know that, right? While you're off being some kind of space cowboy, back here, where it matters, it's all going to hell because of these, these _things_ you love so much."

Holman didn't fight back.

Tommy slapped him, hard, across the face, shook him by the shoulders once again, crying now, tears bubbling out onto that flabby face. "Peter. Peter. Peter," he kept saying.

In their youth they fought often, the sloppy wrestling tussles of brothers. Peter was four years older and too strong, too tough for Tommy. Their father, a strong, quiet man, a high school history teacher, would pry them apart.

Later, just once when they were older, they'd fought over a girl, the two of them squared off to punch it out, no playful wrestling here.

Their mother, a small, gentle woman, had watched from the kitchen

window and come out to break it up. She had stepped between them and the anger evaporated.

But mother was gone now. And Dad.

Tommy pulled back a fist, cocked it, and punched Peter across the left cheek, cutting him. Blood spurted out.

"Goddamn it, Peter. Just Goddamn it." He pulled back for another. Holman lay there, waiting for it, saying nothing.

There was a moment's hesitation. Tommy looked down at his older brother, the famous friend of S'hudon. "Oh, hell," he said, quietly now, "you're pitiful, Peter." And he loosened the fist.

He stood, looked down on Peter, shook his head, and walked away, back toward the ladder to the bridge. He clambered up, took the wheel.

"Pull Twoclicks in," he said. "Let's get going."

Later, at the dock, Tommy tied them up and when his brother told him he'd signed on again with Twoclicks, just shook his head. It didn't matter. Nothing mattered, really, except doing what he could in the time he had left.

Suffer the Children

The grain silos of Troy rose into view above the fields of wheat as he limped along the crumbling two-lane blacktop toward town.

He was finally near another good site, then, and that helped ease the pain in his left leg, the one that hadn't worked right since the blast wave had caught him and thrown him hard against a pile of stacked railroad ties. That had been two months ago. A day-care center in Wisconsin.

School would be in session now, he figured, and that would help simplify things. There would be a lot of school-age children in a town like this; the small towns had come through the Collapse a lot better than the big cities. In a town like this he wouldn't have to go searching for any out-of the-way day-care centers. All he'd have to do was find the right kind of school building, one that would come down quick and easy, and then he'd be able to roll up some numbers in a hurry, something that would really get some attention.

He looked up to gauge the time. About noon, maybe a little after. That was good, they'd all be tired and quiet after lunch and recess.

He limped on. He was sweating, a hard sun shining down through the clear September blue of the sky, the kind of sky he remembered from a distant childhood ... a time long before he'd been forced into all this, long before the S'hudonni had come with their seduction; their promises and their laws and their power. He'd lost a brother to them, but saved himself.

It had all happened so fast. Like everyone else, he'd been bewildered by the speed with which everything had changed. Those great white ships, coming in with an offer too good to turn down. The doors to the universe opening wide. Trade with a hundred other works, a thousand! The wonder of that, the unimaginable wonder!

He'd bought into at first, just like everyone else, just like his brother. Then, slowly, he'd seen what the S'hudonni had really meant when they'd explained that it would take a few small changes here and there for Earth to earn its way to the stars.

A few small changes. The district governors, the new currency, the new language -- the S'hudonni way to peace and prosperity and that rainbow's end, that unlimited future

He was dying. He felt good, had felt good for months now. But he knew that wasn't real, wouldn't last. The doctors had made it clear there was nothing they could do. If S'hudon had wanted to help, well, that would be different. But that kind of technology transfer was forbidden. So he would die, the way America had died. The old way of life gone in a heartbeat. Three years, was it now? Four? And everything was gone. The might, the importance, the freedom, the strength -- all of it gone.

He managed a small bitter smile, thinking about it. Pax S'hudonni, a world at peace, a prosperous, orderly world. Most people these days went for

that, thinking that what they'd lost had been a small price to pay. But not everyone bought it. Not everyone.

He was, he knew, alive for a reason. Two years ago he was supposed to be dead. Instead he was here, the sun beating down hard on the black pavement, the heat uncut by Midwest haze for a change. Must be nearly a hundred. Heat came late to southern Illinois.

He rubbed his arms. The blast that had nearly gotten him had singed the hair on his arms. It had grown back now, but that had been much too close a call. He rubbed his arms in memory of that. Much too close. He'd learned his lesson from that one. He'd be more careful this time. He couldn't afford to die, not yet. There was still too much work to do. Painful work. Awful, necessary work.

He rounded a wide curve in the road and saw the outskirts of the town, no more than a mile or so ahead. Brick buildings, mostly one or two stories. Fine. There was an old brick billboard up ahead, ten or twelve feet tall and hung with the faded emblems of the Kiwanis and the Moose and the Knights of Columbus.

He didn't see anyone until he was right in town, on a residential street that was cooled and canopied by tall, old oaks. An old man was moving slowly along the cracked concrete sidewalk. They said hello to one another cordially enough, he and the old man, but he thought that the old guy eyed him suspiciously. Small-town people were like that these days, insulated, protective. He decided that he'd have to do it soon, then, in the next hour or two, before any more people had a chance to wonder who he was. He didn't like that, he didn't like to feel hurried.

He stopped at the end of the street and sat down for a moment on a bus stop bench. He looked back the way he'd come and saw how the oaks made a cool dark tunnel right in the middle of the blazing sunlight.

Those oaks were old enough to have seen the glory of World War II, and they'd greeted the returning heroes then. And the heroes returning from Korea, and 'Nam and Nicaragua. All the returning heroes. All those brave young men.

And then had come the S'hudonni, promising riches. But no more heroes, no more wars. No more glory. Just profit. S'hudonni profit.

He squirmed a bit to get comfortable on the splintered wood. He could feel, against the small of his back, down where the bottom of the backpack pushed against him, the thin, rectangular hardness that was the two S'hudonni devices.

A little present for the city of Troy, brought to town by a guy who looked pretty harmless. He smiled again at the thought of that. Nice little piece of irony.

Ironic, too, that the devices were of S'hudonni make. These today, then another two in a few weeks, somewhere up the Mississippi somewhere, maybe Hannibal.

So powerful an explosion from so small a thing. He felt the devices against his back. About the size of a deck of cards. A magic deck of cards.

He didn't know how the group had gotten them. He didn't want to know. He had two left, that was all that mattered. That, and how well they worked.

The rubble, the smoke, the heat. The death. That was how well they worked. In Rhinelander. In Saginaw before that. In Akron before that.

Now this one, then one more, and then back home. He'd hide for a while there, get the leg taken care of, and then head out again. So much to do before they found him. Eventually, he figured, they would, and that would end it.

He rose to walk on, and the street sign caught his eye. He was standing at the corner of Jefferson Avenue and Hale Street. Very patriotic little town, Troy. Below the street names were two, newer signs. They also gave the names of the streets, but in S'hudonni script.

It would be best, the S'hudonni said, if all concerned would learn the language of interstellar commerce, of universal profit. Indigenous languages were nice, and could be retained, they said, but only those who could deal in

S'hudonni could really expect to prosper.

That was why all the schools taught S'hudonni to all the children, so they could grow up to prosper under the enlightened rule of the S'hudonni Empire. He was angry with himself for being able to read the script. It was unavoidable, the S'hudonni influence.

But that didn't mean he couldn't do something about it. He started walking again, watching for a school. It wasn't that big a town that he couldn't find what he wanted in a half-hour or so, he figured, and he was right, a perfect two-story red brick one.

"George P. Tillman Elementary" it said in Indiana limestone across the twin-doored entrance.

Air conditioners hummed in the windows of the school. Things were getting back to normal in small-town America. People had bought the new system; had forgotten some of the old hates, had forgiven the S'hudonni for all the chaos that had followed those first landings. Now there were air conditioners once again in the windows of the schools in towns like Troy.

He shook his head slightly at seeing it. He knew what he'd find inside that building. It would be just as bad as the street signs. Worse. Much worse. The acceptance. The children.

In there they were being taught the new way, the S'hudonni way, with those S'hudonni teaching machines for the language and for the science and the math -- and with nothing being taught by real teachers about how things had been, nothing being taught of everything that America had been, of everything that America had lost.

And the S'hudonni themselves; white, pasty-skinned, those porpoise-shaped bodies, those permanent damn smiles. There would be one of them in there, too, running things. That was always how it worked. American kids, American teachers, but all of it run by some S'hudonni administrator.

They would live in the school building, the S'hudonni, that's how they always did it, in a few rooms converted for their use -- damp, misty, clammy places, so that their precious skins wouldn't dry and crack.

They would have their own food in there, would lead their own strange lives -- a little bit of S'hudon right here in Troy, Illinois, right here, where they could teach the children ... always the children.

He slowly circled the building, looking it over closely. The S'hudonni would be in some rooms on the third floor, up on top of everyone else. The second floor would have just a few classrooms, the first floor maybe a small gym. The building would come down easy if he found the right spot in the basement.

He stopped behind a maintenance building, slipped off the pack, reached in to arm the two devices, a little pressure along the upraised ridge, a pattern of four pushes, a pause, then three more. They both started vibrating.

He reached the front gate, found it open, and walked through it toward the building itself. Almost too easy. Security was lax when the S'hudonni ran things; everyone counted on them for protection.

Ten wide steps led up to the main doors. He climbed them, limping a bit, favoring his left leg.

He walked down the central hallway on the first floor. The building was wide open. He tried to look purposeful and parental, but no one stopped him, no one bothered.

He heard a teacher speaking. She was telling the children to put on the caps for a science lesson. "Relax," he heard her say. He looked in briefly as he walked by. Little blond-haired innocents, all in a row, putting on their wired metal caps for a lesson.

The teacher saw him. She was very pretty; blonde, too, like the kids. She smiled at him, and was about to speak when he smiled back, put up his hand to let her know he was just looking in for a second, and then walked on.

She didn't come after him; probably assumed he was a parent who'd just stopped by on the way to the office. He was lucky she'd been stupid; she could have been suspicious and ruined everything.

He found the stairs to the basement at the far end of the hallway and descended them, grimacing with the pain in his leg at every step.

His luck held. The building was heated by an old, coal-fired, gravity-fed furnace that had been converted to natural gas. The huge ducts still arced away to the floors above, providing the airflow, carrying the heat.

He took the first device out and looked it over in the dim light that came from a high-set basement window. A push here, a pull, four taps, a slide to the right, and the time was set for twenty minutes. He planted the thing in the side water evaporator for the unlit furnace. Twenty minutes.

He looked around. It was perfect, just one would do. He could save the other. He slipped it back into the pack, tugged it on, headed upstairs.

The same teacher was quiet as he walked by the same classroom on his way out. Probably had her own cap on, he thought. Learning her lessons. He smiled at the thought.

He walked right out, still unchallenged. He looked back once, from the main gate, glancing at his watch. Only five minutes had passed. Good, he wouldn't get caught by this blast. No nasty surprises.

He walked down the street for a couple of blocks, taking his time. He wanted to be near enough to make sure all went as it should, but not so near as to be suspicious. There was a certain delicacy to this kind of work that went unappreciated by most. He looked at his watch again as he walked. Five more minutes had passed. Another ten to go.

He came to a small park, fronting a pond. He walked in and then moved over to the idle merry-go-round to find a seat. Pushing with his good right leg, he sent the merry-go-round spinning, enjoying the sensation. There were five other people in the park. A mother and her two small children played in the sandbox. An elderly couple sat on a bench at the edge of the pond, feeding ducks. No one looked his way. He looked again at his watch.

Seven minutes left, maybe less. He was never really certain, not to the exact second. S'hudonni time didn't always seem to work out the same as American time.

The children in the sandbox were building a castle while Mom watched. It wasn't too bad an effort, he thought, especially for children so young. Lucky for them they weren't a few years older.

Their mother looked up from their handiwork and saw him. She smiled.

"Hot day, isn't it?" she said, brushing back her hair. "I didn't want to bring them out in this heat, but they were just screaming at me to get outside for a bit. They love to play at building things, both of them."

He said nothing. The little girl looked a year or two older than the boy. Five and three, he guessed.

The boy's part of the castle collapsed suddenly, taking part of the girl's section with it.

"Tommy!" the girl said. _"Now_ look what you've done!" She started back to work on the reconstruction.

Still speaking English, he noticed. Still innocent, at ages five and three. Still American.

It was difficult, it was painful, but he was doing the right thing. This showed it. It was hard, so hard, to see them die, to ask them to pay such a price, to suffer so for what others had done.

So hard. But there was a certain clarity that such violence brought, a certain clarity of vision, a certainty that what he was doing was right, very right. And the first such act, once committed, led inevitably to the second, and then -- more easily -- to the third...

Suffer the children.

He stood up from the merry-go-round and walked away from the sand castle, over toward the older couple. He wanted to be near them when it went off; they would better understand.

And he wanted people to understand. That was the whole reason for everything he did. So that people would understand.

He stood off to the side of the bench and watched the ducks stab at the thrown pieces of bread. Dumb creatures, those ducks, paddling around waiting for handouts. They'd be better off trying to make it on their won, better off without the largess of the older couple. What if the ducks got too used to the gifts and then the old couple didn't show? What if the bread fooled the ducks into trying to stick around through the winter, and then the pond froze over and the old couple stayed inside? That would be that, then, wouldn't it?

He heard a distant _whoomph!_ and turned to face that way, to feel the explosion against his face. The dull rumble swelled into a roar, washing over him, and he felt again the sadness of it all, the necessity of it all.

The old couple rose from their bench, looking scared but saying nothing. The ducks scattered, a few of them taking to the air and flying hard.

He looked toward the sandbox, and saw the children shouting in fear as their mother gathered them to her, hugging them, crushing their castle to do it, kneeling on the towers and walls to reach them and hold them and keep them safe.

He nearly cried to see them, the children safe with their mother. He wanted to go over and tell them that it would be all right, that everything would be fine, that he was doing it all for them.

Instead, he looked away from them, over toward the school, where a column of dark smoke was rising. He could hear the flames crackling, even from here. Time to go. Time to head for Hannibal next, or maybe Quincy.

He slipped off the pack, ready to disarm the second device and start walking, when he felt a deep background rumble. He knew what that was. He looked up.

A solitary, shimmering form walked toward him in the waves of heat rising from the road. Old home week. So they'd found him. All right, then. He fingered the device: a push here, a pull, one good tap, a slide to the right. Five minutes.

"Peter," he said a minute later, when his brother got close. "Didn't know you were back."

His brother shook his head. "This has to stop, Tommy. You know it does."

Tommy smiled. "This?" He waved back toward the rising smoke. "Your friends don't like it?"

Another head shake, slower, eyes sad. "The people in there were shielded, Tommy. No one was hurt."

"How'd you know I was here, Peter?"

"Jesus, Tommy, you have to ask that? They know everything about you. You've been tagged since, hell, day one, back at that beach in Florida. Everything."

Tommy laughed. It was true, of course. He should have seen it long ago. "It's because of you, Pete, right? They let me blow things up because I'm your brother and they want to keep you happy, that about it?"

"You know how they are, Tommy. You served a purpose for them, one way or another."

"And now?"

"And now that's done. That's why I'm here, to tell you it's over. To tell you that you have to stop."

"Do I?"

Peter nodded. "You need to come with me, Tommy. Now. Away from here. Back home to the Florida District. Twoclicks says he needs you there. He says he needs us both."

"Jesus, Peter. You hear what you're saying? He needs us? Your S'hudonni master fucking _needs_ us?"

He watched Peter reach out with his hand. "Come on, Tom. Come with me. We'll bubble up to the ship and be back home in twenty minutes." Behind him, the air shimmered, the bubble taking form in the heat.

All right, then. This is what it had all come to, this is what he was meant for. This moment. Now.

He reached out to take his brother's hand, seeking closure. The small weight of the thing in his backpack was comforting. About two more minutes, he figured. That would do it. Two more minutes.

II

To Leuchars

When the stars threw down their spears
And water'd heaven with their tears
_ -- William Blake_

* * * *

All I wanted was a safe landing. Our frightening, turbulent descent dropped us through towering anvils of lightning-racked storm clouds that shook and shoved our huge landing shuttle with violent bursts of wind as we dropped below sixty-thousand feet and headed into our approach to Caledonia's sole landing strip.

The stomach-wrenching yaws and drops reminded me that we would be forced now to deal again with the vagaries of atmosphere after our months of calm confinement. Too tumbled about to read, I turned away from my book to watch out the window, almost longing for the boring days of interminable nothingness that had marked the past half-year of travel aboard the S'hudonni freighter.

Week followed blank week there in the Earth Environment Bulb. I'd intended to use the time to finish one collection of poetry and start another, but the hours weighed so heavily that I accomplished precious little work beyond writing in my journal.

Instead, I drifted into a kind of permanent daze that helped the time go by. My daily routine included leisurely meals and long rambling walks in the simulator, working my way through a variety of realities; from miles of seacoast dunes to winding mountain paths to damp forest floors.

The one thing to break the monotony was a S'hudonni merchant prince who stopped by to visit once he learned I was aboard.

In a previous life -- one I'd put away decades ago -- I'd known Twoclicks. I'd worked for him, in fact, and suffered for it even while I gained the stars.

He hadn't changed, still the fat, Falstaffian character he'd been forty years before -- all bonhomie and good will, but with a dark undercurrent that kept me cautious. He was, he said, interested in what I'd become since those days old long since. He had read much of my poetry. He said, that first time, that he hoped I would find the time to converse about my work with him.

Find the time? Those rambling conversations with the effusive Twoclicks helped me keep my sanity during that monotonous voyage. Eventually we returned to the odd friendship we'd had nearly half-a-century before, talking about everything from the intricacies of American baseball in its golden era -- How could he have known about Bobby Thompson? And why? -- to the current glories of greater Mercantile S'hudon.

His friendship, and the motives behind it, were impenetrable to me. Why did this wealthy member of the Earth's ruling class hold such interest in me again? The S'hudonni, god knows, were always looking for gain. What profit could I possibly bring? And I hadn't paid enough in the past?

They are such strange creatures, these S'hudonni. There was a time, in my youth, when I thought I knew them, understood them, even got along with them. I was, in my own way, famous for that understanding, wrong though I turned out to be.

Eventually I found they are truly unknowable, our mercantile masters; I learned that in the most difficult of ways, and so finally walked away from any knowledge, any relationships I'd built. Until my long passage on that freighter, I hadn't held a conversation with a S'hudonni in more than forty years.

And now this particular one sought me out. There have been times when I

would have gone screaming away from his presence and all that it reminded me of. But, decades pass, old horrors recede, and you get on with life, you accept things. That's part of growing old. Learning once again to get along with one of our colonial lords in all his intricacies was just another part of my slide into old age.

And Twoclicks was better than most, to tell the truth. It was, perhaps, no more than our situation, hurtling along in close quarters through the darkness in the tiny, fragile environment; but he seemed genuinely interested in my thoughts on matters from the political to the poetic. He thought the Scots' acceptance of limited independence at the turn of the last century had turned out to be a mistake, for instance. And, to my delight, he professed to love sestinas. Imagine a classic in that form, say "Saul's Death," coming forth from that lispy, wide mouth and you can appreciate my amazement.

Short and squat like all the S'hudonni; pasty-white and porpoise-shaped with those stubby arms and legs and fragile fingers, the wide mouth, the small eyes buried in that rubbery flesh -- he was no better looking than any of our masters. And he was full of their typically weird affectations, from his purposefully strange accent (the S'hudonni can speak any of our languages perfectly when they choose -- I've seen them do it) to his love of Earthie soft drinks.

But his good humor and the way he treated me as an equal, as a friend, won me over. I was sorry to see him go on our last afternoon together. I was leaving the freighter for Caledonia along with the rest of the travelers from Earth, while Twoclicks was traveling on to mighty S'hudon itself. We parted warmly.

I had kept to myself, otherwise, making no friends and acquiring no enemies. The people aboard knew nothing of me, nothing of who I'd been and what I'd become, and that was all to the good. My only break in the routine was the time I spent chatting with Twoclicks and the week I spent in sickbay, mid-voyage, fighting a persistent cough and cold. The S'hudonni medcot seemed puzzled at first by whatever had worked its way into my old, tired lungs, but eventually the cot puzzled it out and I recovered, slowly, patiently regaining my strength, knowing that I had time in abundance.

Now, by contrast, we hurtled toward solid ground so quickly I was stunned by our passage, could only watch out the window as the angry weather greeted us with amazing fury. We'd been warned about the storms back at the orbital outpost, where we'd left the freighter and met the landing shuttle. The warnings, of course, just made the actuality worse, with the expectation of danger heightening the nervousness. For most of its year, Caledonia's weather along its populated coastal plain was cool, wet and calm. Only during these few summer months did the occasional storm rage, and this one was, we were told, a classic.

There was another worry we were told of, too. Once we landed we'd have to contend with domestic troubles in Leuchars, the colony's only city. Exactly what "domestic troubles" meant hadn't been made clear, but it didn't sound like a promising start for the colony's new batch of arrivals. Welcome to Earth's first colony, please take cover immediately.

At least we were comforted through the stormy ride toward all these troubles below by the knowledge that our shuttle, like all S'hudonni technology, was nearly magical in its abilities. The wings of the craft grew or contracted, thinned and thickened, to meet the pilot's needs as she contended with the thick well of atmosphere. Even S'hudonni technology, for all its advanced perfection, had to deal with nature now and again and Caledonia seemed determined to prove that point as we fought our way down. There was, at least, a certain wry satisfaction in the way the struggle showed there were limits for even mighty S'hudon. I hadn't encountered such limits often in my life.

Our pilot flew the massive thing as though she were in a dogfight, dodging the worst of the storm cells and twice clicking into our comm system to apologize for her rough handling. She was one of us, oddly, an Earth

emigrant now handling shuttle duties for the colony. Most days that meant moving freight back and forth between the oddly enormous orbital outpost and the colony. Once every three months, it meant passengers. The very fact that she wasn't S'hudonni showed how different things were here on the fringes of the Empire.

Her second apology was worrisomely sincere, and followed a dazzling maneuver that stood us on our left wing as we swerved around a thick, black thunderhead that boiled with activity, gray-black cloud forming and swirling upward as I watched. My restraining device clamped my waist automatically as we banked, and I looked straight down the wing to the dark depths below with considerable awe and no small amount of fear, feeling the pressure of the belt against my hips as gravity tried to pop me loose from Seat 22A, Row Three, Lamb/Clifford, Earth/Caledonia, Return.

I am not a brave man, god knows I'd proven that in my past, so I was more than glad when the riotous ride finally eased a few minutes later as we dropped below the cloud deck. Then, as we flew beneath the storms, I watched as bright lightning streamers etched outward from explosive central flares. I'd never seen lightning quite like that, and it reminded me forcefully of the alienness of what I was doing and where I was. These were not the long, jagged bolts of Earth's electrical activity, these were Caledonia's expressions of power. Caledonia, Earth's first step toward the stars -- the great, humiliating, wonderful, terrifying, humbling, inspiring, tantalizing gift from our S'hudonni benefactors. Caledonia, our grand experiment, given to use by our mercantile friends who rule the stars for profit.

We banked to skirt a final storm cell and there, briefly, I could see in the distance the landing lights seeking us through the rain and the scattered moments of brilliance. We straightened out and dead-arrowed for their glimmer, our target in sight.

I was excited to see that runway. I'd traveled here, as far from my past as any human could get, and in that traveling I'd moved from the pain of that awful past through a sleepy academic interregnum and now into something new, something fresh. That felt very good, indeed.

We bounced three times, the first time quite hard, as if we sought the solid ground too strongly. And then we were rolling toward the distant terminal building, our shuttle's landing lights mixing with the strip's to splash and bounce off the puddled surface of the tarmac. Lightning flashed over us but now didn't seem so threatening.

We exited from the shuttle in a light drizzle. There were a good three hundred meters between our exit ramp and the open door of the pre-fab, one-story terminal building. I put my head down against the cool, light rain and began walking, stepping gingerly around the deeper puddles.

The water reflected brightly with each blast of lightning, and one closer flare caused me to look up. We were in the eye of the storm system. In three directions the thunderheads reached high, mountainous and menacing against a deep blue-black late evening sky. Toward the east, Arran, Caledonia's famous red-hued moon, was full in a broadening patch of clear sky, and from its light the storm clouds took their shape. The clouds sailed west. In an hour, I guessed, the rain might be done.

Another crack of energy brought me back to the task at hand. I hustled with the other two hundred toward the terminal building. I didn't mind getting wet, enjoyed it even, after the long months of weatherless, featureless boredom aboard the bulb of that S'hudonni freighter; but being struck by lightning was surely an encounter with nature more intimate than necessary. I smiled at that thought, and scrambled with the others toward the single large arrival building.

There, a tall, florid man wearing a rumpled gray suit stood behind a podium and apologized to us for "The unfortunate delay you're facing."

He never did introduce himself, a jittery functionary whose plans for the day had been sent spinning by the "troubles" in Leuchars. But, "Landing Day is our major national holiday," he explained. "It commemorates our first

landing here twenty-seven years ago. In the past it has been a time of festivities and celebrations and pride, pride in what we've done here."

He paused, nervous, "In recent years, however, particularly last year and now this year, certain," he paused again, wiped his brow with an embarrassingly pink handkerchief, "certain elements of our society have begun using Landing Day to express, a bit violently at times, their discontent."

He stopped and looked over the crowd as if we were somehow to blame for all this. "No one has been seriously hurt, yet. But we felt you ought to know about the troubles in the city before you take your shuttle buses into the colonial arrival center. Buses _will_ run. However, for those of you who want to spend the night here in the calm, if crowded," and he had the nerve to smile benignly at us, "conditions of the terminal building, cots will be provided. There are showers, toilet facilities, and food enough for the night."

He rambled on, but I hardly heard him. The important news was Trouble in Paradise.

Well, I hadn't planned on being a war correspondent again. I paid those dues, and quite dearly, forty years before. Now I thought of myself quite contentedly as a teacher in semi-retirement and a poet of some small reputation, not, by god, a gung-ho journalist out to save the world, especially _this_ world.

On the other hand, I told myself, when I accepted this two-year teaching appointment, I had figured that understanding and accepting the people and the places of the island continent of Caledonia would be an important part, the most revitalizing part, of my teaching and writing. And part of me, too, was still that journalist who'd seen the Conflict rage and flare and die nearly a half-century before.

I sighed, and began edging toward the door where the luggage was stacked, meaning to grab my two bags and find the first bus into the city. It would be a confusing first night, that seemed certain, but one does what one must, sometimes. God knows that was a lesson I'd learned over the many years.

A hand on my shoulder stopped me. "Mr. Lamb?" a tall, thin young man, wearing glasses, maybe twenty-five years old, stood there. "Mr. Lamb? Clifford Lamb?"

I nodded.

"My name is Paul Seals, sir. I'm with _The Observer._ I've been sent to do a story on your arrival. I'll be happy to take you into city centre in my runabout and maybe we can talk on the way."

Well, Seals was a god-send, free transportation and a font of knowledge all rolled into one lanky form. I quickly discovered as we found my bags and headed toward the small car park in front of the main building, that he was a nice enough fellow, earnest to a fault, thought clearly not happy at all about the position he was in.

I was sure that he would have preferred covering the uproar in the city over meeting a visiting retired politician and minor poet from Earth. I smiled at that humbling thought. In our small literary circle on the home world I had something of a name from my past and a bit of a reputation for my writing. Here, of course, I would be completely unknown.

"I'm sure you'd rather be covering the action in the city," I admitted conversationally as we loaded the bags into the boot of his car and then climbed into the front seats.

He laughed, nodded. "But at least you really showed up. Six months ago we received the message that you'd be coming, but we didn't know exactly when. If you hadn't been on this shuttle, the evening would have been a complete waste."

Though he meant the conversation to be an interview of me, Seals was the talkative sort. As he steered us through the shallow glens that angled in toward the city and its bay, I did most of the listening.

The current troubles headed his list of topics. "Riot, I guess, is too strong a word for them," Seals said, "but there is a lot of pushing and

shoving and yelling back and forth between the older colonists and the first-borns."

"First-borns?"

"They're the ones -- I'm one of them -- who were born on Caledonia. They want changes in the way things are done; secret ballot elections, no restrictions on _The Observer,_ fairer treatment of the Anpics, things like that."

The Anpics are the indigenous tribes. Like everyone else on Earth I'd read about them. "I thought the Anpics were left unchanged. Wasn't that part of the original agreement with the S'hudonni when the colony was started?"

"Well, yes, but it hasn't worked out quite that way. Most of the first-borns think the Anpic population has been decimated by the changes we've made here. There never were very many of them, you know, and as we've spread out those relative few have been forced to change tribal patterns that go back, well, thousands of years at least, I suppose."

"And the older colonists aren't worried about that?"

"Oh, they're worried, or claim to be. But all they ever want to do is study the problem. And then they seem to be figuring out ways for the Anpics to accommodate us rather than having us back away."

He'd been getting angry, just talking about it, but then he eased back in his seat and calmed. "At least that's how the first-borns look at it."

"I can see which side you're on."

"I'm a journalist," he said, running his hand through his full mop of red hair. He intended that to be his full answer, as if it proclaimed a convincing neutrality.

I said nothing in response.

"Look," he said, after a long minute of silence. "I have my sympathies, sure, but I cover it straight, like we all do at _The Observer._ There's only a dozen of us working at the paper, and we're evenly divided between first-borns and older colonists. We all get along just fine by staying outside of the arguments. We cover it straight up, that's all."

I nodded. I'd played it that way myself, a long time ago. It hadn't done me much good. I could only hope, for Seals' sake, that his efforts had happier results and less deadly consequences than mine. I almost said something, tried to use my past to warn him of his possible future. But I hadn't talked about those years in a very long time and I found I couldn't here, either.

It was a half-hour drive into the outskirts of Leuchars. By the time we got there my worries about the troubles had eased. The streets were quiet, and Seals clearly expected no serious trouble. His electric runabout even had a sign on each side that read _The Observer._ He laughingly called that "Protective. Maybe. Not everybody likes the paper, you know. The sign might just make us a target."

Then he added, rather wistfully, "There might be a little action, but it's doubtful. We're not used to violence here; we've never had any, really, and I think everyone is shying away from even the possibility."

It certainly looked that way. Leuchars was not a pretty city at first glance. Here on the outskirts the prefab and hastily-built stone and wood homes and shops looked as though they hadn't been there long and might not be there tomorrow; like coastal Florida had always looked to me before my life changed, before we tore the whole place down and let the S'hudonni rebuild it for us. Before I'd admitted my shame and then left it behind for a safer life in Scotland.

The wide streets appeared calm, though, nearly empty; and then things began to look more prosperous and permanent as we drove closer to the city centre. The people walking the streets didn't look especially furtive or dangerous. It was late, nearly midnight local time, and there was no curfew in effect.

Seals even convinced me to go with him to a favorite local pub to continue our conversation and get started on the real interviewing. He was

talking about the local ales, in fact, when we felt, as much as heard, a deep dull, thumping boom as he turned right to take a short cut.

"I wonder..." Seals said, and then fell silent as a long, low rumble followed the boom. He took two more quick turns, trying to get in the direction of the sounds. There was a stalled car ahead, angled across the road so that we had to edge up and onto the sidewalk to get past it. From the rear, in the streetlights, the car looked fine, but as we pulled slowly by I could see the front fender scorched where paint had bubbled. The windshield was cracked into thousands of tiny fragments, held together only by their polymer bond. The headlights were blown out.

"Paul," I said stupidly, as if he couldn't see this for himself, "this car's been bombed..."

...and then an explosion from the corner behind us lit up the night, flashing momentary light and stark shadows as it shattered storefront glass and rattled our little car violently.

I looked back. Dozens of people were rounding the corner and running toward us, bloody, panicked by the explosion. They were marching when the bomb went off along their route, and now they fled for their very lives, afraid there would be more terror at any moment.

The scene reminded me a lot of what I'd left behind all those years before in the States, before I'd left for Britain and my years of quiet hibernation. Back then, back home in the States, was when it had all fallen apart on me. I had watched, safe, as friends died, a nation died. That was when my memories were made. Everything I'd been since, the teaching, the plays, the poetry -- they all began there, a reaction to that terrible time.

Seals pulled the runabout thirty meters or so farther on and parked it. He killed the engine, opened his door, grabbed his camera from the back seat and tried explaining things to me all at once.

I got the idea. My news value was in rapid decline and he was getting his wish for some action.

I could see the excitement in his face, and decided to watch him work, getting out to follow him back up the road. I stayed behind him as he walked along, talking to people and rapidly taking pictures. The crowd had slowed in its flight as no more bombs exploded. They were young, first-borns no doubt, and their fear was turning quickly to anger. I heard them talking about how the bombs proved what kind of people they had to deal with.

I talked briefly with one of them, a chubby, anxious young man in a light blue jacket with the letters UL stenciled across the front. "That car there," he said, pointing to the scorched vehicle we'd driven carefully by, "was just driving along when someone threw a bomb. There was this big splash of flame, and then the driver managed to pull it over. She got out, I saw her running. And then your car came out of that street and turned to go by it, and we thought you'd get bombed, too, but then you didn't and we started walking that way and then that big bomb blew out that chemist's shop right back there and..."

The fellow was near panic, rambling, but the general information seemed clear. A peaceful march had gone terribly wrong here, and might get worse at any moment. Seals was inside a pub that sat across the street, The Canny Man, talking to people in there who'd seen the action. He'd waved at me to join him a few minutes before and then gone into the place. I headed that way to tell him what little I'd learned.

And I saw something, someone, a fleeting glimpse of a man, running down the side alley next to the pub, through it and into the street beyond.

"Hey," I yelled, and raised my hand to point at him. He'd been standing over a rubbish bin, dropping something into it. "Hey, stop!"

As if that would stop him. As if I, a tired old man, could stop anything.

* * * *

Once, a long time ago, I was given the chance to stop someone. I didn't, I couldn't, and too many suffered far too much because of me.

I'd been lucky in my life. No, Lucky -- capitalized. An athlete, then a journalist, I'd had my successes, won my awards, righting the wrongs as I'd seen them, doing my best to find the truth of things. I hadn't always been perfect; a trail of failed marriages and a pained relationship with my younger brother attested to that. But I'd done my best, achieved a certain satisfaction in doing it. I was settled, happy with my place in the general scheme.

Then came Landing Day, the cushiony soft bottom of the shallow Gulf of Mexico perfect for the S'hudonni's big freighters, and soon after, so much like home for the S'hudonni themselves, creatures of that warm, shallow waterworld we now hear so much of, mighty S'hudon itself.

There were turtles on the beach that day, laying eggs in newly dug nests. My brother and I were there, taping away as the mothers struggled up the beach, flailed away with her back flippers and then began dropping soft, wet gray eggs by ones and twos -- dozens of them, plopping into the sand and then stickily onto each other. I was mesmerized by this process, watching it closely, when a distant roar began and then dopplered higher and louder and louder still as it came toward me before suddenly going silent -- total mind-numbing volume to eerily quiet in an instant.

I looked out to sea and there sat a screamship, a great white whale of thing floating there calmly. And then came another, roaring into silence, and another and then more, freighters on spindly legs dropping into the shallow seas.

So when that first S'hudonni emerged I was there. Peter Holman was my name then, and I was the one who the first S'hudonni spoke to in that strangely sibilant English. My career was made. I had access thereafter, and played my role well, quickly making pasty-white porpoise-shaped friends in the highest of places.

A month later I was in New York, six months later I was on my way to stars. A few years later, when I returned from my second visit to S'hudon and the Seven, I had unspendable wealth and power beyond imagining.

And then, during the Reorganization, reality set in. Grain farms for S'hudon's alcohol, some necessary changes in the way we led our lives, some new rules and regulations, a new way of seeing ourselves.

Some rebelled, my brother among them. He had a stolen device of S'hudon's. He thought he could do something useful with it. That was Tommy, always trying to be useful, to make an impact.

He tried to detonate that thing as we boarded a ship to take us home to Florida. It didn't work, of course, but they knew he'd tried. I'd thought that my presence, the presence of Peter Holman, the Earthie they trusted, the Earthie they shared soft drinks with, the one who knew their private lives, their secrets, their little jokes, would protect him.

I was so terribly wrong. Oh, god. I heard that awful scream from above as we stood there, Tommy and I.

I heard that scream and looked up and there, above us, hovered one of those awful ships. I fell to my knees in terror. I cried. I begged of that thing to let us live. A light shone down on us; I felt consumed by it, thrown into the gravel of the road we stood on, waiting for the pain, for the end.

But for me, alone, my prayer was answered. Tommy died in the bright light of S'hudon's power, his arms outstretched to embrace the end. I think he was smiling.

I had scrapes on my arm -- imbedded grit from an Illinois road. That was all, that the knowledge of what I'd done. So I fled. I had money, god knew, and time. I thought, given those two, that I'd somehow emerge from my horror, find a new life, a new name. Change myself, renew myself, somehow earn back the debt I'd incurred. I felt dead. That me _was_ dead. I quit the show, quit the country, traveled, learned my new name and who it was I'd become. Clifford Lamb, an academic. A quiet man. A poet, by god -- one with a shattered arm, pieces of that burnt sand imbedded so deeply into me that forty years later it was still there, occasional grains of it emerging from time to

time to remind me of what I was and what I did and did not do.

Once, years ago, I thought that eventually all of the grime in my arm would works its way out, my arm and shoulder would be clean, renewed. It never quite happened.

* * * *

And now this, all of it back again for me as if my cowardice had happened recently, a month or two ago, not forty years. Hesitantly, fearfully, I cried out to that figure.

And he, it, stopped. I was halfway across the street when I saw him hesitate at the end of the short alley, no more than thirty meters from me. He turned to look back. He waved at me, as if to push me back, before turning and running quickly around the far corner and out of sight.

I had only started to turn back when the bomb he must have planted in the rubbish bin blew with a loud whoomph of concussion that sent me tumbling back and down onto the street at the curb. I saw the explosion in weird slow-motion time, saw the rubbish bin expand and disappear into an orange-red flame that grew toward me. Somehow I had the sense to drop down low and duck behind a stone bench before the shock wave could catch me fully, and even then, with some of its force broken by the bench, the shock flung me hard back against the stone wall behind me.

There was a dizzying moment, as I lay there, when I thought surely I must be dying. But life and death are not so simple as that. Instead, as my senses returned, I realized I wasn't badly hurt. So I stood, was dusting myself off as others, Paul Seals among the first, reached me to offer help.

"My god, Lamb. I thought for sure that you'd been killed. I can't believe it. Bombs. Here. And you. My god, what if..."

I waved his concern off. Truth was, I didn't feel that bad; felt exhilarated, really. Something about the past few minutes had gotten my tired old adrenal glands working again, waking me up.

"I'm all right, Paul, really. The concussion just knocked me down, that's all. I don't think any of the debris got to me at all. I got behind that bench there, and then was just awfully lucky, I suppose."

"Well," he said, smiling, "not all _that_ lucky." And he pointed toward my left leg, where a jagged piece of metal was jammed into the thigh. Blood soaked my pants, but there was no spurting, so this wouldn't likely kill me where I stood. Funny that I hadn't noticed it and felt no pain until Seals showed me the wound. Then, "damn," I said, and immediately felt faint. I sat down on the curb of the street. Sirens were wailing now in the distance. Help would be here soon.

"I think we should just leave it in there for now," Seals was saying, and then there was something else he said, something about violence and bombs and Leuchars and the first-borns. He was rambling on but I barely heard him for the roaring in my ears and the way the night-time view of the streets was curiously narrowing in my vision and then, slow fade, there was darkness.

You looked out to winter
and I seemed to look out, too.
I seemed, as I so often do,
to be doing the one thing
while actually lost in the other.
_ -- from _To Leuchars, _Clifford Lamb (Expat Press)_

* * * *

My stay in the infirmary was mercifully short. The surgeon who cleaned out the wound and stitched me up said I'd been lucky, the shrapnel missed the femoral artery by a centimeter or I might have bled to death before the emergency crews could get to me.

There was no S'hudonni medcot here, of course, they don't easily part with that level of technology. Instead, the surgeon's work was his own. But his stitching inside and out went well; he thought I'd spend no more than a week in bed recovering, given my age.

In two days, I felt healed. In three days the stitches were out and so was I, free to go amidst the smiles of the surgeon, proud of his work, and to my own amazement. Physically, I felt surprisingly good, given what I'd been through. The other bumps and bruises of that night had healed quickly, and the few days in the infirmary had gone by in a blur, with visits from Seals and his sister Pauline and her friend Janice, a recent emigre from Earth.

To my surprise, I was a celebrity in Leuchars. Not only was I the first writer of any reputation to visit the colony in more than a decade; I was, to them, a famous Earth poet. One of my thin collections, as it happens, was taught in the school system, along with the likes of MacCaig and Eliot and Yeats and Tennyson.

Everyone, it seemed, had great plans for me during my visit. Everyone wanted to help me get over my wounds and get on with my work here, my teaching and the writing of the expected new volume of poetry based on the delights of Caledonia.

Things had been calm since that explosive night. The explosions of Landing Day, the injured people and shattered buildings, had frightened both sides into a kind of shocked ceasefire. They weren't used to this kind of violence, and everyone seemed to think it was over, as a result. I hoped they were right.

But I had my doubts. In my too-long life I had seen any number of these moments of calm, some of them years long. None of them had lasted.

I had thought, in fact, that this last long stretch in my life was reality; calm, academic and serene, with a slow accumulation of reputation as a poet. I'd earned my peace, I thought. And now this.

As I left the infirmary with Paul Seals, I rubbed my left arm, thinking of what the surgeon said. "This has always been a quiet place," he murmured as he checked on me, marveled at my recovery. "I don't understand, it's always been nice and calm."

Calm. I smiled at that. I thought I'd earned a certain calm, but the pressures here were moving toward a violence. I had no idea why these pressures had come, any more than the people here, these good people, understood the horror of what they'd come to face. They thought it was over, a spasm of horror that was past them now. I hoped it was so, I truly did.

The Governor General of Leuchars, apologetic to a fault about what she said her city had done to me, paid a visit the morning before I left the infirmary. When she heard I was being released early, she invited me to dinner that evening at Government House. "It will be a quiet little gathering, Mr. Lamb, just five or six of us, nothing too taxing, I promise."

Feeling energetic, I agreed, though as soon as I left the infirmary with Seals and we drove to his house, where I was staying in a small guest room, I began to have second thoughts. Still, this strange energy wouldn't last forever, I guessed, and I might as well take advantage of it. By mid-afternoon I was out for a long walk that should, if my planning held up, end with my arriving at Government House in time for the Governor General's "little gathering."

The walk was wonderful. Sometimes what you touch tells you more than what you see. Walking the streets of Leuchars was like that for me. Feeling the pavement beneath my feet and reaching out to touch the grass of that alien place showed me more of it in a two-hour stroll than days of viewing out of a hospital window or looking at it through Seals' car window might have.

I rambled from residential areas through the business district and from there into a small series of parks that ringed the city. It was possible, using those parks, to walk completely around the city centre in woods and parkland the entire time, always within a half-kilometer or so radius from Government House, the political heart of Caledonia, built atop the hill that centered the park.

The park's foliage was a mixture of local plants and genetically tweaked Earth imports, courtesy of the S'hudonni. Broad-leafed low bushes adorned with cottony balls of bright red flowers that launched themselves at

me as I passed, vied with beds of forsythia and roses for my attention.

The afternoon darkened as I walked. At first I thought the thickening weather was a local fog rolling in from the docks where the New Tay River emptied into the mouth of Leuchars Bay. But the weather proved it was more than a mist by spitting gusty rain at me and forcing me from the park. I sought shelter in a small cafe on a side street near the city's central square.

The rain reminded me of home. The runoff rushing through the gutters and spilling out onto the street looked and sounded the same. The rain even tasted the same as it ran off my soaked cap and into my eyes and mouth while I sought out the cafe. There, drying out, I sat and sipped on hothouse grown coffee of which the owner of the cafe was justifiably proud.

"Best coffee in the entire city," he boasted as he poured me a refill. "It's all in the details, you see. The right beans, tended just so. Then the drier for them, then the right grind, the right filters, good water. You have to do these things right every time for a good cup. Every time."

He was right, it _was_ in the details, and the coffee was delicious, a perfect counterpoint to the blowing rain I could see rippling across the street outside. For that dizzying moment it looked just like home.

Twenty-seven years I spent in Edinburgh, twenty-seven good years recovering and reviving and learning how to live a quieter life. Sheltered in the Dean Village, a quiet little group of homes hidden away in a small gorge in the middle of urban Edinburgh, I lived and worked. I had friends there, good ones. They held the typical Scots' cold sympathy for what S'hudon had done to my own country, the enormous grain farms everywhere busy in the first stage of producing S'hudon's alcohol. The crowded, gleaming perfection of the four S'hudonni port cities with their rings of shantytowns. The shock and pain of economic collapse that led to S'hudon's Reconstruction of once-America.

The Scots and the rest of the British had benefited enormously from the S'hudonni arrival, forging their New Empire, working at the behest of the new lords of the country manor that Earth seemed to be to the S'hudonni, their private garden where we labored busily, incongruously raising grains for them. So my friends' sympathy was muted; they were sorry for the poor cousin across the sea, certainly, but not _too_ sorry. We'd earned it, in their minds, by trying to alter the inevitable back in those early days. Such hubris, to think ourselves capable of warring with the gods.

I had warred with the gods, and lost. But there was no way to revive the dead. There was no honor to be earned that can remove those stains. I had thought to change the world. Instead, instead.

But life and times go on, and eventually I drifted to Edinburgh and the calm, studied life that slowly emerged. I could never repay what I'd done, true enough; but I could teach, and care, and help my students one by one. I didn't know how to survive any other way.

* * * *

That was all long ago. There I sat in a perfect faux cafe in a perfect faux Scots city on a world hidden in distant technology from Earth. No astronomer peering into the heavens, no cosmologist philosophizing about distant and missing dark matter: none of them had the vaguest idea where Caledonia was located. The S'hudonni found the planet and for their own reasons prepared it in ways beyond our knowing, and brought us here, the planet ready for our occupation. And there I sat, sipping coffee, marveling that life could take me from that broken past to this strange present.

I shook my head, remembering. I sipped the coffee while the rain mnemonically slapped against the window. Finally, as I watched, it eased off and I finished my second cup, thanked and paid the man, and walked back onto the street.

Leuchars seemed older and larger than it had a right to be. There couldn't be more than thirty thousand people here, and yet it seemed as big a city as one ten times that size.

And its age was a fooler, as well. The stains of past rains that

discolored the sides of the buildings, the worn stone steps of the houses and shops, the general feel of age that permeated this place -- all of that gave Leuchars the feel of a city hundreds of years old, instead of one nearly new.

But as I walked along it slowly began to make sense to me. Twenty-five years was time enough for soft stone to wear from heavy use and for frequent rain to make a permanent memory of its effect upon the side of a building. There had been time enough, in those twenty-five years, for these people, like their buildings, to look as if they belonged here, to have their own sense of destiny, their own history.

The very name of the place held clues. The Leuchars in Scotland after which this place was named was a small, transitional town, a train station near an abandoned air base. From Leuchars you can take the bus or a taxi to St. Andrews, or change trains to make your way to Dundee or Perth. Otherwise, the place is of no consequence.

Just outside of that original Leuchars, a few miles away on the coast, half buried in the turf, lies the bottom row of stones from what was, more than two thousand years ago, a Roman fort. Visited by the Emperor, Septimius Severus himself at the height of his power, the fort marked the very edge of the Empire, looking out over St. Andrews Bay toward the distant Grampian mountains and the naked blue Picts who lived there.

I thought of that as I walked a sodden gravel path through a murky afternoon. The edge of empire. A place for transitions. Wasn't that why I had come here to the edge of this empire, for my own transition, some final change in a life that had seen too much, done too little, caused too much harm?

I'd thought to find a calm peace here for my final acts, a place where I could teach and write into my decline.

Instead, I'd stumbled into this explosive ferment. How could they do this to one another? How could feelings that deep, hate so strong that lives were threatened, have emerged here in such a tight-knit, isolated community? I was no sociologist, no psychologist. I was, instead, just a tired, old poet; and I didn't have the answer.

* * * *

The birds of Earth migrate by ultrasound, marking their paths by the resonations of a distant sea, harmonizing with it as they move toward food and safety.

Just such a resonance connected this city to the ships of S'hudon. I heard and felt nothing at first. But heads tilted and the people around me in the park clearly heard. They felt.

Then I, too, finally, felt a distant rumble, a low vibration, something calling. God, I knew that sound. It had been nearly half a century since I'd felt it in my bones like that, but I knew, I knew.

I followed the crowd. What had been a few dozen became hundreds and then a thousand or more as we gathered around a small hill in the center of the park. No one moved onto the hill itself, we all simply gathered and waited.

There were young and old there, looking up, scanning the sky, smiling, saying nothing for a change, just watching and waiting.

I didn't break into the moment to ask anyone, it seemed too spiritual for that. Instead, I, like them, looked up, shading my eyes against a thin sun that broke through the clouds. And then there came a great roar from the crowd, and I saw in the fading gray of the clouds a high white enormity, slowly descending. A screamship. The gathered crowd burst into cheers.

And I understood. For these people, everything they had was the result of such ships. For the humans here; their careers, their culture, their very lives depended on the arrival of ships such as this, the great protectors, the benefactors, the screamships of S'hudon.

The ship flew over our heads once, just above the thin, scattered clouds so that I could see its shadow through the clouds, pale and gray as it passed.

Then it came down beneath the cloud layer and began to settle, glinting

of that white perfection I'd seen years before. It somehow looked warm, even from a distance. And it looked powerful, too, as I'd known it would.

It hovered for a moment, pausing a few hundred feet above us, its wings extended for atmosphere. There was no high, angry scream, no great roar of engines balancing thrust against gravity; none of that famous intimidation. Just that deep rumbling and that huge shape as the ship settled just above the hill.

A few long minutes passed, and then a door irised open from a spot on the side of the hull. A figure emerged onto a walkway that slid forth -- a S'hudonni, porpoise shaped, whitely pale, standing on those stubby legs. They are not a pretty people, our lords and benefactors.

He looked over the crowd, raised one frail arm in a barely perceptible wave, and there was an audible sigh of appreciation from the crowd. On Earth, the S'hudonni wear personal shields, their thin glow a reminder of who's in control and who isn't. Here, on a world they created for their Earthie friends, there was no shimmering protection despite the recent violence. First-borns and colonials might try to kill each other, but neither group would ever threaten the S'hudonni, their lifeline.

Several dignitaries mounted the ramp of the screamship, shook hands with the agent. They, too, then waved to the crowd before the entire troupe came down through handshakes and smiles to a pair of limousines -- I wondered what it had cost to ship _those_ from Earth -- which they disappeared into as the ship, safely impenetrable in its perfection, sat behind to wait.

I looked around. An older colonist smiled at me, said "Usually just once a year they come, and now this is the third time in the past six months. Something, isn't it, the power of those things? And what they've done for us. lt's just something."

I shook my head and began walking away, thinking of what mighty S'hudon has done to us all in its search for harmony and profit. Out here, on the fringe of the empire, their power impressed all the more. As I walked along, the rain returned; a brief, cold shower that spit at me as I struggled in the sudden wind to snap my jacket shut.

* * * *

I heard a car behind me, turned to see one of the limousines. It stopped, a door opened. There was a giggle. It was Twoclicks.

"Mr. Lamb, that wass good, wassn't it? Just like your film about Earth standing still. 'Klaatu barada nikto,' yess?"

"Twoclicks! I'm amazed, and pleased, to see you. I had no idea that it was you getting out of that screamship. Weren't you continuing on to S'hudon?"

"Planss changed," he said in that sibilant whisper of theirs. "Here, watch." And he pointed toward his ship. "Gort," he said, "Marana kooa."

The ship's ramp withdrew inside, and a vertical hatch closed smoothly after it. "I made that up," he said, barely containing his merriment. "Iss good, yess?"

"Yes, Twoclicks, it's very funny. I don't suspect most of the people here have seen that old movie, though."

"Really? You ssaid on the ship that it wass a classic. You lied?"

"No, it's a classic, surely, of a kind. It's just rather obscure, I'm afraid."

"Ah," he said. "Obscure. Well, no matter, much of life is obscure, yess? Pleasss come ssit down in comfort, Mr. Lamb. We have much to talk about once again, the two of uss."

"I was walking to a dinner at Government House. I suppose that's canceled now, with your surprise arrival."

"Oh, no, Mr. Lamb, iss very important that you be there. Iss important matterss to discuss."

"Important matters?"

"Yess, but that iss for later. Now, jusst relax. Let uss talk, Mr. Lamb, as we did on the ship. Tell me again of your favorite poetss. Let's say, American, nineteenth century. Whitman, no doubt, yess?"

"Well, yes, him certainly. But Dickinson, too, and perhaps Crane. Have you read Crane's poetry, Twoclicks? Very, very interesting work. Listen," and I recited a favorite from Crane, "A man feared that he might find an assassin;/Another that he might find a victim./ One was more wise than the other."

"Ah, yess, iss very, very good," said Twoclicks. "Iss from _Black Riders,_ yess?"

"Yes," I said, and shook my head. His knowledge was amazing.

And so we contented ourselves with conversation as the limousine drove toward Government House. It was like old times, discussing poets and politics for those thirty minutes or more as the car slowly worked its way through the crowds that surrounded us. Then we arrived, were escorted from the limousine into a large dining room, and the calm times began to end.

In what distant deeps or skies,
Burnt the fire of thine eyes?
On what wings dare he aspire,
What the hand, dare seize the fire?
_ -- William Blake, _The Tyger

* * * *

The governor general was chatting with her assistant, the slick too-smiley character I'd met at the hospital when the two of them paid me the visit that led to this invitation. Bailey, the assistant, was speaking heatedly as we approached, his face contorted in anger -- something had him terribly upset.

But that all changed, night into day, as he saw our approach. His face immediately brightened into a wide smile and he jovially stretched out his hand to meet mine. "Mr. Lamb, we're so glad you could make it. And Consul General Twoclicks," he added with a slight bow, "we are honored, as always, by your presence."

Twoclicks ignored him, and spoke instead to the Governor General. "Madam, these troubless are sso unfortunate."

"We are doing what we can, Twoclicks," she said with a tired smile. "I, for one, think it's a matter of communication, or lack of it. The two sides just won't talk to each other."

"Except through _The Observer,"_ said Bailey. "And since we have no control whatsoever over what's printed in that paper there's no telling how heated things may get. It's really a very threatening situation."

"But at least in _The Observer_ the two sides are talking about the issues," said the Governor General, turning to look at her chief aide.

"More like they're shouting," said Bailey, then, seeing his boss' expression as she eyed him, "but, yes, they are," he hesitated, "as you say, communicating."

Twoclicks raised his hand and the two fell silent. "Freedom of press wass _your_ idea, you humans, when we first began this colonization. We found it a curious concept even then, to allow such criticism. Hass it failed? Do you wish it to end?"

The question struck me as an explosive one. Standing there as an uncomfortable observer, watching the obvious conflict between the Governor General and her Lieutenant Governor and mixing it in with my personal liking for Paul Seals and his hard-working _Observer_ colleagues, I could sense that great things suddenly hung in the balance here. Twoclicks had posed a question that came to the heart of Caledonia's existence. If the colony's leadership admitted that its free-press ideals weren't working, it would also be making a tacit request for S'hudonni help in stopping the current troubles before they got worse. So much for independence.

But if the leadership held ground and turned down Twoclick's implied offer for help, then the current situation might tumble into serious, deadly violence. If that happened, surely the S'hudonni would have to step in anyway? It seemed so to me. I was happy I wasn't the one being asked the question.

The Governor General shook her head. "No, Twoclicks. We will solve this according to our constitution, and with our freedoms intact."

Bailey's face was a mask as the Governor General said that; a slight, tight smile his only expression. He clearly had other ideas.

"As you wissh, Madam," said Twoclicks, smiling that wide smile the S'hudonni can flash when they choose. "I wass only wondering."

The evening went on like that for two hours or more, polite conversation with a deadly undercurrent to it. Bailey, the Lieutenant Governor, was the one who seemed the most dangerous to me. He was, on the surface, a smiling and pleasant man, one concerned about Leuchars and the Troubles and anxious to find a way to, as he kept saying, "Just solve the problem."

But under that veneer was a calculated viciousness. Bailey had ambition, and power. It was a dangerous combination.

I said as much to Twoclicks as he drove me home to Seals' house later, in that expansive, ridiculous limousine.

"Yes, iss true, I think, Mr. Lamb. Bailey is the ssort who wishes for action. The Governor General, as you can ssee, is the ssort who wishes for things _not_ to happen. Iss funny, really, yess?" And he chuckled.

"Funny, Twoclicks? I'm afraid I don't see the humor in it."

"Oh, Lamb, _iss_ funny."

"If you say so."

He held up his small hands as if to slow me down. "I have a nice surprise. You would like to hear it?"

"All right."

"Good. I undersstand you were involved in these troubless. There wass an explosion?"

"Yes. I wasn't badly hurt."

"It could have been sso much worse for you."

"Yes, I suppose so, it could have been. But I was lucky, I got out of the way of the worst of it, ducked behind a bench."

He smiled at me. "You moved well for a man of your age, Lamb. Did it all sseem to be in sslow motion as it happened? Did you sseem to have time enough to do what you needed to do?"

"Yes, yes it did." What was he getting at?

"And you sseem very healthy now, very fit."

"Yes. I feel good, actually. I think the excitement, the changes, the travel: they've been good for me."

"Yess. Good for you."

We wheeled smoothly around a corner and headed toward Seals' house. The driver, without being told, clearly knew where we were going and how to get there.

Twoclicks turned to face me directly. "These difficultiess on Caledonia jusst now," he hesitated. "We are watching them. From among uss, different factionss are watching."

Oh, god, now he wanted to tell me of S'hudonni politics? Internal squabblings? Power struggles? No thank you.

"Twoclicks, I don't need to know about this."

"But you will lissten?"

I nodded. Just listening might be dangerous, of course, but no more so than _not_ listening.

Twoclicks paused, thinking something through, it seemed. Then, "Lamb, I will go the heart of it. I have need of your help."

I laughed. _"My_ help? You must be joking. What could I possibly do to help you? I am a tired, old poet, Twoclicks. Remember how we talked about that, back on the ship?"

He'd actually been able to recite a poem of mine, a little thing about old empires. That and Shelley's _Ozymandias_ were, he claimed, his favorite poems from Earth. I'd been flattered, and not believed him for a second.

"You are not so tired now, I think."

"Yes," I admitted again, "not so tired just now. I'll probably collapse in a few hours and sleep for a week. Look, Twoclicks, I don't know what you have in mind, but I don't really see how I could possibly be capable of helping you in any significant way."

Then I realized what he must mean. "Oh, you'd like something written, right? A speech perhaps, or an essay for the local paper? Yes, certainly, I can help you with that."

"No, nothing like that, Lamb. We have alwayss enjoyed what you write, but no, nothing like that, at all."

"What, then?"

"During your trip, during your illness on the freighter." He paused, waited. I could feel a certain dark enjoyment he was getting from this conversation.

"Yes?"

"Certain enhancements were made for you. Changes. Devices as part of your treatment."

"You did something to me? Oh, Christ, Twoclicks, what..."

"For you, Lamb. These things, these devices, will help you, physsically. They," he paused again, found the word, "repair what damage they find. They enhance where they can, within their limitss and yours."

"Enhance?"

He reached over with that short, frail arm and touched me with his fragile fingers. "I will sshow you, on this sspot on your arm. Ssee?"

He pushed up my sleeve, uncovering part of my left arm that showed the dirt from decades ago. He concentrated for a moment, smiled at me, said "Insstructions. I have contacted my ship, and it informs your devices, and thiss," he pointed to my arm, "iss the result."

I looked at my arm, and a patch the size of my thumb seemed to be clearing, _was_ clearing, and then, in a few more seconds, was a pale white, my skin without its ground-in blemish.

"They do nothing but help you, Mr. Lamb. Your life will improve as long as they function."

He paused, seemed to be listening to something for a few seconds. "They have already cleaned certain placques away, near your heart. There were polyps in the lower intestine, they are gone. Your muscle tone, it iss better. You are fasster, quicker. You are younger, Lamb, and can sstay that way."

"Oh, Christ," was all I could say. What had they done to me? Why?

He smiled broadly. "You are sshocked. We understand thiss. But you have lost nothing and gained all. And thiss is temporary. Another week or two and the devices corrupt. They collapse, are flushed away. You will again be as you were; aging, an old poet."

"Well, thank god for that."

He laughed, a sharp bark of delight. "Yess, thank god for old poetss. You are a delight, Lamb."

Then he grew more serious. "Lamb. Understand this, we can enhance again, more permanently, more broadly. Your mental skillss. Your very bones and cartilage. Everything, anything. Your left arm, it could function once again."

"Perfect health?" I laughed. It was all some scam, of course, some elaborate joke from Twoclicks. The S'hudonni wield enormous power, no question, but they always have a reason, there is always a profit. Nothing is for free. "And what else, Twoclicks? Immortality?"

"Perhapss, in a way. A long, healthy life, at leasst."

"And what am I to do in return?"

"Soon," he said, "a crucial moment. A particular act."

"I didn't ask for this, Twoclicks. I don't want it. Take them away from me. Leave me be as I am, as I was. Please."

"It iss a very large empire, Lamb, with many who serve."

"It's not _my_ empire, Twoclicks."

"Yes, it iss. You are here. Earth iss here. You are part of uss now."

We pulled up in front of Paul Seals' house.

"I will probably just disappoint you, Twoclicks, when this big moment comes. You know my past."

"Your past. Yess, we remember." He motioned to the driver, who got out, walked around to my door, opened it for me.

I stepped out, looked back in to say, "I make no promises, Twoclicks. I'll be happy when your devices are done with me."

He just smiled, and the driver closed the door.

My Water of Leith runs through a double city;
A matter of regret.
_ -- Norman MacCaig, "Double Life"_

* * * *

Two weeks later I'd begun to think of it all as a false alarm. I felt better, yes, but I was no Superman. My knees still ached some in the mornings, my lower back twinged after my long, daily walks. Whatever it was that Twoclicks had given me, whatever those "devices" were, they hadn't affected me all that much.

Leuchars, too, suffered pain. The tension between the older colonials and the first-borns seemed to be rising each day, though there had been no more violence.

In my long walks, I could see it, feel it, the way the emotions were bottled up but threatening to burst. The way the two groups looked at each other on the street, the way they interacted in the shops; from my outsider's perspective, the dam was surely going to burst.

Paul Seals and the other _Observer_ staffers were increasingly blamed for much of the tension, especially by Bailey, the Lieutenant Governor. He even arranged for the Governor General's office to issue its own daily news-sheet, "In the interests of fairness," as he explained in the first issue's main story.

The new paper, along with _The Observer's_ columns and heated letters to the editor, served as daily reminders to all of us that while the violence had receded, its source remained.

Driving back from a quick visit to _The Observer, _where I had agreed to meet with the editor-in-chief and discuss the issues, I tried to talk it over with Paul Seals, but he was unusually quiet. He'd received a death threat by e-mail, and while it wasn't the first, the cumulative effect was starting to take its toll on him.

Droplets of rain slid down my side window as Seals drove the last mile or so to his house. I'd come to really like the young journalist, as well as his sister and her friend, during the days I'd spent with them. Despite our differences in age, we got along well. They felt they could trust me to be fair, and so had begun asking my opinion on their current troubles. Were they right in assuming my fairness? I thought so. I hoped so. I hadn't told them of my conversation with Twoclicks.

I watched the rain drops angle down my window, merging occasionally with one another. The wind, the rain and the motion of the car all conspired to move the drops along, pushing them off the glass, toward some sad little oblivion.

I didn't care for that image, frankly; it fell much too close to home. I sighed, shook my head to clear it of the bad omen I'd just invented for myself by watching silly drops of water on a glass, and looked past the remnants of the drop's trail to the neighborhood beyond as Seals pulled his car into short gravel driveway.

His house was a small, one-story stone structure. A simple cottage, really, but it boasted a large front yard, covered spottily in that moss-like greenery they called grass here. There was one wonderfully large oak-like tree with huge, bright yellow leaves and a multitude of branches rising just at the edge of the yard. Its shade reached all the way to the house.

I planned on writing through the evening. The lull had given me time to

consider my own poetry again, and the writing felt productive, focusing on the sights and sounds of this place first, since I understood its emotional values so little.

I brought out my portable screen and started scribbling. The screen had become almost a friend of mine in the year since I'd bought it. As it converted my handwriting into print on the screen I was able to see, at once, both my hand-written version of the poem and, at the same time, a good approximation of how it would look in print at the same time. The dual imagery, at first an annoyance to me, had become a necessary part of my writing, allowing me to sense the poem, to feel it, in more depth somehow, as if I still held it tightly and yet had sent it out into print at the same time.

Then, as I wrestled with a bad rhyme, trying for some useful enjambment that might save the thought, I heard the television broadcast from the adjoining room. It was the local station offering a special on what were now officially labeled the Troubles.

I set the poem aside -- probably a wise thing to do in any event -- and walked into the room. Seals, his sister and her friend were there, watching, and I joined them.

It was disconcerting, seeing that televised version of what Paul and I had been through more than two weeks before. The images battled with my own recollections to secure some anchor in the truth. Had there been that many people on the streets? Had the burned car given off such dark, oily smoke? Had the explosion which threw me down on the street done so much damage to the buildings but so little to me?

Like the poetry I'd just been writing, it was two realities at once. I would have said no to all of those images, but there were the tapes in front of my eyes to prove me wrong. I was angry, watching the show, to think that technology was restructuring my remembered reality of events.

At one point the news commentator, an older man with white hair, referred to suspicions by the authorities that the bombings were the work of the "First-borns and the chief instigator for their claims, local journalist Paul Seals."

"Oh, god," Paul moaned, "now that's the sort of reality you get when your government runs the television station. How in god's name did they come up with that? 'Chief instigator'? Good lord."

Pauline laughed nervously. "You always said you wanted to be a famous writer, Paul."

"Well, I _did_ have a different sort of fame in mind, of course," he said with a smile.

Pauline brushed back her red hair. "Jokes aside, Paul, this could be dangerous. They're obviously setting you up for something."

"Yes," I added. "Be careful, this had made you a target. It's made all of you targets, in fact."

"Oh, I don't think there will be any more violence, Mr. Lamb," said Janice, Pauline's friend.

She was tall, only a few centimeters shorter than me, and athletic in build. Her brown hair was cut short. Her face was very pretty, high cheekbones, almost Asian eyes, and a delightful smile that reminded me of someone I'd once been in love with. Thirty years ago I fell in love with a woman like her.

She was a curious creature in several ways. The same general age as Pauline, she hadn't been born on Caledonia at all, but had come from Earth some five years before. I didn't know why, yet, but assumed it was the sense of adventuresome travel that often appeals to the young, multiplied here by time and distance.

But Caledonia was no backpacking trip through Europe. Getting here was difficult and expensive, indeed, for someone not sponsored by the S'hudonni or some Earth government or corporation, and she seemed independent of those sorts of constraints, never mentioning any such aid. She had family money, I

supposed, finally, and a great deal of it, though if that was the answer she hid her wealth well..

"It's really hard to understand this violence," she was saying. "I'm sure it's not first-borns starting it, and it's hard to imagine the older colonials doing it either. From my perspective, it just doesn't make any sense, all of this chaos over some disagreements on how to treat the Anpics."

"Well, that's how it began," said Paul. "But it's getting a lot bigger than that now, Janice. I mean, we're into issues of free speech here, and a free press. We've had a representative democracy from the start, and now I think maybe we're heading toward a dictatorship. Those sort of things? They matter."

"Sad thing is, everyone's too damn confrontational right now for any common ground to be found."

"There _is_ no common ground between freedom and a dictatorship, and that's what Bailey, in particular, wants. He figures he can be his own little king here, run his world while the S'hudonni sit and watch."

"You think that's all S'hudon will do? Just watch?"

"Why not? Things will run along here smoothly enough if Bailey gets control. Hell, probably a lot smoother, to tell the truth. From the S'hudonni perspective, it probably makes great sense."

"Or as much sense as anything they do," added Janice with a wry smile. "I mean, we still don't know why Caledonia exists as a colony; they've never explained that adequately, right?"

I nodded, and smiled. God knows S'hudonni logic didn't always make sense. "Right. We know what they get from Earth, which serves as a kind of private garden and an alcohol producer. We don't know where those products go, though, or why. And we have no idea at all what Caledonia is all about."

"We know what we've learned in school, that Caledonia expands the empire, and it's a way station for shipping anyway, so it made sense to colonize, and since it's like Earth, we got to do the colonizing."

I shrugged. "All of that may well be true."

"Or not," said Paul. "But the S'hudonni aren't our immediate problem. Bailey and his friends are. And my point is that the S'hudonni aren't going to help us stop them."

"So you think there's nothing we can do and it's all going to explode again?" Pauline asked.

He shook his head. "I don't know. I'm not optimistic."

"Maybe you could help, Clifford," said Janice, looking at me. "The older colonials seem to like you, your respected by the first-borns, and it's obvious the S'hudonni think highly of you."

I laughed. "Everyone seems to think a lot more highly of me than I deserve," I said. "No. I'm not your answer. I'm a teacher, and a middlin' good writer trying to write a few more decent poems before I die."

Janice looked at me almost crossly. "Why say something like that, Clifford? You're young enough, as writers go. There's no reason you won't be writing for years and years. My god, you're in terrific shape, you're obviously fit. If I didn't know better I'd say you were forty-five, not sixty-five."

Her flattery was enjoyable, and frightening. Did I really look younger? Could I be honest with myself about how I felt, physically? I could trust none of it, knowing it all might be the work of the engineers of S'hudon. Was I a falsehood? For the second time in my life I could not trust myself. For the second time, I had no idea of my own reality.

Still, "Easy to say when you're young, Janice. No, I'll do this, and finish a final volume of new poems, spend my time here teaching in Leuchars and then find some small island back on the home planet somewhere where I can while away my declining years in peace."

"I think maybe you're serious," she said.

"I am, truly. I've earned the rest." Then I laughed. "Look, maybe I'm just tired and worn down right now, Janice. I came here expecting a quiet

couple of years of teaching and writing. Instead, I come roaring down through a terrible storm, find myself wounded in a riot and spend days in the infirmary, then find I'm being wooed as a diplomat of some sort. This isn't at all what I thought Caledonia would offer me."

She laughed. "I can promise you that things on Caledonia aren't normally so exciting."

Pauline agreed. "It's usually so quiet it will drive you crazy. If quiet contemplation is what you need, you'll find plenty of time for that here, I'm sure."

She leaned forward on the couch. "I'm sure the Troubles are over. They _have_ to be over, and we can go back to _talking_ about what to do rather than blowing each other up."

I liked Pauline. She was honest and open. She and her brother were clearly quite close, yet she wasn't afraid to differ with him. I hoped she was right, I hoped their troubles were over.

Eventually we talked ourselves out, getting nowhere, really. The day had been a long one, and tomorrow promised more of the same, so we finally all headed for bed.

I tossed and turned for awhile, restless, but then finally fell into sleep. Then, in the pre-dawn darkness, I awoke in a fever, my shirt soaked in sweat, my hair damp, pulse racing. There was a dream. Explosions, pain, screaming -- that awful time from my past, that time when I watched my brother die for what he believed in Someone stared at me in the dream, a wide, patient smile. Twoclicks.

I couldn't recall more details, had spent far too many years learning to forget the minutiae of the horrible. A minute passed and I calmed. As my heart slowed, a breeze from the open window in the next room worked to cool the sweat. In a few minutes I went from feverishly hot to chilled. I rose from my bed and walked into the living room to shut the window.

It was just before dawn. Arran had long since set, and I saw, through the glass, a neighborhood cloaked in shades of gray. A ground mist covered everything from waist height down, giving the stone homes and strange, wonderful, oakish trees a curiously ungrounded look, as if they were adrift on some gray sea.

It appealed to me, that sense of being adrift. Above the ground mist the gray thinned, roofs and higher branches stood out in sharp, stark relief; all hard, dark ominous edges. Above them, the sky held the color of granite tinged with a faint, thin, precursing red.

I stared at the scene for a few minutes, taking it in, thinking that the ground fog might clear, for myself as well as for the day. I turned back to the couch, ready to try for more sleep.

I have always slept better in the mornings. The nights too often are troubled, images drift through unbidden and then slowly filter away. It has been that way for me for forty years now -- half-acknowledged things poke and prod their way through my unconscious, turning themselves into parts of my dreams, leaving wispy remnants behind when I struggle up to consciousness.

I loved my dreams as a small child, dreaming of flying through blue skies like Peter Pan, soaring into Neverlands of warm islands in azure seas. Later, after my times of trouble, the dreams darkened, my very pillow seemed to harden to rock beneath my head, the night recalling my heavy burden.

In the morning, things were better, the surrounding huge dark sack full of unwanted dreams had emptied and I could sleep, my thoughts again my own.

Here, I sat on the living room couch. These were things I hadn't thought much about in years. Edinburgh, and work in a calm, confident society, had painted a veneer of order over all that had gone before. In Edinburgh I had managed to put my past away, had convinced myself this was a better me, the truer me. A poet, not a journalist; an artist and teacher, not a hack journalist milking the misery of others for personal profit.

But now things were changing, moving like that ground mist out there, streaming in and around me again. I would have to try and keep my tired, old

head above it all.

A voice from behind me asked, in a surprised tone, "You're up this early?"

It was Janice, dressed in running shorts and shoes and an oversized sweatshirt with the letters UL across the front. Her dark, brown hair was pulled plainly back behind her head into a pony tail. She wore no makeup on those high cheekbones. She looked altogether American there for a moment -- a vision from a past that was long gone.

"Bad dream," I admitted. "But I was just about to try for some more sleep after closing this window. Surely you're not going outside in that fog, and at this time of the morning?"

"I run every morning. I like the peace of it. And the ground mist isn't a problem. It's really not that thick, and the pavement is smooth."

"Well, have a good run. I'll probably take a good, long walk this afternoon. You can give me some advice on where to go."

"You like walking?"

I laughed. "You make it sound like exercise. Poets don't exercise, my dear, it's bad for the reputation. No, I just like to go for long rambles, five or six miles, enough to keep my weight under control. On the S'hudonni freighter I went into a wonderful VR treadmill every day." I chuckled, "I knew it was the only chance I'd ever get to walk along the Great Wall or in the Outback."

She put her hands on her slim, runner's hips and stood in front of me in mock defiance. "Look, Clifford, why don't you just come with me now and do the real thing? You're already awake, it's a beautiful morning out, we can talk as we go, and there's nothing virtual about it."

I groaned. "First thing in the morning? Heavens, Janice. I don't know if I'm capable of it. And I'd just slow you down terribly, to boot. No, some other time, perhaps."

"Clifford, we'll just go for a nice, slow ramble as you called it, then come back for some juice and coffee and a hot shower. It'll be wonderful. Come on along, all right?"

She reached down to grab my hands and tugged me up from the couch. "All right," I said, "all right, then. Let me put some shoes on, and off we go. But you'll have to be easy on me, agreed? Take your time for this tired old body?"

"Doesn't look that old and tired to me," she said with a grin. "Come on, it will be nice and easy."

And, for a time, it was.

The mist, thicker than Janice had predicted, was a waist-high cloud that we plowed through, our feet all but hidden. Sunrise was still a few minutes away, and the false, gray pre-dawn light gave us just enough shadowy visibility to see our way.

I was a little stiff at first. I hadn't taken any time to loosen up before we started out and the pace was faster than I liked. But then, as we moved briskly along, I warmed up to it and began to enjoy myself, feeling the rhythm of the walk.

It was eerily silent, our shoes on the pavement the only sound to mar the mist-dampened morning. Street lights, still on, threw a yellowish glare through the mist so that our shadows moved from behind us to in front before elongating and fading out every few meters. I could have been home in Edinburgh: the stone homes, the cool mist, the yellow vapor lights, the wet earthy smell of it as the pre-dawn darkness lightened to gray.

I noticed a small animal scamper off under some low bushes as we neared one yard, and in glancing at that little creature I was brought back immediately to just how far I'd come. Its single front-leg never touched the ground as it loped with quick strides into the bush. Moments later, a four-winged bird flew toward us, no more than three or four meters off the ground, and hovered to stare at us.

Janice laughed and waved her hand at it to shoo the bird off. "That's a kurra," she said. "They're very curious, a lot of people have them as pets."

"In cages?"

"Cages? No, a kurra wouldn't stand for that. They just stay in the homes of people who feed them and pet them. They love to be stroked along their throats."

"And that animal that ran into the bush, what was that?"

"A dewlong? I didn't see it, but it must have been. They look a bit like a cross between one your rabbits and a cat, I suppose. Yes, they domesticate, too, and they're everywhere. They're very clean little animals, and they've accommodated well to our presence here. The experts say there are even more dewlongs now than when we first landed. They're cute little things, very cuddly."

She turned to look me in the eyes as she walked. "It's beautiful out here in the morning, isn't it? And you're keeping up fine, Clifford. I knew you would. You were an athlete in your younger days, as I recall."

"How did you know that?"

"You're better known here than you think," she said, and then added "'We warm nicely in the rain/ stride by stride as/ we run that bouldered shore/ where the legions faltered/ and ceased at last/ the outward surge of empire.' That's from 'Running in the Rain.' From your _Clearances_ collection, right?"

This place, and this young girl, were full of surprises. I had published six collections of poetry in the years I had taught in Edinburgh. They had sold well enough, for poetry, and earned me a small reputation as a minor expatriate American poet. But for someone to have memorized a poem from one of them?

"Where in heaven's name did you find a copy of that?"

"At the university. You're taught there. That's one of the lit teacher's favorite poems. I took an open course from her, and she went on and on about what a wonderful poet you are. I'm sure she's excited about having a chance to meet you while you're here. I had to memorize that poem and half-a-dozen others for my final examination." She laughed. "You don't act it, Clifford Lamb, but you're really quite famous."

"Famous? Hardly. I'd like to meet that teacher and thank her, though. I must have more readers here than back home."

"Think so? No, you're just being humble. I read your work back home, too, in the poetry magazines. And here, I bet we could find several of your collections in the city centre bookstore right now."

"I wonder how they got here? I didn't know any of my little books had been sent all the way to Caledonia."

"Well, they certainly got here by S'hudonni freighter," she laughed. "Most books come digitized, of course, and then they print them here. I'm not sure how Professor Lindsay came to find that one poem, or pick it out, but it's quite famous. The poem seems to speak to people here, you know, talking about empires and outward edges and all."

"Yes, I guess it would, though I don't recall having thought of any of that as I wrote it."

"For god's sake," she laughed, "don't let Professor Lindsay know that. She's convinced us all that you meant every word of it to be understood by us."

"I won't tell a soul."

"Neither will I," Janice said, and then smiled at me warmly before turning away and stepping up the pace. "Let's build up a little momentum, Clifford, there's a bit of a climb up around this corner."

She was a marvel, this young Janice. For the first time in many years I regretted my age. If I were decades younger...

But, of course, I wasn't. I was an old poet, despite all of S'hudon's wonders. What interest could she possibly have in me? None, and I knew it. She was a beautiful, athletic young girl who delighted in teasing me. That was it, and nothing more, despite an old man's fantasies.

We rounded the corner and headed up a gentle incline. Janice glided up

it easily. I took it with more work, but was pleased to realize I could handle it well enough. We were a good four or five kilometers into the walk and I felt fine, quite good even, loose and warm and good.

The incline steepened, and we left the ground mist below us as we climbed through a small park. The scenery reminded me of my long walks through Edinburgh's Holyrood Park, striding along the paved road that runs right around Arthur's Seat, the small mountain that rises near the heart of the city.

It was always a difficult climb there, one I struggled with a few times a week, climbing easily at first and then finding it tougher and tougher as I neared the crest of the road. As the years went by that incline had seemed to grow steeper. But now, pleasantly, my calves and my breathing felt fine.

In twenty minutes more we rounded a final corner and the road flattened out. We had reached the top of the climb. Janice stopped, turned to look at me. "I wanted you to see this," she said, and pointed over my shoulder.

I turned to stare at the distant sunrise. We were no more than two hundred meters above the ground fog, but it was enough. The pewter sky was easing into a faint, pale blue as I watched the sun rise behind a distant volcanic mountain. The fog still hugged the ground, but the air above was startling in its clarity. I could see Leuchars spread out below, not unlike the view from Calton Hill back in Edinburgh. To the west, a morning thunderhead rose from the bay, its top half reflecting the dawn's light in startling shades of pink and red. I hadn't seen such a sky since Florida, all those years ago. While I looked that way a bolt of lightning flashed deep within the cloud. A few moments later came a rumble of thunder.

Janice came over to me, took my left arm and held it. "Beautiful, isn't it?" she said. "That sunrise over the city is the main reason I run so early every day."

"It's magnificent."

I was much too conscious of her holding my arm as we stood there, cooling in the breeze. "It's not a bad little city, really. It's not Earth, of course, that it doesn't have anything like the wonders of the home world. But they manage here, you know? They publish their books, they have two different live theater groups, some writers groups and..." she stopped, laughed. "That must all sound very silly to you, very defensive, my talking about Leuchars like this."

"On the contrary," I said. I was, in fact, watching her as she spoke of it. Her cheeks were lightly flushed from the exercise and the cool wind, her eyes clear and blue. Her jaw, strong and angular, gave her face a strength that matched her physical fitness. "It's a remarkable place, your Leuchars. I'm very happy to be here, to have a chance to stay for awhile, to teach and write. I find this all very rejuvenating. Though I'd prefer it a little calmer, to be honest."

She gave my arm a squeeze, then looked up at me, reached out slowly to touch my cheek. I was dizzy, light-headed as I looked at her looking at me, that slight smile, her eyes so clear.

And then, as if on cue, we heard a low, distant whoomph. An odd sound for thunder, I thought.

We turned to look and there, near the far edge of the city, a column of smoke was rising.

"Oh, no," she said. "What could that..."

There was a flash of bright light, perhaps a half-mile away to the south. A few seconds later came the sharp thud of another deep blast.

"Oh, my god, Clifford."

And it happened again, to the east. In moments, columns of smoke were rising from all three sites.

We headed back to Seals' house, at first walking quickly, and then as we heard another distant explosion and then yet another, this one closer, we started moving more and more quickly, until we were trotting, and then running.

As we picked up the pace that thunderhead we'd seen at the city's edge came toward us, first kicking up a breeze and then, as we neared Seals' house, dropping fat, scattered raindrops around us on the pavement.

I shouldn't have been physically able to run as I did, full stride for at least two miles, a frantic pace. At that, Janice was well ahead of me, hurrying home, hurrying to her friends.

The fat drops became more numerous and then a hard squall line came up on me from behind. I lost track of Janice in the gray wall of rain as it passed over me.

I was no more than three blocks away when I heard a final, terrible explosion ahead. Legs pumping, arms in motion as if pulling me along, I ran harder still, a right turn, and then down a block and a left and there, damn it, I saw it, a small, black cloud rising through the downpour. Too late. I felt that oppressive lead in my gut that I remembered from times past. Too damn late.

I came closer and there, next to that bright and brilliant tree at the edge of Seals yard, glorious in its bright yellow plumage, stood Janice, screaming in the rain, hands at her hair as she fell to her knees in anguish. In his yard, near his car, stood Paul Seals, his face contorted, his hands blackened at his side. In the car, silhouetted by flame, was what had been Pauline, her arms upraised in supplication, the fire roaring past the dark figure, licking out through the windows, hungry for more. I could hear the hot hiss of the rain splashing against the hot metal.

He passes away under a cloud, inscrutable at heart, forgotten, unforgiven, and excessively romantic.

_ -- Joseph Conrad,_

Lord Jim

* * * *

There were sirens everywhere, I realized as I stood there, my senses sharpened by the horror and the fear. Sirens, the crackle of the flames in the downpour, the terrible stink of burning rubber and paint and scorched metal and acrid steam; and there, in that awful mix, the terrible smell of meat, of burning death.

"Paul," I said, walking toward him. The moment, surreal in its details, agonized slowly toward a painful reality. "Paul," I said again, and he turned to look at me, his face contorted with grief. He started to speak, saw something behind me, eyes widened, and turned and ran for his door.

I turned to face what Paul had seen, a little rag-tag army coming up the street. There were perhaps one-hundred older men and a few women with Bailey at their lead. They carried weapons they'd fashion from their daily lives -- plowshares into swords here on a world where they were no weapons.

And they marched our way.

"Lamb! Mr. Lamb!" Bailey yelled at me. I stood there and waited for him as he walked briskly over to me, drenched from the rain but his face alight with a kind of fever. He was enjoying this immensely.

"Lamb, I'm so glad you're all right! It's been a terrible day, a terrible day. I've invoked martial law and we're doing our best now to restore order. My god, there's explosions all over the city."

"Where's the governor general?"

He sighed, his expression one that mixed contained glee with faux sympathy. "I'm afraid she's collapsed under the strain. Completely incoherent. She's in Government House now, resting."

"Under house arrest?"

He looked at me oddly, realizing for the first time, I think, that I wasn't firmly in his camp. "Absolutely not. She's under sedation and I've had to step in temporarily, as the Constitution requires."

"And why are you here?"

"To arrest Seals, of course. He's the cause of all this, Lamb, as we discussed. You agreed with me, remember? You could see he's the reason for all

this violence, these explosions. Lamb, my god, people have been hurt, perhaps some of them killed."

"And he caused this? Paul Seals set off these explosions?"

"Yes, or had his followers set them off. I'm convinced of it." Bailey waved toward several of his supporters, armed with cricket bats and shovels. They walked our way, stood next to him, glowering happily in their moment of power.

God, I'd seen that look before in men's eyes, the look of the immortal, supreme in supposed power -- ready here to take on the first-borns and anyone else who got in their way. I'd had that look in my own eyes, once.

I shook my head. "Bailey, you should just walk away from here. Seals had nothing to do with this." In fact, I wondered if Bailey himself hadn't arranged for the explosions, that made more sense than anything else. This whole conflagration, the chaos, the fear, might well be his construction.

"Nothing to do with this! My god, you're a sympathizer with them, Lamb." He motioned to the two and they walked over to me, stood at my side, ready to take me under arrest.

"Do you think the S'hudonni will stand for this coup d'etat, Bailey?"

"I've spoken to your friend Twoclicks, Lamb. He understands the necessity of what I'm doing here. He'll back me fully."

But my question had reminded him of my friendship with Twoclicks, and a slight shake of the head to the two was enough to get them to back away from me.

I wondered if Bailey's version of what Twoclicks had said was as much a lie as his version of what _I'd_ said. Probably, which meant Twoclicks might not have agreed with all this at all, and a screamship might come roaring in at any time. Then what would happen? Death, again, as it had happened for me in the past? Perhaps.

"Go with these men, Lamb," Bailey said, polite and careful with his language and his tone. "No harm will come to you. We'll just keep you quiet until we can get you off-planet and up to the station. From there you'll get the first freighter back to Earth. Easy, right?"

It _was_ easy. I could just walk away and be done with this. It was not, after all my fight. It never had been. Both sides had assumed I supported them, both knew of my friendship with Twoclicks and thought that somehow I wielded influence.

They couldn't have been more wrong. And while this was the right time to make my exit, I realized, standing there staring at Bailey, that I couldn't. I'd made my choices here.

There was a distant rumble, a roar like the one I'd heard forty years before. It grew louder and the crowed milling around our tragic scene stopped in mid stride, stood there, then looked up, scanning the sky through the gray smoke and the rain, easing off now with the passing of the squall line.

The roar rose into a scream and then suddenly stopped and there, above us, was a screamship. The same one I'd seen two weeks before? No way to know, and it probably didn't matter. A screamship, that's all that we needed to know, hanging there, intensely quiet, all power and glory hallelujah.

I knew then what I had to do, what this was all about, how it had been designed for me, planned for me. Nothing happens that isn't planned, when it comes to the S'hudonni. I was an actor. This was my role to play.

I turned my back on Bailey and walked toward the front door of Paul Seals' house. Bailey cursed me, under his breath at first as I turned away from him, and then more openly as I walked away.

"Lamb, damnit, you're _wrong,_ this has to be done my way, for the sake of all of us, for the sake of Leuchars. Goddamnit, for the sake of humanity."

Ah, there was his mistake. Humanity. I walked on.

I reached the door, hesitated. Was I to walk in? Stand there and shout? I shrugged, knocked politely.

"Come on in, Lamb," said Paul from inside.

I entered. He stood there. "It's all gone to hell, hasn't it?" he said,

not phrasing it as a question, saying it with certainty.

"Maybe. There's a screamship out there, just watching. If it's on your side, then you'll win, that simple."

"And if it's on their side, the side of order and control?"

"Then, yes, it's over. But there's no reason to die for this Paul, no reason for anyone else to suffer."

"She was," he said, "the most wonderful person, my sister. She was everything I tried to be but couldn't. She had so much patience."

I smiled, nodded. "I liked her, Paul. Everyone liked her. She was a wonderful person."

"And look what happened to her."

"Yes, and we'll have to find out who did it and punish them. But no more death now, Paul, not here."

He started crying, reached out to me, held me by my shoulders, sobbing. "I just thought if we said it all loud enough, and long enough, that we could make it happen, you know? And then I thought that just a scare, just enough of something to make them pay attention, and we could change things. Jesus, I had no idea this would happen."

"The first bombs?"

"Oh, hell, yes. I was tired of words."

"And today's?"

"No, none of this. For Christ's sake, she was my sister, _my sister!_ No, none of this."

"Okay, then. You didn't hurt anybody, Paul. Some property damage, and you bruised me up some." I chuckled. "But I'm over it now, and I won't press charges."

I held out my hand. If I could get him out of there while the screamship was nearby, maybe with Twoclicks inside, I could probably keep him alive. The mob wouldn't try to beat him to death with a screamship hovering right over their heads.

Paul suddenly looked very tired to me. The manic energy from the horror he'd just seen, the energy that drove him toward madness, had drained away, leaving nothing but an enormous sadness, maybe, for what his life had been like before this awful day. God, I knew that feeling.

He staggered toward me, defeated. I put my right arm around him, turned us both around, opened the door with my left hand, and we headed out.

The rain had stopped. The mob of older colonials had grown in the few minutes I'd been inside. There were hundreds now, angry, buzzing with an animated hostility toward Paul, toward all the first-borns, maybe even toward me, depending on what trouble Bailey had been stirring up among them.

Above them, over us all, that screamship floated silently blotting out the morning sky, watching over us, god-like.

We walked down the short front walk toward the gate. Paul's car still smoldered, a few firefighters standing over it now, playing hoses on it. I could no longer see Pauline's body inside.

An electric whine came from our right, where an alley ran. I looked that way and saw that Janice had found a car, god knows where or how, and was waiting there, in the driver's seat, a tight, grim smile on her face. She waved us to her, started to open the door to get out so we could slide in behind her. If we could get there, get in, and get away before all this exploded into chaos then, I figured, there would be time enough for things to calm down, for reason to return.

We reached the gate. Then, as I put my hand on it to swing it open, I heard a new noise, another angry buzz.

Paul said "Look," and tilted his head in the direction I'd come running in from just a few minutes before.

It was the first-borns, dozens of them, walking toward us, linked arm in arm.

The mob in front of us couldn't hear the first-borns' approach over their own babble, but then a few at the fringe saw the new group, poked those

next to them to show them, and the word spread in moments. The crowd turned to look at the new arrivals.

The older colonials outnumbered the first-borns two or three to one. Unless some had put together home-made bombs of some sort (and god knew that was entirely possible) this was going to be a hand-to-hand battle, shovels and cudgels and crickets bats against each other. There would be a lot of cracked skulls out there, I knew. That, and the final tearing apart of this little society's peaceful existence.

Could the screamship stop all this somehow? Would it? Was Twoclicks up there watching? Was he laughing?

Oh, hell. I hadn't asked for this, but here I was. And if the memories of my past failures still haunted me, well the thought of failing again loomed even larger as a spectre.

I shouted out. "Wait!"

A few heard me, and turned back to look. Again, "Wait! Listen to me!"

A few more turned, then more and it spread. I had their attention.

"This won't help," I yelled out to them. "Fighting them won't help. Killing each other won't help."

Bailey emerged from the front of the crowd, his face contorted in anger. "Look at you, standing there with Seals. He's killed a lot of our friends. The bombs today? People have died, Lamb. You hear me, our friends have been killed!"

I raised my hands. "So let it stop there, Bailey. No more death. Not this way, not here."

He held a long, stout club in his hands. He raised it. "We'll stop it, Lamb. We'll stop it for good, starting with Seals. Don't get in our way. Don't do it!" And he charged toward us, that club held high.

I pushed Seals out of the way and ran toward Bailey, thinking to tackle him, wrestle him to the ground before this all detonated into pain and death.

As we approached each other he began to swing the club. I could see it in aching detail as it arced toward me -- a meter long or so, as big around as a coffee can, polished wood, some piece of furniture I guessed with a strangely calm part of my brain. I was about to be clobbered with the leg of a table.

But I surprised even myself, moving more quickly than I would have thought possible, getting inside the arc of that swing before he could strike me.

I grabbed Bailey in a bear hug, started squeezing, stronger than I'd ever felt in my life -- glorious in that strength suddenly, feeling an enormous sense of well-being, of calm serenity in the midst of all this frenzied motion.

The crowd froze to watch our struggle. I squeezed harder and Bailey dropped the club. I heard his ribs crack beneath my crushing grip. He cried out in pain. I let him go, and he fell to his knees on the ground.

I'd won.

His head hung down. He seemed haggard, beaten. I thought surely the hate had been squeezed out of him.

"C'mon, Bailey." I offered him my hand. "Get up. Let's talk to these people. Let's tell them what we have to tell them. Let's get them headed home before things get any worse."

To my surprise, he shook his head no and then slowly looked up, a strange grin on his face, a look of dark triumph. For a moment, I couldn't figure out why.

And then, to my right and at the back of the crowd, there was an explosion. I looked that way and saw the last moment of blue flame covered by a rising cloud of gray. Then another, to my left, this one also inside the back edge of crowd.

There were a few long seconds of stunned silence, and then the crowd exploded in anger and fear, surging away from the bombs, surging toward where we stood.

Over our heads there was a high-pitched warning shriek and then the screamship opened fire, onto the front yard just behind where Bailey and I stood. It was a warning shot, one meant to quell the rush of the crowd.

It didn't work. The front of the crowd tried to stop, threatened by that bright vortex, but those behind, pushed by those even farther behind, continued to move forward.

Bailey, screaming in fear, ran from me, scrambling on his hands and knees to get away from the thin, blue tunnel of death that marched toward us.

As he ran, the light followed him, seeking him out, searching for him. That was the S'hudonni plan, then, to exorcise this devil now, take this opportunity to end his reign before it truly began. In a few seconds he'd be covered by it, the panic would escalate, hundreds might die, would die. I knew this. With a terrible, deadly certainty, I knew it.

And I knew what I could do about it. I'd failed again. I'd been named a leader by both sides and I'd failed them both. But there _was_ an answer.

It was the calmest, most serene moment of my life. The decision made, the understanding of it all so very clear.

Twenty meters away, in front of me, a ruined distribution truck from _The Observer_ lay on its side, its windscreen shattered. "To Tell the Truth," was written in script across the side panels. To get to Bailey the light would have to cross that wreck, etch a burned path across those words.

I ran to the truck, scrambled atop it and turned to watch the light approach. Janice had left her car, was coming toward, pushing her way through the crowd. Standing there, above the fray, knowing the crowd could see me, I raised my arms in acceptance, embraced the column of searing light that turned and moved my way, ten feet from me, then five. It seemed to hesitate, to slow its march as it reached the edge of the truck. I looked out over the crowd.

I could not feel the heat. Isn't that strange? No more than two meters away the pavement bubbled beneath it, macadam melting and scorching in its heat, but I couldn't feel it.

It moved, angling away from me. I heard, as if from a distance, Janice shouting my name. What was it she had said to me, that they trusted me here, that they wanted me to lead them, to show them the way? Well, all right, then, that's what I could do, I could show them.

It moved again. It would miss me. No. Not that. Not away. Quickly, firmly, I looked up toward the screamship that brought all this to us, to me, and then took two strong steps and, arms outstretched in that wonderful embrace, leaped into the light.

In all the broad expanse of tranquil light, I saw no shadow of another parting.

_ -- Charles Dickens, _Great Expectations_

* * * *

A huge face swam over me; a bulbous smile, a deep chuckle. "Wass _wonderful_ Lamb. What you did was simply _wonderful!"_

It was Twoclicks, bubbling with merriment. "A moment sstraight from your Conrad -- the ssacrifice for honor, yes? To die to ssave others and earn back one's honor, yess? Expiation. Penance. _Very_ Catholic, Lamb. Ah, it wass brilliant!"

"I'm alive?"

"Oh, yess. Very much sso. Alive, and a hero. You are ssurprised by thiss? I have told the Governor General that you live. Later today, when we land in the park and we emerge from the ship, there will be thoussandss to ssee you there."

"A hero?"

A voice from behind him spoke. "You died to save them, Clifford. They know this on both sides. They know that you offered yourself to stop the riots before more people died."

It was Janice. She came out from behind Twoclicks and moved to stand next to me. She leaned over, reached out to touch my cheek as she'd done on

that hilltop, then came closer, her eyes staring into mine. She leaned down and kissed me gently. "It was the most courageous thing I've ever seen."

Twoclicks laughed out loud, that fat, bloated body shaking with merriment. "It wass absolutely _perfect._ We gave you a ssecond or two, jusst for impact, and then sstopped the weapon. You were outlined in it, blazing in it, Lamb, and then I ussed the stasis field and brought you on board, set the devices to work on repairs, and now," he waved those stubby arms dramatically, "here you are. The Hero of the day."

"You did this, Twoclicks? You did this to me?" I was very tired.

His whole body moved forward with that nodding head. It was almost a bow, he bent so low to say yes to me. I watched him, wondering at his intentions.

"Why am I alive?"

"Why? To ssave thiss colony, to make thiss place work."

"No, no. I mean 'how' am I alive. Why didn't I die in that flame, that heat?"

"Ah," he smiled again. "Weapon doess not affect uss, of course, Lamb. Iss simple thing, really. Excites molecules. Friction. Heat. Ssomething like that. But we are," he paused, thought it through, said vaguely, "protected."

"And me?"

"As I ssaid, Lamb, protected."

_"I'm_ protected?"

He looked at me, sighed, spoke as if to a slow child, said what I did not want to hear. "Yes, Lamb. You are one of uss now. Remember? Those devices insside you? They rebuild, create, assemble, repair. And protect."

"I didn't ask for this."

"That could be argued, Lamb."

"I'm not sure I can do this, do what you say you need, Twoclicks."

"Oh, Clifford, you can," said Janice, smiling down at me. I looked at her and couldn't help but weakly smile back. I realized now, in this setting and with Twoclicks here in the room, who she reminded me of; someone I'd known long ago, someone whose love I'd walked away from once to save myself from further destruction. "Heather?" I asked.

Janice only kept smiling as Twoclicks put one thin arm over her shoulder. "Never look back, Lamb. Iss Janice, and she can help you. Iss brilliant, you know."

Yes, I thought, looking at her, seeing that smile I knew so well, I supposed she _was_ brilliant.

Twoclicks smiled that huge, wide smile at me one more time. "I will help. We will have the besst time!" And he reached out with those thin, frail arms to give me a hug. I am, I suppose, the only Earthie to have been hugged by a S'hudonni.

We talked more after that, the three of us. Twoclicks made it clear that S'hudon needs a leader here, someone who can bring these people together, keep them together here on the fringes of empire, here where the outermost fortress looked out toward the emptiness, toward the wild lands where savages hide in wait.

As he explained it to me, this outpost is important to S'hudon's trade routes, and the small human population is crucial is to the support of that outpost. He hinted darkly at something more, at some new enemies of S'hudon, some competitors; but I wondered, as he talked, how true that was. For Twoclicks, ultimately, it's all about profit, not patriotism.

I felt better physically even as we talked, S'hudonni technology working its medical miracles on me. But my arm, the one shattered by the dirt and pain of a memory decades old? The ground-in dirt, the reminder of who I was and what I did -- that was still there. I had only to ask and the S'hudonni devices would clean that out in minutes. But that seemed wrong. I needed the memories that arm brought me. Sometime, somewhere, perhaps I'd get the chance to act on those memories.

Later, that evening, as Arran rose in the east, we came in over

Leuchar's main city park, hovered there for awhile, screaming and rumbling, impressive as hell. Twoclicks and Janice were right, of course; both the older colonials and the first-borns were there, cheering me wildly. I was the answer they sought. They need a leader here, someone they could admire and follow.

With the crowd gathered, with the roar of their approval, we lowered that wide ramp. Together, Twoclicks, Janice and I, we walked down it. Klaatu barada nikto.
